

Response to Guy Waters

Ralph Allan Smith¹

Guy Waters book *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology: A Comparative Analysis* includes interaction with my views on the Trinity and the Covenant of Works.² His comments on the nature of a covenant are also relevant to my views. In this essay, I offer my response to his critique in these three areas. I should say that I appreciate the fact that Waters has made a serious attempt to study what I have written. His select, annotated bibliography covers most of the books and articles I have written on the Trinity and indicates that he has done research, though he chose not to include what I regard as an important article and the most important book I have contributed to the discussion.³

Part 1: On the Trinity

Waters and Kuyper

Waters refers first to my book *Paradox and Truth* and offers a very general summary of the book and his own comments on the argument. I believe Waters is trying to be fair and he does take time to present my position. However, in his comments on this book and the argument for the covenant among the Persons on the Trinity, he completely neglected the central arguments, neither presenting nor responding to the arguments of Abraham Kuyper and Cornelius Van Til.

For example, as Waters seems to understand, I rely on Kuyper's view on the Trinity. But he offers no response at all to Kuyper, who argued that the Covenant of Redemption implies an intratrinitarian covenantal relationship. Since some who read this may not read the original book in which I presented Kuyper's argument, I offer the following full quotation from Kuyper.

If the idea of the covenant with regard to man and among men can only occur in its ectypical form, and if its archetypical original is found in the divine economy, then it cannot have its deepest ground in the *pactum salutis* that has its motive in the fall of man. For in that case it would not belong to the divine economy as such, but would

¹ My thanks to my sons, Ben Zedek and Berek, and to my nephew, David Houf, for offering corrections of typographical errors and awkward sentences, as well as criticisms of content. Others also interacted with a draft of this essay and offered encouragement and corrections. Needless to say, the remaining faults are mine.

² All references to Waters' book in this essay come from pages 21-29 and 33-40.

³ I am referring to the article "A Covenantal Ontology of the Triune God" at: <http://www.berith.org/pdf/A-Covenantal-Ontology-of-the-Triune-God.pdf> and to the book *Trinity and Reality* (Moscow: Canon Press, 2004).

Response to Guy Waters

be introduced in it rather incidentally and change the essential relations of the Three Persons in the divine Essence. Besides, the objection arises that the Third Person of the Holy Trinity in that case remains outside of this covenant and that the Three Persons in the eternal Essence are placed in such a relation over against one another that one runs the danger of falling into the error of tritheism. This danger can be escaped only when the divine economy of the Three Persons is presented *natura sua* as a covenant relation. . . . We then confess that in the one personality of the divine Essence there consists a three-personal distinction, which has in the covenant relation its unity and an inseparable tie.⁴ God Himself is, according to this conception, not only of every covenant, but of the covenant idea as such the living and eternal foundation; and the essential unity [of the Godhead] has in the covenant relation its conscious expression. Father, Son, and Holy Ghost stand accordingly over against all what is not God or what opposes God in that unity of faithfulness that the one does not will anything else than the other, and the entire power of the divine Essence turns itself with the highest consciousness in federal unity against all that is not God.

And when in this manner the foundation of the covenant idea is found in the confession of the Trinity itself, then follows from this the further covenant relation between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit which is determined by the appearance of ungodliness in the world of angels and men, not only according to the idea of its possibility, but according to the idea of its reality. For when we proceed from the confession of the Trinity to the confession of the decree, then the reality of it is a matter of fact, and the federal unity in God must be directed to the complete conquest of the fact of sin, in order that God may be triumphant. And this leads to the *constitutio Mediatoris*, not as an act of force, but as a federal action, and thus arises the *pactum salutis*. In the covenant relation Father, Son, and Holy Spirit aim together and each for Himself at the triumph over sin, that is, at the triumph over all that which places itself over against God as anti-God. The ground of this will in God is found in the original covenant relation in the divine Essence; and that which is to be accomplished by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit respectively unto that end continues to find its federal unity in the *opus exeuns* which is common to the Three Persons. That which is assumed as the work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit respectively does not rest on arbitrary division of labor, but on the distinction which exists between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the divine Essence itself, and that not only in the world of salvation, but also already in the work of creation. Hence, the *pactum salutis* can never include only the two, but must always include the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity. Besides, considering that the decree knows not of two possibilities, with or without sin, but only of the reality, that is, the reality of sin, this *pactum* does not appear after the fall, but recedes into eternity and forms the point of procedure of the entire *pactum salutis*. And when the *pactum salutis* thus stands behind the fall and has its root in the *decretum*, it follows *eo ipso*

⁴ Note here, too, Kuyper's language "We then confess that in the *one* of the divine Essence there consists a three-personal distinction . . ." No doubt this kind of language in Kuyper is another source of Van Til's "one person, three person" formula.

Response to Guy Waters

that the introduction of it started immediately after the fall, and that a suspension of it until the hour of the incarnation is inconceivable.⁵

This is a profound theological argument and it has not been answered. Waters does not even address it.

Waters and Van Til

When it comes to Van Til, I have to confess that in my book *Paradox and Truth*, I failed to do justice to Van Til's view of the covenant. In that book, I wrote,

However, there is one respect in which Van Til's doctrine lacks the concreteness it must have, an important aspect of the doctrine of the Trinity which is, I believe, implicit in Van Til's approach, but which needs to be made explicit to clarify the link between the doctrines of God, creation, revelation, man, and salvation.⁶

In Van Til's major published works, I had not found an *explicit* reference to intratrinitarian relationships as covenantal. However, in *The Eternal Covenant*, I partially corrected the inaccuracy of my statement in *Paradox and Truth* when I showed through a series of quotations that Van Til's doctrine of God and his doctrine of the covenant rather clearly *implied* the notion of an intratrinitarian covenant. At that point, however, I had still not found an unambiguous assertion of an intratrinitarian covenant.

