

Van Til, Karlberg, and Westminster

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Mark Karlberg argues that the Westminster Standards have a flaw in the doctrine of the covenant. He is not arguing that the Westminster Standards are wrong, but that there is an element of ambiguity because of inconsistency in the doctrine of the covenant, inconsistency introduced through the scholastic tendencies of seventeenth century Reformed theologians. Karlberg, following Meredith Kline, seeks greater clarity in a more consistent doctrine of the Covenant of Works. However, his discussion of the tensions within Reformed theology point the way to another and better solution, the one implied in Van Til's doctrine of the covenant among the Persons of the Trinity.

Karlberg on Westminster

It seems obvious to me that Karlberg is correct about the inconsistency of the Westminster doctrine of the covenant. On the one hand, the Westminster Standards show us that men stand before God always and only in a covenantal relationship. All men are either in Adam or in Christ. There is no neutral, non-covenantal ground on which to stand. On the other hand, the Westminster Standards speak as if there is a natural relationship between Adam and God, one that is prior to and, therefore, more fundamental than the covenant relationship in the Garden. In this respect, the Westminster Confession and Catechisms speak as if the covenant is not fundamental to man's nature and not inescapable in his relationship with God. The covenant relationship between God and Adam is regarded as a benefit added to Adam's situation in the world, not something basic to the way he exists as God's image.¹

What is the reason for this inconsistency? Karlberg argues that the Westminster Standards reflect a tension in Reformed theology that was inherited from scholasticism. Karlberg explains the scholastic position in the following:

It had become popular among medieval scholastics to distinguish between two stages of creation corresponding to a supposedly twofold state of Adam prior to the Fall. Whether or not one assumed a temporal separation between these two stages or states of creation, what was important in the minds of the scholastics was acknowledgment of Adam's creation in a "pure" state of nature (*in puris naturalibus*), to which was added the supernatural gift of grace (the *donum superadditum*). By means of God's (nonredemptive) grace Adam and all humanity could come to spiritual communion

¹ Although I think this reflects the most natural interpretation of the Westminster Standards, it would hardly be violating them to insist that the covenant is given with the creation of man in God's image and to deny that there is any pre-covenantal natural relationship.

with God as their highest blessedness. The higher enjoyment (*fruitio*) of God constituted the state of grace, in distinction from the state of “pure” nature.²

According to Karlberg, the implicitly covenantal theology of Calvin and the early covenant theology of the sixteenth century was basically free from this sort of nature/grace dichotomy. But as Reformed theology developed in the seventeenth century, theologians began to distinguish between Adam’s original state in nature and Adam’s position before God in covenant.

Through long years of controversy and debate Protestant dogmaticians made increasingly heavy use of scholastic distinctions and terminology. To preserve the graciousness of the first covenant with Adam most Reformed federalists employed the speculative and dualistic distinction between nature and grace. As a result, the covenant order was set over against the natural order of creation. This new development, or rather revision to an older view, appeared in the writings of Francis Junius, a highly respected Dutch scholar and professor. . . . Although Adam was obliged to render complete and perfect obedience to the law of God by virtue of his debt as a creature (*ex puris naturalibus*), the covenantal reward of life eternal was strictly one of grace and mercy (*ex pacto*).

For the first time in the history of covenant theology there appeared a significant revision of Calvinistic doctrine regarding creation and God’s covenant with Adam. No longer was the covenant concept organically related to the order of creation. The result was a logical, if not temporal, abstraction of a natural order from a supernatural, covenantal order in creation. On this interpretation the covenantal order was perceived to be superimposed upon the natural. Junius’ view of supernatural grace offered in the way of covenant was virtually equivalent to the scholastic notion of the *donum superadditum*.³