Only recently did I find such an explicit statement by Van Til. Mark Karlberg's book *Covenant Theology in Reformed Perspective* included a quotation from Van Til that I had never seen. It was from the article on "Covenant Theology" written by Van Til for *The New Schaff-Herzog Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*⁷. Here Van Til's view is transparently clear.

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.* (emphasis added)

[S]ince the internal relationship of the triune God is covenantal, God's relation to mankind is also covenantal.⁸

If I had known of this quotation a few years ago, both *Paradox and Truth* and *The Eternal Covenant* would have included a stronger statement of Van Til's argument for a covenant among the Persons of the Trinity. That being said, in *The Eternal Covenant* Van Til's basic argument

⁵ Quoted in Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 295-96.

⁶ *Paradox and Truth*, p. 72.

⁷ I found a used copy of the book and bought it so that I could read the entire article.

⁸ Van Til, "Covenant Theology" in *The New Twentieth Century Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*.

appears in a less explicit form. The essential point that Van Til states in the citation above is affirmed through a series of quotations which show that, for Van Til, representation is the central idea of the covenant and that mutual representation is essential to intratrinitarian relations. Thus, Father, Son, and Spirit relate to one another in covenant.

As with Kuyper, Waters does not mention Van Til's argument or respond to it. Kuyper and Van Til present the most basic and important arguments for the view that the Father, Son, and Spirit relate to one another. As I pointed out in my response to J. V. Fesko, who also did not address Kuyper and Van Til, it is their arguments that demand an answer.

Waters and Arguments for a Trinitarian Covenant

In my response to Richard Phillips, I suggested 8 lines of argument for a covenant among the Persons of the Trinity and expounded them in the rest of the 70 page essay.⁹ The arguments are the following.

1. What God does in time reveals who He is in eternity and His most characteristic act in establishing relationships with other persons in time is covenant making.
2. The relations among the Persons defined in the names Father, Son, and Spirit are distinctly covenantal.
3. The names of God used to describe Trinitarian relations are also the names used to describe God's covenant relationships with creatures.
4. Representation is a key covenantal idea and it is found in the relations of the Trinitarian Persons in the representation of the Father by the Son and of the Father and Son by the Spirit.
5. Some of God's attributes are described in language that is distinctly covenantal.
6. The Gospel of John speaks of God's covenantal relationship with us as parallel to the relationship between the Father and the Son.
7. The pre-creation covenant for the salvation of man would involve a change in the relations among the Persons of the Trinity to accommodate the creation, if they were not essentially related in covenant.
8. The dynamic of the Trinitarian ontology is emphatically covenantal.

Kuyper's and Van Til's arguments are included in the list above (no. 4, 7). Other arguments are added from various sources. The only arguments that Waters has responded to are numbers 5 and 6 on the list above. Since he does not mention this essay, he may be unfamiliar with it. For those interested in the subject of an intratrinitarian covenant, I recommend considering this essay since it was written primarily to give a fuller statement of the argument for a intratrinitarian covenant.

⁹ <http://www.berith.org/pdf/A-Covenantal-Ontology-of-the-Triune-God.pdf>

Response to Guy Waters

Apart from the arguments above that are not addressed, there are three arguments that Waters interacts with that deserve attention. First, Waters is not persuaded by the argument that the world was created in covenant with God. He answers my brief argument and says that I am following Van Til when I speak of creation being in covenant. In fact, as is clear from the book *The Eternal Covenant*, I am relying on Meredith Kline's extensive exegetical arguments for this. I did not consider it important to offer detailed exegetical argumentation since Kline had done so much and it would have been superfluous to repeat him. However, Waters makes no reference to his arguments.

Waters not only disregarded Kline's abundant and often profound exegesis, he also specifically asserted precisely the proposition that Kline refuted: "Smith overlooks the fact that what has been traditionally termed the 'covenant of works' is not instituted until Genesis 2. In other words, the biblical narrative tells us that there is a temporal gap (of some unspecified time) between the creation of man and the first covenant between God and man. This certainly seems to be the understanding of the Confession (WCF 7.1). It is not true, then, that God *has* only and, therefore, *can* only relate to man by way of covenant."

Those interested in Kline's arguments and how they relate to this should consult his works dealing with creation. There is much that I disagree with in Kline's exposition, but his argument that the act of creation itself was a covenant-making act seems beyond refutation. On this point, Waters needs to take Kline into account.

If Waters did succeed in proving his point, however, consider what he would be proving: God's relationship with man and the creation is *basically* non-covenantal. Upon the foundation of this "natural" relationship, God adds a covenant relationship. The covenant, therefore, is not essential to God's relationship with man or the world. It is not definitive of man's nature nor essential to human relations. It is a supplement to the prior and foundational natural relationship, an arbitrary extra.

I submit that any theology self-consciously predicated on this foundation does not deserve the name "Covenant Theology."¹⁰ It is a theology that says the covenant is just one possible add-on to the fundamental natural relationship that originally pertained. Ironically, then, if Waters' view could be proved, a truly Biblical covenantal theology would be undone.¹¹

Waters also appeals to the language of the Westminster Confession in response to my brief exposition of the creation account. Though my own argument was stated succinctly since I had Kline's work to rely upon, Waters' only response is that I have not drawn "good and *necessary* consequences from the biblical narrative of creation." If his point is that my arguments fall short of rigid proof, then, of course, that is true. But does anyone attempt to establish his exegesis of a passage of Scripture according to standards of rigid proof? What exactly does Waters mean when he says I do not show "necessary" consequences? If I have drawn Biblical inferences from the creation narrative — relying on Kline and not restating his much more elaborate exegetical arguments — then how are these inferences not necessary? Although I prefer not to state things in the forms of deductive argument, what is Waters' response to the following?

¹⁰ I should add that I do not believe the Westminster Confession and Catechisms are consistently based on the notion that man may or may not relate to God in covenant.