As Karlberg explains, Reformed theologians like Johannes Cloppenburg and David Dickson interpreted Adam’s original condition along the lines of a scholastic distinction between nature and grace. Dickson, for example,

conceived of the covenant arrangement as an addition to the constitutive state of nature with its distinctive governing principle, the so-called law of nature (*lex naturae*). The covenantal order entered alongside, but did not supplant, natural law. The law of The law of nature required of the creature full and perfect obedience. Prior to life in covenant with God, Adam was but an unprofitable servant of the Creator. The obedience he rendered to God was merely his due as a servant-creature. By way of the covenant Adam was to be made a “confederate friend of God.” The requirements laid down in connection with the probationary test,

² *Covenant Theology in Reformed Perspective: Collected Essays and Book Reviews in Historical, Biblical, and Systematic Theology* (Two Ages Press: <http://www.twoagepress.org/Karlberg.pdf>), pp. 95-96.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 98-99.

observed Dickson, were meager in comparison with the reward of eternal life; the reward far outweighed what Adam dutifully owed his creator.⁴

This kind of scholastic distinction between a state of nature (pre-covenant law) and a state of “grace” (covenant promise and reward that far outweighs anything Adam could merit) was introduced into the Westminster Confession and catechisms. Describing the doctrine of the Westminster Confession (7:1), Karlberg writes,

The natural relationship between God and the creature, we are told, is one of law: “reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator.” But the highest enjoyment of God — “fruition” is the scholastic term denoting the beatific vision of God (glorification) — depends upon the covenant established “by some voluntary condescension on God’s part.”⁵

The Shorter Catechism includes the same sort of nature/grace dichotomy and therefore introduces the same sort of confusion to the doctrine of the covenant.

The *Shorter Catechism* describes the covenant as a “special act of providence,” suggestive of the view that posits a distinction between the natural order and the covenant order. On the one hand, the covenant with Adam is defined as a Covenant of Works. On the other hand, the nature/grace dichotomy as employed by the Westminster divines in their doctrine of the covenant introduces a speculative element within the confessional formulation.⁶

Karlberg’s concerns in expounding this problem are different from mine in quoting him. Karlberg is particularly, and rightly, concerned about eschatology. In his view, a more consistent doctrine of the Covenant of Works, along the lines suggested by Meredith Kline, prevents the inconsistencies of the Westminster doctrine. Apart from Karlberg’s concern with eschatology, however, there is, I believe, a deeper problem, though not by any means unrelated to eschatology. The deepest and most important issue is the relationship of the doctrine of the covenant to our doctrine of God.

Van Til on the Covenant in God

Karlberg presents Abraham Kuyper and Cornelius Van Til as theologians whose doctrine of the covenant was more consistent than Westminster’s. Kuyper, as quoted by Karlberg, affirms that Adam’s original state was covenantal.

⁴ Ibid., p. 99.

⁵ Ibid., p. 100.

⁶ Ibid., p. 100. Nineteenth century theologians like Dabney and Thornwell are guilty of the same sort of scholastic confusion. See, p. 101.

Adam is called as a confederate in life and created in covenant. The covenant is given with creation, which is evident with Adam's creation in the image of God.⁷

For Kuyper, "covenant life issues from the triune God."⁸ Kuyper's view of creation means that the covenant applies from the moment of creation both to the world itself and Adam as its covenant lord. There is never a moment in time or a place in the universe that is anything other than covenantal. The covenant is not, therefore, granted to Adam as a "special act of providence." It is imprinted into the very being of Adam, defining what it means that Adam is the image of God.

Van Til follows Kuyper's doctrine of the covenant, but expresses it in his own distinctive language.

Covenant theology sprang up naturally as the most consistent expression of Calvinism, in which the idea of the self-sufficient, ontological Trinity is the final reference point in all predication. It is this idea that lies at the center of covenant theology. The three persons of the Trinity have exhaustively personal relationship with one another. And the idea of exhaustive personal relationship is the idea of the covenant.⁹

As Van Til explains, the fundamental idea of the covenant is the idea of "exhaustive personal relationship." Van Til uses this expression to describe the mutual indwelling of the Persons of the Trinity.¹⁰ Father, Son, and Spirit "mutually exhaust" one another in the sense that they indwell one another so perfectly that there is no point at which any one of the three is without or apart from the other two. Their interpersonal relationship is utterly perfect. The distinction between the Persons does not interfere with the absolute oneness of their mutual indwelling, and their mutual indwelling does not erase the personal distinction. Covenant, then, in God is a wholly and perfectly "personal relationship."

Van Til's description of the covenant in God here is thoroughly consistent with the picture of the covenant in the book of Deuteronomy, in which God's covenant relationship with Israel is expressed as a love relationship. In Deuteronomy, God sets His love on Israel (Deu. 4:37; 7:7,8,9, 13; 10:15, etc.), his child (Deu. 1:31; 8:5; 14:1), and requires of Israel that the people love Him in response (Deu. 5:10; 6:5; 10:12; 11:1; etc.). That is the sum of the whole covenant.

Though it is not expressed with the same clarity in Deuteronomy as it is in the prophets, the idea of God's relationship with His people as a marriage is implicit in references to God's jealousy. God chose Israel in love, sustained and protected her in love and led her in His perfect love. What he required of her was a loving response. The covenant between God and His people was one in which God gave Himself to His people and called upon them to give themselves unto Him in love. Thus, the very essence of the covenant relationship is love. When, therefore, Van Til speaks of the Persons of the Trinity as having an exhaustively personal relationship with one another, he is offering a Biblical perspective on covenant, illumining what it means to say, "God is love."

⁷ Abraham Kuyper as quoted (and translated also, it seems) by Karlberg, *Ibid.*, p. 102.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ As quoted in Karlberg, *ibid.*, p. 104.

¹⁰ See: Ralph Allan Smith, *Paradox and Truth: Rethinking Van Til on the Trinity* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2002), p.64.

When Van Til speaks of the ontological Trinity as “the final reference point in all predication,” he is referring to the fact that the whole world is utterly and totally personal because every thing and every fact is part of the plan of the wholly personal God. The world reveals Him and can only be understood in relationship to Him. What needs to be emphasized here is that to speak of the world as personal and in relationship to God is to refer to the covenant. The covenant in God is the very essence of personal relationship. The three Persons of the Trinity planned the world and rule the world in terms of their mutual love for one another, which means that all truth concerning the world reflects something of the Triune God who planned and rules it. It is a wholly personal world because it was created into a covenant relationship with a wholly personal God. For Van Til, the world is created to reflect the very being of God as a Triune God of love, and covenant is fundamental to the creation because it is essential to the being of God.

Karlberg and Van Til

Karlberg sees Van Til and Kline as holding to the same view of creation and covenant. For both of them the world is created in covenant with God. Covenant is not something added to a world already in a “natural” relationship to God. They agree that there is nothing prior to or outside of the covenant. In this respect, I believe Karlberg is correct. But, depending on one’s understanding of Reformed faith, Van Til’s doctrine of the covenant introduces a new tension into the Reformed doctrine of creation.

Karlberg, following Kline, sees Adam’s relationship to God as a Covenant of Works and interprets that covenant in terms of merit, not grace. Kuyper, Bavinck, and Van Til, following the Reformed tradition in general, use the language of the Covenant of Works but see the relationship between God and man in the garden as gracious. In other words, God’s generosity and kindness abound. He is good to Adam before Adam has done anything to deserve blessing, and He offers blessings to Adam that transcend the value of any work Adam could perform. Gracious in this sense obviously has nothing to do with “redemptive grace,” but it is not necessarily an unbiblical use of the word (cf. Luke 2:52).

What is the tension introduced here? According to Karlberg and Kline, the creation order is a Covenant of Works, understood in the strict sense of the words. The original order is one of law, which is defined by the terms of the covenant. Karlberg and Kline favor a covenantal understanding of the original creation in which law is basic and definitive. Redemptive grace is built upon this foundation of law in the sense that only when Christ fulfills the demands of the law can grace be given to His people. Van Til’s view, however, says that the original covenant in the creation order is a covenant that reflects the wholly personal relationship of Father, Son, and Spirit, a relationship in which they mutually indwell one another.