¹¹ I should add that I do not believe that the Westminster Confession has to be understood as Waters does. I think it presents an inconsistent view in respect to the original creation. Agreeing with Kline and disagreeing with Waters here does not necessarily mean that one rejects the WCF on this point.

Response to Guy Waters

1. The command-evaluation-blessing pattern is a covenant-making pattern.
2. The Genesis creation account uses the command-evaluation-blessing pattern.
3. Therefore the Genesis creation account refers to the making of a covenant.

If the in the Genesis creation account is a typical covenant pattern, it is natural to regard the creation as a covenant-making act. What Waters needs to do is show one of the following: 1) that the command-evaluation-blessing pattern is not a covenant-making pattern, or 2) that the Genesis creation account does not follow such a form. If he provided either of these arguments, he would be offering a substantial response.

Second, Waters' discussion of my exposition of John 17 is similar. Essentially, his argument is that my exegesis is only one possible approach to the passage and my arguments fall short of proof. What I tried to show is that a covenantal understanding of John 17 offers the best and most biblical exegesis. Since John does not use the word "covenant" in his Gospel, the argument is somewhat complicated and Waters' summary statement does not do it justice. Those interested may consult my essay.¹² In order to refute what I have written, Waters needs to suggest a better and more Biblical approach to the passage. It is hardly a response to say that my exegesis is not the only possible approach.

Third, I argue that many of God's attributes are defined in words that are relational, and that the relation presupposed by those words is covenantal. Love is perhaps the clearest example. Love as an attribute makes no sense whatsoever apart from interpersonal relations, which is why the Muslim monad is not described as a god of love. Love as an attribute makes sense only when speaking of the Triune God of the Bible.

In addition, I pointed out that in the Bible, love is used to describe the most profound conception of covenantal commitment. Love, used of God's love for man, describes His covenantal gifts — Jesus and the Spirit. When the Bible speaks, then, of God as love, we are to think of three Persons who share an utterly self-sacrificial commitment in covenant. That is the most natural, most wonderful, and most exalted sense of the word love. Waters' answer is that it is "not at all clear why such words must be grounded in a *covenantally* divine character in order for God to use them in revealing Himself in redemptive history." Again, this seems to be less than a real response. One has to ask: What is Waters' understanding of God's love? How and why does a non-covenantal understanding of intratrinitarian love better accord with the Biblical evidence? Why does God always reveal His attributes in covenantal language if covenant is not essential to His character? Until these questions are answered, the issue has not been addressed.

Conclusion

When I first wrote about the intratrinitarian covenant, I did not anticipate the need for extended argument. After all, Abraham Kuyper and Cornelius Van Til had provided profound theological arguments for the intratrinitarian covenant and I had never read anyone disagreeing with them or attempting to refute them. It came as a surprise to me that an idea that seemed so obvious an implication of Reformed theology would meet with such resistance among Reformed people. The intratrinitarian covenant proposed by Kuyper and Van Til offers the Reformed world a theology that is centered on the Triune God and that clearly links our knowledge of who God is with our knowledge of man and the world. In Van Til's words, we seek a worldview in

¹² <http://www.berith.org/essays/j17/>

which “the idea of the self-sufficient, ontological Trinity is the final reference point in all predication.” This is what Calvinism and covenant theology must mean. Consistent with the spirit of historical Calvinism, the intratrinitarian covenant, moreover, offers a worldview in which worship and love are central.

The idea that a covenant among the Persons of the Trinity somehow implies tritheism was not repeated by Waters. In fact, he specifically denied the implication. But for some among the Reformed, the suggestion that the Persons of the Trinity are in covenant implies that in some way the Three are prior to and more ultimate than the One. I repudiate this implication. I do not say that the Three Persons become the One God by means of a covenant. God is one and three, equally and ultimately, as Van Til emphasized. The notion of a covenant among the Persons — to which Van Til himself held — does not imply the Threeness of God is prior to His oneness or that the Oneness of God depends on the covenant. What is lurking in the background here is the wrong definition of a covenant and a view of God as “substance.” If God is one substance to which three Persons are attached, so to speak, then the one true God is four “things” — one substance and three persons. This is an ancient problem. Substance language invites difficulties.

We should supplement traditional statements with language that defines the ontology of God in covenantal terms. Following Van Til, I am not suggesting that one choose between ontology and covenant. The point, rather, is that our ontology must be covenantal. The Three Persons in Covenant are the One God. The One God is three Persons who indwell one another in covenantal love. Or, to borrow a different expression from Van Til, God is One Person and He is Three Persons. But in no sense is He four persons. In other words, as John Frame explains, we are equivocating in our use of the word “Person.” That does not present a logical problem because we are not including this equivocation as part of a logical argument. With Van Til we want to affirm that God is a one-consciousness Being and a three-consciousness Being. Neither is prior or more ultimate. Of course, in so affirming, we are confessing a mystery that transcends our comprehension.

Why should Reformed writers oppose Kuyper’s and Van Til’s covenantal trinitarianism so vehemently and with so little in the way of substantial argumentation? What is it about this idea that provokes so profound a visceral reaction? I do not have an answer to these questions. But I believe that John Murray was correct when he argued that Reformed theology needs to revise its view of the covenant. To attain a theology in which the doctrine of the Christian God is the true center, the light which radiates through every other doctrine, one must have a Biblically rich doctrine of the Trinity. If Kuyper and Van Til mistook the road to such a Biblically rich doctrine of the Trinity, those who oppose them must offer an alternative that is more Biblical, an alternative that accomplishes what their view offers and more.

Whatever we believe about the intratrinitarian covenant, Reformed Christians should be pursuing theological growth in a spirit of worship and praise for the Triune Creator, for we can only be faithful to the vision of the Reformation so long as we are still seeking growth and reform for the glory of God.