The tension introduced is this: Is the mutual indwelling of the three Persons of the Trinity a “law covenant,” a Covenant of Works? What would it mean to say that the relationship between Father, Son, and Spirit is an eternal Covenant of Works? Who is under probation to whom? What are the conditions? The model suggested by Karlberg and Kline for Adam in the Garden is very hard to fit with the relationship of the Trinitarian Persons. If Van Til is right that the Persons of the Trinity relate to one another in covenant, as mutually indwelling one another and mutually representing one another, then the covenant given to Adam in the Garden would be

better understood and expressed in language that can be applied also to the eternal Trinitarian covenant.

I have suggested that “Covenant of Love” is an appropriate expression for the Trinitarian covenant.¹¹ It certainly fits Van Til’s emphasis on the mutual indwelling of the Trinitarian Persons, for indwelling is first and most obviously a total self-giving of each of the Persons to the others. Father, Son, and Spirit share all they are with one another without reserve. This is love. Add to this that the Biblical concept of love is a covenantal idea. To say that God is love and give that expression a Trinitarian application is to say that the Persons of the Trinity devote themselves to one another in the bonds of a covenant.

The differences between the Kline-Karlberg approach and the approach suggested by Van Til’s definition of the covenant are significant. For comparison, it may help to place them side by side. Of course a chart like this oversimplifies issues, but it also makes the tendencies of the two different positions clear.

Covenant of Works	Covenant of Love
Law	Love
Contractual agreement	Mutual commitment of love
Obedience as law-keeping	Obedience as love
Commandments as conditions of contract	Commandments as instruction of love
Keeping conditions as merit	Keeping commands as response to love
Sin as breaking rules	Sin as betrayal of love

The question for us to ask is, which of these two paradigms best comports with the idea that creation reflects the Triune Creator? Of course, other questions must be answered also. What is the relationship between law and love? Are the two paradigms mutually exclusive or can they be seen to overlap in some respects? How does the covenant of love idea affect the doctrine of justification by faith?

It seems to me rather clear that the covenant among the Persons of the Trinity must be understood as a Covenant of Love rather than a Covenant of Works. This means that the original creation covenant — whatever we label it — has to be understood as an expression of God’s covenant love. In terms of Kuyper’s and Van Til’s understanding of the Trinitarian covenant, this does not mean primarily God’s love for man or the world. What comes first in understanding the creation is that the Father created the world for the Son, as a gift to Him. The Son and the Spirit worked with the Father to create the world, and receive it from Him in order to glorify the world and present it back to Him. The work of redemption through the Son and the Spirit is a work of reclaiming God’s world and finishing the original plan of glorifying the world for the Father.

¹¹ This is not an entirely new suggestion for the covenant in the Garden, as Joel Garver points out, “The covenant is also sometimes called a ‘covenant of life’ (e.g., Westminster Catechisms; James Fisher) in virtue of the promised reward of eschatological life. It is sometimes called a ‘covenant of friendship’ or ‘love’ (e.g., Robert Rollock, William Strong, Fisher), referring to humanity’s original relation to God in innocency in contrast with a covenant of ‘mercy’ or ‘reconciliation’ in light of human sin and corruption.” From Garver’s essay, “The Covenant of Works in the Reformed Tradition,” <http://www.joelgarver.com/writ/theo/covwor.htm>.

In Kline's model, covenant as law is fundamental both to creation and redemption. The law covenant is not only the original covenant of creation; according to Kline, it is in some way the eternal covenant between Father and Son. Kline is explicit.

And our additional terms, "Creator's" and "with Adam," will serve to bring out the parallelism between this covenant of works and what we shall be calling "The Father's Covenant of Works with the Son" (i.e., the eternal intratrinitarian covenant), namely, the parallelism of the two Adams scheme, each of these covenants involving, as it does, an Adam figure, a federal representative under probation in a covenant of works.¹²

Kline's model works well if we are only considering the doctrine of justification. The Son was in a Covenant of Works like Adam. Where Adam failed, the Son succeeded so that those who are represented by Him are justified. As a model for justification, this is very clear, at least in isolation from other basic doctrines. The problems appear when we ask about its relationship to the whole, especially when we ask how this fits in with the doctrine of the Trinity and creation. How do the Persons of the Trinity relate in the eternal covenant? Is the relationship between the Father and the Son one in which the Son is on eternal probation? How does the Spirit fit into this? What does the fact of creation itself mean? In other words, why did God create the world?

When we ask these sorts of questions, the Covenant of Works model offers rather strained answers at best. After all, if we agree with Kuyper and Van Til — and apparently Kline, too — that the Persons of the Trinity share an eternal covenantal relationship, we have to understand that covenant as being logically more fundamental than God's plan to create the world, to allow the fall, and to redeem man. The Covenant of Works — however it is understood — can only be part of God's plan with relation to the world, which is what we have to assume that Kline also means when he speaks of the intratrinitarian covenant. He is referring to the Covenant of Redemption, not to essential intratrinitarian relations.

This raises two very important questions. The first question is an extension of the issue raised by Abraham Kuyper. Kuyper pointed out that it would be odd to imagine that the Persons of the Trinity entered into a covenant in order to save man if covenant was not something essential to the way God is in Himself. The same kind of logic can be applied to the Covenant of Works. Why would a God who exists in an eternal covenant, described by the absolute love of mutual indwelling, create His image into a covenant that is essentially different from the covenant relationship enjoyed by the Father, Son, and Spirit?¹³

The second question concerns creation itself, the most basic question one can ask: Why would God create at all? The Biblical answer is that creation is an unnecessary expression of the love of the Father, Son, and Spirit for one another. God created the world because He wanted to, because the Father delighted to give the Son a gift of His love, because the Son and the Spirit delighted to work with the Father in the creation so that they could glorify the Father's gift and

¹² *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Overland Park, KS: Two Ages Press, 2000), p. 20. Kline's argument that the creation is a covenantal process includes very helpful material.

¹³ Let me reiterate here that the Covenant of Works can be formulated so that it is in harmony with the eternal Trinitarian relations. Van Til himself did so.

return it to Him. Creation results from the overflowing abundance of the love of Father, Son, and Spirit for one another.

This leads to another question. If the creation of the world is an expression of the love of the Persons of the Godhead for one another, why would God create Adam in a Covenant of Works rather than a Covenant of Love? The two covenants seem to be quite different in essence, even though they both can include commandments, a period of testing/training, punishment for sin, and a plan of redemption. Understanding the creation of the world as the expression of the covenantal love of Father, Son, and Spirit for one another seems to require that the covenant into which man was created was an extension of that covenant love. As Kline defines the Covenant of Works paradigm, it does not fit in here.¹⁴

These questions concern theology proper, the highest concern of theology in general and Reformed theology in particular. They present a very real challenge to our thinking about God, creation, and the covenant. Of course, if we had incontrovertible Biblical evidence that God had in fact created the world into the kind of Covenant of Works that Kline speaks of, we would have to accept that as true, even if it provoked questions we could not answer. In fact, however, I believe the Biblical evidence supports the view that the creation covenant was a Covenant of Love, not a Covenant of Works in the Klinean mold.

This is where the history of Reformed theology is especially interesting. Kline's view of the Covenant of Works as a strict law-covenant is a revision of the Reformed tradition. As Karlberg explained, Kline's criticism of the Westminster Confession and Catechisms corrects an error that may have come in through the influence of scholasticism. On this point, I agree with Kline and I expect his view to become standard. His exposition of the creation of the world as a covenantal act is Biblically persuasive.

But even if we agree with Kline and understand the creation without the implicit nature/grace dichotomy in the Confession, we do not have to follow his understanding of the Covenant of Works. The traditional Reformed emphasis on the "grace" of the Covenant of Works is thoroughly Biblical and is not a mere deduction from a scholastic nature/grace dichotomy. Reformed theologians have not been wrong in emphasizing the abundant goodness of God to Adam in the Garden. Nor have they been wrong in stressing the fact that God's promise infinitely surpasses the value of any work that Adam, or even the whole race of man together, could perform.