Part 2: On the Covenant

Waters presents the Federal Vision as a theological system that defines a covenant as a relationship. Although it is not directly affirmed, the impression is that this is a distinctive of the

Federal Vision. Thus, criticism of the position that a covenant is a relationship appears to be a criticism of the Federal Vision. At best this is misleading. When Federal Vision writers define a covenant as a relationship, they are following the best of recent Reformed scholarship. The scholars they follow, moreover, are not proponents of the Federal Vision and they do not deny forensic aspects of the covenant. This is well-known to Waters, if for no other reason because it is included in an essay of mine that he quotes and summarizes.¹³

Therefore, it is odd, at the very least, to imply a contrast between the Federal Vision writers as those who believe a covenant is a relationship versus Reformed theologians as those who believe a covenant is an agreement. Admittedly, Waters does not crudely set the two theologies in this sort of stark contrast. Nevertheless, his conclusion is that by defining a covenant as a relationship, the leading thinkers of the Federal Vision hold to an ambiguous view of the covenant that is not able to do justice to the Biblical emphasis on the forensic aspects of the covenant. This ignores the fact that Reformed scholars who speak of covenant as relationship do not necessarily agree with the Federal Vision, nor do they downplay the forensic aspects of the covenant. The definition of a covenant as a relationship comes from a consideration of Biblical data and is not confined to those who believe the theology of the Federal Vision.

John Murray

No theologian in the 20th century was more faithful than John Murray to traditional Reformed theology and its emphasis on the forensic. Murray's views on the imputation of Adam's sin, the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer, and the forensic nature of justification are thoroughly orthodox and traditional. Murray was a highly respected scholar both in and outside of Reformed circles. He was also one of the courageous few who stood up to suggest that further reform of Reformed theology was necessary, even suggesting reform in the doctrine of the covenant.

On the question of the definition of the covenant, Murray was as clear as one could be. In his short book, *The Covenant of Grace*, he specifically addressed the question of whether or not the covenant should be defined as "mutual pact or agreement." He surveyed the Biblical material with this question in mind and came to the conclusion that a covenant is *not* a mutual pact or agreement. In his words,

From the beginning of God's disclosures to men in terms of covenant we find a unity of conception which is to the effect that a divine covenant is a sovereign administration of grace and of promise. *It is not compact or contract or agreement that provides the constitutive or governing idea but that of dispensation in the sense of disposition. . . .* As covenant revelation has progressed throughout the ages it has reached its consummation in the new covenant, and the new covenant is not wholly diverse in principle and character from the covenants which have preceded it and prepared for it, but it is itself the complete realization and embodiment of that sovereign grace which was the constitutive principle of all the covenants. *And when we remember that covenant is not only bestowment of grace, not only oath-bound promise, but also relationship with God in that which is the crown and goal of the*

¹³ http://www.berith.org/essays/defining_the_covenant_what_consensus.htm

Response to Guy Waters

*whole process of religion, namely, union and communion with God, we discover again that the new covenant brings this relationship also to the highest level of achievement.*¹⁴

O. Palmer Robertson

Another respected Reformed theologian who has written on the definition of the covenant is O. Palmer Robertson. He states his view in unambiguous language.

What then is a covenant? How do you define the covenantal relation of God to his people?

A covenant is *a bond in blood sovereignly administered.*¹⁵

Extensive investigations into the etymology of the Old Testament term for “covenant” (ברית) have proven inconclusive in determining the meaning of the word. Yet *the contextual usage of the term in Scripture points rather consistently to the concept of a “bond” or “relationship.”*¹⁶

A long history has marked the analysis of the covenants in terms of mutual compacts or contracts. But recent scholarship has established rather certainly the sovereign character of the administration of the divine covenants in Scripture. Both biblical and extra-biblical evidence point to the unilateral form of covenant establishment. No such thing as bargaining, bartering, or contracting characterizes the divine covenants of Scripture. The sovereign Lord of heaven and earth dictates the terms of the covenant.¹⁷

This does not mean that Robertson is denying traditional Reformed theology or the doctrines of imputation and justification. Robertson is not a proponent of the Federal Vision, nor do his views necessarily lead to Federal Vision theology. His definition of the covenant is based upon the best of the most recent scholarship.

United Reformed Churches of America

An unofficial exposition of the covenant published on the internet by the United Reformed Churches of America also criticize traditional Reformed definition of the covenant, without thereby approving the Federal Vision theology. The reason they repudiate the traditional view is simply because they do not believe it accords with the Bible.

By its very nature the covenant requires two parties. Sometimes it is said that the essence of God’s covenant is an agreement between two parties. *We hold that such wording is inadequate and misleading.* The sovereign Creator designed the nature

¹⁴ John Murray, *The Covenant of Grace: A Biblico-Theological Study* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1988, reprint of 1953 edition), p. 31-32. Italics added.

¹⁵ *The Christ of the Covenants* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), p. 4. Italics in the original.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5. Italics added.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

Response to Guy Waters

and the requirements of the relationship which He desired in His own wisdom, and implemented them when and with whom He wished. The Old Testament Hebrew uses *berith* to designate God's covenant, while the New Testament Greek employs *diatheke*, both of which intimate a one sided origin which includes a second party. Frequently the Reformed churches have used the wording “the covenant of works” as applying before man’s fall into sin, and “the covenant of grace” referring to God’s gracious and just deeds and promises after and in response to the fall. This bi-focused view of God’s relationship with His creature man is questionable. The use of the former in particular has limitations as to its usefulness, since the Bible does not suggest nor employ the wording. We believe that the simple designation “God’s covenant” is preferable. The Scriptures teach that in His covenant the Creator establishes a relationship of friendship with His creature man, requiring and demanding obedience and love in response. The Garden of Eden was a setting designed by the LORD God (notice the consistent use of the covenant Name in Genesis 2) to demonstrate the Creator’s love for His world and to test man's response to that love and friendship. The ingredients of the covenant are sharply delineated by God, as the trees, the task, the commandment, and the punishment are poignant commentaries of the LORD’s love and justice.¹⁸

Again, this unofficial document from the United Reformed Churches in North America rejects the definition supplied by traditional Reformed theology not in the interest of promoting the Federal Vision, but because they see the traditional language as inadequate and misleading for Biblical reasons.