This traditional Reformed perspective on the original covenant fits well with Van Til's doctrine that the creation reveals the covenantal God. The God who is three Persons who give themselves to one another in covenant love creates the world as a gift from Father to Son and Spirit which will be glorified and returned again to the Father as a gift. The emphasis on "grace" in Reformed theology can be seen as an expression of this. The Father who delights to give to His Son, creates Adam and gives him the world also, for he too is a son of God. The Garden itself, the trees of the Garden, the blessing of a wife, and even the command regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil are all part of God's abundant love and kindness. No doubt, as Kline emphasizes, God is Lord. But Adam's Lord is his heavenly Father. Law is not the most basic expression of the covenant, except insofar as it is the definition of the way of love.

¹⁴ I have tried to be clear about the fact that there is more than one way to understand the Covenant of Works. See my essay, "Interpreting the Covenant of Works," http://www.berith.org/essays/cov_works/. What I am interacting with in this essay is Karlberg's and Kline's understanding of the Covenant of Works.

Love and grace expressed in the abundance goodness of God freely poured out upon Adam and Eve is basic to the doctrine of the Covenant of Works in Reformed history, as Joel Garver has shown.¹⁵ I believe one could argue that the emphasis on grace is a more important facet of the doctrine than scholastic notions of merit or vestiges of the nature/grace thinking of the Middle Ages. The traditional Reformed exposition of the Covenant of Works seems to have included elements that are inconsistent with the Reformed doctrine of the covenant as basic to God's relationship with man. However, Reformed theologians were certainly not wrong to emphasize the fact that the Garden and all the blessings Adam enjoyed were a gift from the God who rejoices to give because He is Father, Son, and Spirit — the God for whom mutual giving in love defines His covenantal character.

Conclusion

It may be fair to say that both the Kline-Karlberg view and my application of Van Til's approach the question of the creation covenant by reading the teaching of the New Testament back into the creation account. Kline sees the forensic issues of justification by faith, understood in the light of Paul's epistles, especially Romans 5, as the key to understanding the creation covenant. According to Kline, the parallel between Adam and Christ requires that the creation covenant be a Covenant of Works because Christ came to fulfill the requirements of the law for us and to die on the cross according to the demand of the law for our death.

In my book *The Eternal Covenant*¹⁶, I have argued that the parallel between Adam and Christ can be fully maintained without following Kline's view of the Covenant of Works. In this essay, I am stressing Van Til's doctrine of creation as the expression of the covenantal nature of the Triune God. I am reading the creation account in the light of the New Testament doctrine of the Trinity, the covenantal relationship of the Father, Son, and Spirit, and the New Testament teaching that creation is a gift from the Father to the Son. I agree with Kline that we have to interpret the Genesis account in a manner that does full justice to Paul's doctrine of justification. But the approach suggested by a Covenant of Love does do justice to the doctrine of justification, while also, I believe, taking into account the Trinitarian truths that New Testament teaching about creation forces us to consider. The Gospel of John begins with a Trinitarian statement about creation, Paul's epistles contain many Trinitarian statements about creation, and the book of Revelation has a profoundly Trinitarian understanding of creation.

The Trinitarian covenant should be our starting point for understanding creation because the New Testament emphasizes that creation was the work of Father, Son, and Spirit together, that the creation was a gift from the Father to the Son through the Spirit, and that the Son having received the gift in love, redeems the fallen world and glorifies it through the Spirit so that He can present it back to the Father. This is covenantal fellowship in love. Our understanding of the original covenant in the Garden has to fit into this larger picture, keeping in mind that Adam, as the image and likeness of God, is created to join the Trinitarian covenantal fellowship of love, not, of course, as an ontological equal, but as a creature whose special calling is to glorify the Triune God.¹⁷

¹⁵ <http://www.joelgarver.com/writ/theo/covwor.htm>

¹⁶ *The Eternal Covenant: How the Trinity Reshapes Covenant Theology* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003).

¹⁷ Thanks to my nephew, David Houf, who helped me correct typos and a few awkward sentences.