Meredith Kline

Among the recent expositors of Reformed theology, no one emphasizes the legal and forensic aspects of the covenant more than Meredith Kline. But Kline also devotes no little space to demonstrating that the act of creation itself was a covenant-making process. Kline cannot, therefore, define a covenant as an agreement. The uncreated world that came into covenantal existence did not negotiate a pact with God. The world that did not exist obeyed the command of God and came into obediential existence. Then, God looked on the obedient world and blessed it.

Kline’s definition of a covenant fits this basic approach.

Every divine-human covenant in Scripture involves a sanction-sealed commitment to maintain a particular relationship or follow a stipulated course of action. In general then *a covenant may be defined as a relationship under sanctions*.¹⁹

Northpointe Presbyterian Church

I personally know nothing of this church. I found its web site through a Google search. To the best of my knowledge it is a typical PCA congregation with no special sympathy to the

¹⁸ “Contours of God’s Covenant: An Unofficial Exposition of the United Reformed Churches in North America.” *Clarion*, Volume 48, No. 16, Aug. 6, 1999. Emphasis added.

¹⁹ “Law Covenant” in *The Westminster Theological Journal* (vol. 27, no. 1, Nov. 1964), p. 3. Italics added.

Federal Vision. The definition of the covenant on the website includes both traditional emphasis on the notion of agreement and more recent emphasis on the notion of relationship.

We understand the relationship of God to his people to be founded upon covenant agreements. A covenant is a bond in which God condescends to initiate a loving relationship. We recognize major covenants within God's relationship with man. The first covenant was based on the works of Adam. This was initiated by God in Genesis chapter 2 and broken by Adam through his disobedience in the first half of Chapter 3. Because of the fallen state of Adam and all his posterity through the effects of sin with no hope for salvation, God initiated a second covenant relationship of Grace in Genesis 3:15 founded upon God's work of salvation.²⁰

J. Ligon Duncan

Duncan is not a proponent of the Federal Vision. But his definition of the covenant in his lectures on Covenant Theology comport with the view that Waters rejects.

But here is one that I think will help you see the covenantal nature of Genesis 1:26-31: *A covenant is a binding relationship with blessings and obligations.* A covenant is a binding relationship with blessings and obligations. Now that is not adequate in any way as a total, final definition of 'covenant,' but it certainly stresses at least a couple of things doesn't it? It stresses first of all that a covenant is a relationship. It is a special kind of relationship. It is a binding relationship. And in a religious context, of course, it is a saving relationship. Furthermore, it is a relationship that involves both blessing and obligation, both promises and responsibilities. And lo and behold, as we look at Genesis 1:26 and following, that is precisely the pattern we see there of the relationship that is described between God and Adam.²¹

Does Duncan's view of the covenant necessarily entail a view of God's relationship with man that goes contrary to the traditional emphasis on the forensic and legal aspects of the covenant? By following the best of recent theology, has Duncan unwittingly betrayed the Reformed tradition? Is Duncan one of those who, by redefining the covenant, surreptitiously undermines the whole of Westminster theology? Maybe, maybe not. In either case, he is expressing a Biblical view of the covenant.

Conclusion

The list of those defining a covenant as a relationship could be extended almost *ad infinitum*. Many of those on the list would be theologians and pastors who hold to traditional views of Reformed theology in contrast with the views of the Federal Theology. Thus, viewing a covenant as a relationship rather than an agreement is not a defining characteristic of the Federal Vision. Rather, it is a characteristic of a more sophisticated Biblical theological approach to the definition of the covenant.

²⁰ <http://www.northpointepca.org/identity.html>

²¹ [http://www.fpcjackson.org/resources/apologetics/Covenant Theology & Justification/Ligons_covtheology/03.htm](http://www.fpcjackson.org/resources/apologetics/Covenant%20Theology%20&%20Justification/Ligons_covtheology/03.htm) Italics in original.

Response to Guy Waters

Is the notion of a relationship ambiguous? Yes and no. The covenant relationship between God and Israel is defined in the covenant formula “I will be your God and you will be My people.” I suppose this is ambiguous from a certain perspective. But the covenant law of God and the history of God’s covenant discipline of His people spell out the details and remove the ambiguity.

Waters says that the proponents of the Federal Vision overemphasize the marriage analogy. But that is the analogy that the Bible ends with in the most glorious vision of the unity and love of the Triune God with His people. John sees a vision of the Bride of Christ, the heavenly Jerusalem. That is the consummating vision of what the covenant is and the kind of fellowship it envisions. Whatever ambiguities remain are Biblical ambiguities inseparably included in the most glorious vision imaginable of God’s love and grace for His people.

The covenant is a relationship of love. It is “a personal-structural bond which joins the three Persons of God in a community of life.”²² Waters is correct that one’s definition of a covenant should influence the whole theological system, but he is quite wrong in suggesting that the Federal Vision holds to a definition of the covenant that is distinct to its own particular theology. On the contrary, the proponents of the Federal Vision hold to a view of the covenant that is common among recent students of Biblical theology, including many who do not agree with the theology of the Federal Vision.

It may be true, however, that the proponents of the Federal Vision confess a theology that is more consistent with the view of the covenant espoused by those who view the covenant as a relationship. If that view of the covenant is correct, as many affirm, then the real problem is whether recent Reformed scholarship is calling us to revise our view of the covenant. To this question, I believe our answer should be in the affirmative.

Part 3: The Covenant of Works

Waters offers criticism of my views on the Covenant of Works expressed in the book *The Eternal Covenant*. He rehearses the three basic objections that I offer for the Covenant of Works, criticizing each of them in turn, and then closes the section by criticizing my statements about the relationship between the Covenant of Works and justification. This covers most of chapter 3 of the book.

Before turning to Waters’ critique, I would like to point out that I have written a number of essays on the Covenant of Works. In my essay “Interpreting the Covenant of Works,”²³ I quoted the following from John Murray.

Towards the end of the 16th century the administration dispensed to Adam in Eden, focused in the prohibition to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, had come to be interpreted as a covenant, frequently called the Covenant of Works, sometimes a covenant of life, or the Legal Covenant. It is, however, significant that the early covenant theologians did not construe this Adamic administration as a covenant, far less as a covenant of works. Reformed creeds of the 16th century such as the French Confession (1559), the Scottish Confession (1560), the Belgic

²² James Jordan, *The Law of the Covenant* (), p. 5

²³ http://www.berith.org/essays/cov_works/01.html

Confession (1561), the Thirty-Nine Articles (1562), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), and the Second Helvetic (1566) do not exhibit any such construction of the Edenic institution. After the pattern of the theological thought prevailing at the time of their preparation, the term ‘covenant,’ insofar as it pertained to God’s relations with men, was interpreted as designating the relation constituted by redemptive provisions and as belonging, therefore, to the sphere of saving grace.²⁴

What Murray clearly shows here is that the Covenant of Works is not essential to Reformed theology or Covenant theology. But I hasten to clarify my terms. It may be helpful to distinguish between the covenant idea, Reformed theology, Covenant theology, and Federal theology. In this scheme, the covenant idea would refer simply to the Scriptural teaching about the covenant. Reformed theology would be the theology of the Reformers, including Luther and the English reformers. Covenant theology would be any theology in which the covenant provides the basic framework for the theological system. Federal theology would be the specific type of Covenant theology in which there are two covenants, the Covenant of Works in Adam and the Covenant of Grace in Christ, that serve as the organizing framework for theology.²⁵ Of course, this is the theology that came to expression in the Westminster Confession of Faith. Making a distinction of this sort helps us avoid historical confusion and will hopefully help to clarify the theological issues in the present debate.

Murray’s quotation reminds us that early Reformed theology and Covenant theology did not include the conception of a Covenant of Works. What I added in my essay is evidence that among the proponents of Federal theology, there have been multiple interpretations of the Covenant of Works. When, therefore, Waters defends a Covenant of Works, it is important to keep in mind that he is not defending either Reformed or Covenant theology, which do not require a Covenant of Works, nor is he defending Federal theology *per se*. What he is defending is one particular interpretation of Federal theology.

It is this sort of complexity that Reformed and Presbyterian pastors and theologians need to keep in mind as they continue to debate various basic issues in Reformed and Covenant theology. In the light of that complexity, I suggested in another essay that one’s views on the Covenant of Works should not be set up as a litmus test for Reformed orthodoxy.²⁶ With these preliminary remarks in mind, then, we are ready to turn to Waters’ critique.

The Covenant of Works is Antiquated

Waters responds to my three arguments against a Covenant of Works in order. My first argument against a Covenant of Works is that the doctrine expressed in the Westminster

²⁴ John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray: 4, Studies in Theology*, "Covenant Theology," (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982), pp. 217-18.

²⁵ The fourfold distinction suggested here is a slight modification of David Weir’s distinction between the covenant idea, Covenant theology and Reformed theology. I have added Reformed theology to the list of terms because it is important to keep in mind that many Lutheran and Calvinistic reformed pastors and thinkers presupposed a unity in their theology, even though the Calvinists emphasized the covenant in a way the Lutherans never did. For the reference to David Weir, I am indebted to David Gibson, *Prelapsarian Federalism and the Shape of Reformed Theology: A Response to James B. Torrance and Holmes Rolston III*, p. 7. Gibson’s essay is available at: <http://www.beginningwithmoses.org/bigger/prelapsefederalism.pdf>

²⁶ <http://www.berith.org/essays/litmus/>

Response to Guy Waters

Confession of Faith is antiquated. By referring to it as antiquated, I mean that the particular doctrine of the Westminster Confession seems to be based upon a medieval voluntarist understanding of merit. In saying this, however, I express my debt to Lee Irons. In other words, this idea is not original to me. I am simply referring to — and agreeing with — a well-known student of Kline.

In his essays on Covenant theology Mark Karlberg expounds the problem at more length and explains it more clearly perhaps than Irons' essay.²⁷ Though Waters regards my "assertion" as "intriguing," I am simply quoting other Reformed scholars. Karlberg's extended and detailed discussion traces the development of Reformed theology and shows how the influence of scholasticism entered. I cannot quote his entire historical survey, but the following two selections serve to outline the basic issues.

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 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. The provision of supernatural grace itself indicated the creature's utter dependence upon God for the full blessing of life and spiritual communion with God. The beatific vision of God, *i.e.*, glorification, could not be attained by natural human strength. Oftentimes, the scholastics spoke of this subsequent state of grace in specific terms of God's covenant or pact with all humanity. The eschatological goal of creation, namely, communion and life with God in consummated glory, was to be attained in the way of covenant promise and reward. Whereas the state of nature was static, the covenant order was established by God as the means of realizing humanity's final state of glorification and beatitude.²⁸

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. The covenant, according to Junius, was established with our first parents by God the Father in the love of his Son. It held out the promise of supernatural life for obedience and the curse of death and separation from God for disobedience. As a supralapsarian, Junius emphasized the sovereign, electing purpose of God in creation. 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

²⁷ *Covenant Theology in Reformed Perspective: Collected essays and book reviews in historical, biblical, and systematic theology.* <http://www.twoagepress.org/Karlberg.pdf>

²⁸ *Covenant Theology in Reformed Perspective*, p. 96.

Response to Guy Waters

of grace and mercy (*ex pacto*). Prior to the Fall, argued Junius, Adam's blessedness was communicated by the three persons of the trinity, particularly by the Son, the fountain of election. The cause of life was God's sovereign grace and election. The sacrament of the tree of life symbolized supernatural life through Christ, the originator of life. Although Junius upheld the essential distinction between this original, covenantal grace of Christ and soteric grace after the Fall, his speculative view of covenant nevertheless obscured the fundamental antithesis between the order of creation (law) and the order of redemption (grace).

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*. A second and more serious result of this theological deviation within Reformed thought was federalism's obscuration of the eschatological design of creation. (As we will argue below the return to the biblical theme of eschatology among Reformed systematians at the turn of the twentieth century brought about the eventual reclamation of the organic conception of the Covenant of Creation.)²⁹

It goes without saying that I am not in entire agreement with Irons or Kline. What they point out is that the particular form of the Covenant of Works taught in the Westminster Confession VII.1 finds its roots in the medieval Catholic voluntarist tradition. Waters seems to doubt that this is true, but I am relying on the explanation of historical theology by Irons and Karlberg, who both, Karlberg in particular, refer to many other Reformed scholars and to original sources. I am not a scholar, but from the reading I have done, there seems to be something of a consensus that Reformed theology was influenced by scholasticism. Of course, there is quite a debate about how important that influence was and whether or not there is a serious divide between Calvin and the Calvinists. But Karlberg's review of the history of Reformed theology does not seem controversial.

What is intriguing is that Waters, in response to the suggestion that the Covenant of Works in the Westminster Confession of Faith VII.1 is antiquated, answers by proposing as a solution the very nature/grace sort of dichotomy that Karlberg criticizes as a scholastic addition to Covenant theology. To cure the disease, Waters would have us re-infected with the same germ. The whole problem is that the theology of the Middle Ages failed to see that Adam was created in covenant with God so that there could be no distinction between the natural order and the covenantal order. Introducing that distinction in later Reformed theology, as Karlberg explained, was a source of basic problems in Reformed theology. Somehow, however, Waters sees that as a solution. In this case, then, Waters is debating not with me or with the proponents of the Federal Vision, but with Lee Irons, Mark Karlberg, and much of more recent Reformed theology.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 98-99

The Covenant of Works is Unbiblical

The first issue in my claim that the Covenant of Works is unbiblical concerns the nature of the original creation. If the Covenant of Works doctrine in Westminster implies that the creation order is not covenantal, then it is unbiblical. Waters' response to this part of my argument is especially weak since he offers very little — in fact only an assertion — in response to Meredith Kline's exposition of the creation as a covenant-making act. Once again, however, it is important to note that the real debate on this point is not between Waters and me, or Waters and the proponents of the Federal Vision, but between Waters and Kline — not to mention much of recent Reformed scholarship.

Other problems that I pointed out have specifically to do with Kline and Murray. But Waters rejects Kline's view of the covenant as essential to the creation order itself and Murray's view that Adam and Eve should not have been allowed to partake of the tree of life. In other words, Waters has a view of the Covenant of Works that is different from both Kline and Murray. That is not a problem in itself, but it is a fact that should be noted, for the debates involved here are much broader than any disagreements between Waters and the Federal Vision.

As for the Covenant of Works being unbiblical, what I pointed out is that the Covenant of Works is usually understood to mean that Adam is righteous, but not yet "justified" — or something similar to that. Adam had not yet merited eternal life because he had not passed the test and been pronounced righteous so that he could inherit for himself and his posterity the gift of life.

What I see in the Biblical narrative is something different. Adam is created by God and then placed in a sanctuary-Garden created especially for him. It is the place of union and communion with God, paradise. If we consider how Garden of Eden themes are repeated in the picture of the New Jerusalem in Revelation, we might even call Eden, "heaven in its primordial form." Adam is blessed as fully and richly as a man could be blessed. Is this the picture of a man who has to earn merit in order to achieve blessing? Or is this the picture of a man who was given the highest blessing conceivable and called to persevere? I contend that the latter picture does more justice to the Biblical evidence.

It would be possible, of course, to simply add my view to the list of interpretations of the Covenant of Works and keep the same Federal theology. For Adam's position in the Garden is indeed a position in which one sin undermines the covenant relationship, for him and his posterity. He has no covenant mediator between himself and God. He has no Savior to intercede for him. He stands before God on the basis of his own works. But we do not want to say that this is a works-versus-faith situation. Surely for Adam to do good works before God and to persevere in the blessings of the Garden, he must have faith. What is required of Adam is true faith. In the context of a man created without sin, the requirement of faith means a faith that exhibits itself in a sinless life of serving God. Anything less would be unbelief.

Waters' criticism of my view on this point is that I affirm "utter continuity" between the covenant with Adam and the covenant in Christ. He says, "Notable in Smith's construction of the Adamic covenant is the idea *that it operates on precisely the same terms as the present-day covenant of grace.*"³⁰ What I said in my book, however, is that the two situations are similar. I never affirmed that the two are "precisely" the same nor do I view them as in "utter continuity."

³⁰ Waters, p. 37.

Response to Guy Waters

I referred to various distinctions between the two in my essay, but not having anticipated Waters' sort of misunderstanding I did not attempt anything like an exhaustive list — nor will I here. Some of the most important distinctions are listed.

1. The covenant with Adam was temporary; the covenant in Christ is eternal.
2. Adam had no mediator, so he stood before God alone; Christ is our mediator before God so we never stand before God alone.
3. The first covenant had no provision of redemptive grace so that one sin meant death. In the new covenant, grace abounds to sinners through Christ.
4. Adam was a sinless man. What was expected of him was appropriate for his original sinless condition. Christ was the sinless Son of God and what was demanded of Him was what only He could have done. We are sinners in Christ and what is expected of us is in accord with our condition.
5. The faith that Adam was to exercise in God was trust in Him as holy and good Creator. We exercise a faith in God as Savior from sin, so our faith includes repentance.

To repeat myself, then, I did not and do not assert “utter continuity” between the covenant in the Garden and the covenant in Christ.

The Covenant of Works is Theologically Inadequate

Waters response to this criticism of the Covenant of Works is that he has already answered my view about an intratrinitarian covenant. If that were true, then he would be right at least in saying that I had nothing to propose as an alternative to the Covenant of Works. It would remain true, however, that Federal theology would be a theological system in which the Covenant of Works would be the paradigmatic covenant for all of theology. That seems to me to be theologically out of tune with the Biblical revelation of God. But if there were no intratrinitarian covenant, some might believe that a Covenant of Works as paradigmatic would be the only choice. That is not actually true.

What must be remembered is that John Murray, a confessing Presbyterian, believed that the Biblical covenant idea does not fit the notion of a Covenant of Works. He not only denied that a covenant is an agreement, he also emphasized that redemptive grace is of the essence of a covenant relationship. That is not my view. I mention Murray's view to point out that there are other viewpoints on the covenant that would evaluate Waters' understanding as theologically and Biblically inadequate. Abraham Kuyper and Cornelius Van Til would also view Waters approach as theologically and biblically inadequate, though neither of them would reject the Covenant of Works. Waters' approach, therefore, is not the one-and-only truly Reformed view, nor is it the only view which comports with Federal theology.

An Objection Considered

The final section in Waters' discussion of my views on the Covenant of Works is devoted to the question of the relationship between the Covenant of Works and justification by faith. The motive for writing about justification by faith in my book was that Meredith Kline and his followers assert that a denial of the Covenant of Works is a denial of justification by faith. My intention is to show that is not the case. After all, Lutherans do not believe in a Covenant of Works, but few would contend that they therefore must deny justification by faith.

I showed in my book that the doctrine of a Covenant of Love in the Garden does not eliminate the legal aspect of the covenant nor does it compromise the doctrine of imputation. I do suggest that merit is not an appropriate idea and that our doctrine of imputation would be better off without it. If one re-defines merit along the lines suggested by Lee Irons, there is no real problem with using the word merit, except that it may be misleading. Besides, once one has re-defined merit, the word is no longer necessary. Of course, Waters may not agree with Irons' views of merit. He may believe in merit in a different sense. In that case, the debate is not between Waters and me, but between Waters and Irons.

My statement that it is Christ's righteousness that is imputed to the believer rather than Christ's merit is said to be a rejection of "the historic Reformed doctrine of imputed righteousness." To demonstrate that I have denied the historic Reformed doctrine, Waters goes on to quote from James Jordan. It is true that I have often happily indicated my deep indebtedness to Jordan's writings and teachings. But quoting from James Jordan and then making conclusions about my views, when I have never indicated that I agree with Jordan in the matter quoted, is, to state it mildly, methodologically imprudent.

As a matter of fact, I agree with Charles Hodge's statement about Christ's active and passive obedience.

It is frequently said that justification consists in the pardon of sin and in the imputation of righteousness. This mode of statement is commonly adopted by Lutheran theologians. This exhibition of the doctrine is founded upon the sharp distinction made in the "Form of Concord" between the passive and active obedience of Christ. To the former is referred the remission of the penalty due to us for sin; to the latter our title to eternal life. The Scriptures, however, do not make this distinction so prominent. Our justification as a whole is sometimes referred to the blood of Christ, and sometimes to his obedience. This is intelligible because the crowning act of his obedience, and that without which all else had been unavailing, was his laying down his life for us. It is, perhaps, more correct to say that the righteousness of Christ, including all He did and suffered in our stead, is imputed to the believer as the ground of his justification, and that the consequences of this imputation are, first, the remission of sin, and secondly, the acceptance of the believer as righteous. And if righteous, then he is entitled to be so regarded and treated.³¹

Note that Hodge does not speak here of merit. He can express the view of Federal theology without that word. Without entirely denying the distinction between the two, he also

³¹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. (soteriology, chapter 17 no. 7)

combines Christ's active and passive obedience in the interest of being faithful to the testimony of the Scriptures. I agree with his statement above. I think such a view should be accepted as orthodox from the perspective of Reformed theology, Covenant theology, and Federal theology.

What Jordan offered, I believe, was a *supplement* to the traditional doctrine of justification, not a replacement and certainly not a new definition of orthodoxy. However that may be, my own view on this particular point is well stated by Hodge above. Waters' debate with Jordan is another issue.

Conclusion

One of the most important conclusions to come out in the discussion of Waters' criticisms of my views is that the title of his book, *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology: A Comparative Analysis*, is misleading, at least as far as it concerns me. Waters is not comparing the Federal Vision with Covenant theology, as I have defined the term in this essay. Nor is he comparing the Federal vision with Federal theology, which is what he means by Covenant theology. What he has done is compare the Federal Vision with his own narrow and sometimes outmoded version of Federal theology. When purportedly criticizing me, he is almost always disagreeing with men like Abraham Kuyper, Cornelius Van Til, John Murray, and Meredith Kline, to name only a few of his prominent opponents. His title suggests that clear lines can be drawn between the Federal Vision and Covenant theology, but the fact is that Covenant theology embraces more than one form of theology and the Federal Vision comports with it. Even Federal theology has enough diversity to include the theology of the Federal Vision.

Placing the debate in Waters' framework and suggesting that the proponents of the Federal Vision are opponents of Covenant theology not only involves an overly narrow view of Covenant theology, it conducts the argument along the lines of mere debating technique rather than offering a fair evaluation of fellow Christian scholars and pastors. In spite of the length of his book and his apparent desire to be fair with those he criticizes, Waters' definition of the debate as a dispute between the Federal Vision and Covenant Theology renders a nuanced and theologically accurate analysis impossible by erasing the various overlapping concerns between Covenant Theologians and Federal Vision writers, by ignoring the complexity of Covenant Theology itself, and by failing to take into account the advances in Covenant Theology suggested by writers like Meredith Kline. Waters' book, therefore, rather than contributing to the discussion, muddies the waters.