

## The Federal Vision and the Covenant of Works

### ***Introduction***

Ever since the theological doctrine of the covenant of works was codified in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) it has come under criticism and outright rejection. In past years rejection has come not only from the broader evangelical community but also from within the reformed camp itself, most notably from John Murray, Herman Hoeksema, and Daniel Fuller.<sup>1</sup> Most recently, however, rejection of the covenant of works has come from proponents of the so-called, federal vision. Among the proponents of the federal vision, two authors have specifically written against the traditional understanding of the covenant of works, Rich Lusk and James Jordan.<sup>2</sup> Jordan, for example, writes that “the confusion over merit and works came into the Protestant tradition as a hangover of Medieval theology.”<sup>3</sup> Lusk along similar lines attributes the rise of the covenant of works, not to medieval theology, but to the place logic of Peter Ramus (1515-72). Lusk writes that Ramus

developed an alternative to Aristotelian logic, based on a dichotomizing method that arranged ideas in two's, e. g., law vs. gospel, nature vs. grace, faith vs. works, reason vs. revelation, wrathful God vs. merciful Christ, covenant of works vs. covenant of grace, etc. The Ramist system rapidly became master rather than servant of the biblical revelation, fragmenting the unity of the Scriptural narrative.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 2, *Systematic Theology* (1977; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1996), pp. 47-59; Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1966), pp. 214-226; and Daniel P. Fuller, *The Unity of the Bible: Unfolding God's Plan for Humanity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), pp. 181-82.

<sup>2</sup> One may also add P. Andrew Sandlin, “Covenant in Redemptive History: ‘Godspel and Law’ or ‘Trust and Obey’?” in *Backbone of the Bible: Covenant in Conemporary Perspective*, ed. P. Andrew Sandlin (Nacogdoches: Covenant Media Press, 2004), pp. 63-84.

<sup>3</sup> James Jordan, “Merit vs. Maturity: What Did Jesus Do for Us?,” in *The Federal Vision*, eds. Steve Wilkins and Duane Garner (Monroe: Athanasius Press, 2004), p. 192.

<sup>4</sup> Rich Lusk, “A Response to ‘The Biblical Plan of Salvation,’” in *The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros and Cons. Debating the Federal Vision*. The Knox Theological Seminary Colloquium on the Federal Vision, ed. E. Calvin Beisner (Ft. Lauderdale: Knox Theological Seminary, 2003), p. 119.

Lusk and Jordan claim, therefore, that the covenant of works is foreign and unknown to the teaching of Scripture. It is the thesis of this essay that the federal vision, at least as it is represented by Jordan and Lusk, errs in its rejection of the covenant of works. Moreover, their erroneous rejection of the covenant of works leads to other systemic errors. Their error regarding the covenant works compromises the system of doctrine contained in the Scriptures, which is summarized in the Westminster Standards. This essay will proceed along the following lines to substantiate this thesis: (1) briefly outline the traditional understanding of covenant of works; (2) outline the views of Jordan and Lusk; (3) critique Jordan and Lusk's view of the covenant of works and demonstrate how it compromises the system of doctrine; and (4) conclude with some general observations regarding the federal vision. We may therefore proceed with the first portion of our study, defining the traditional understanding of the covenant of works.

### ***The traditional understanding of the covenant of works***

It will prove helpful to review briefly the traditional teaching of the covenant of works so that as we examine the views of Jordan and Lusk we will have a backdrop for comparison. We can of course find no better statement than that offered by the Westminster Confession: "The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam, and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience" (7.2).<sup>5</sup> In this succinct statement the divines offer three ideas: (1) that the first covenant was one of works; (2) the reward of this covenant was life for Adam and his offspring; and (3) the required condition of this covenant was perfect and personal obedience. To support the first idea the divines cite Gal 3.12: "But the law is

not of faith, rather ‘The one who does them shall live by them.’” In this verse Paul explains the results of obedience to the law, in this case, the one who obeys the law shall live. To support the second idea, that the reward of the covenant of works was life not only for Adam but also for his offspring, the divines cite Rom 10.5: “For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them.” Here we see the divines conclude that the one who lives in obedience to the law receives life. They also cite Rom 5.12-20 where Paul places Adam and Christ in parallel, which demonstrates their federal relationship with those who are united to them.

The divines go on to cite Gen 2.17 and Gal 3.10 to support the idea that the condition of the covenant of works was perfect and personal obedience. Gen 2.17, of course, is the command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And, Gal 3.10 states: “For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.’” The divines cite these two passages to demonstrate that Adam was under a state of law in the garden, and the penalty for violating that law was death, the same penalty due to those who violate the mosaic law, or torah.

Some might object to the offered proof-texts for the covenant of works on the basis that the divines have cited passages of Scripture that deal not with Adam’s state in the garden but the post-fall relationship of man to the mosaic law. While this is true, the divines do appeal to Paul’s understanding of the torah, one must take into account how the divines understand God’s administration of the law throughout redemptive history. The

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<sup>5</sup>All quotations of the Westminster Standards taken from *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646; Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1995), unless otherwise noted and hereafter abbreviated as WCF,

divines argue that “God gave to Adam a law, as a covenant of works, by which He bound him and all his posterity to personal entire, exact, and perpetual obedience; promised life upon the fulfilling, and threatened death upon the breach of it; and endued him with power and ability to keep it” (WCF 19.1). Among the passages of Scripture that the divines cite to support this statement is Rom 2.14-15: “For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. <sup>15</sup>They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them.” Now, this citation implies that Adam received the command not to eat from the tree of knowledge and additionally, the moral law was written upon his heart. The divines go on to state that, “This law, after his fall, continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness; and, as such, was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in ten commandments” (WCF 19.2a).<sup>6</sup>

Confession 19.2a means that the divines equate the moral law inscribed upon Adam’s heart with the law given at Sinai. Hence, what is said about the law at Sinai may also be said of the law in the garden of Eden with one major difference. In a post fall world no one can obtain life by the law (Rom 3.20; Gal 3.10, 24), but this is not so in a pre-fall world where sin and death have yet to enter the picture. This means that Adam’s presence in the garden was determined by his obedience to the law as it was specifically and generally revealed to him, that is the specific command not to eat of the tree of knowledge and the general revelation of the law upon Adam’s heart. If Adam was obedi-

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<sup>6</sup> See the exposition of these portions of the Standards of Robert Shaw, *An Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith* (1845; Fearn: Christian Focus, 1998), pp. 240-42; also A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1958), pp. 248-51.

ent, he would secure life. We must also note the federal relationship between Adam and his offspring. Namely, whatever Adam secured, whether life or death, would be communicated to his offspring. We know, of course, that Adam rebelled and received the penalty God promised, death. Again, based in part on Rom 5.12-19, the divines argue that Adam and Eve, “being the root of all mankind, the guilt of this sin was imputed, and the same death in sin and corrupted nature conveyed to all their posterity, descending from them by ordinary generation” (WCF 6.3). This means that Adam passed on the guilt of his sin and death to his offspring by immediate and mediate means, imputation and ordinary generation.

This is a brief overview of the teaching of Scripture as outlined in the Westminster Confession on the covenant of works. This backdrop provides us with a reminder of what the proponents of the federal vision reject. However, we may note at this point Jordan and Lusk’s erroneous historical-theological claims. The divines’ exegesis neither appears to be the result of a medieval hangover nor Ramist logic as Lusk and Jordan claim. One’s philosophical commitments did not dictate theological positions as Ramists and Aristotelians alike both affirmed the covenant of works. For example, Amandus Polanus (1561-1610), a Ramist, and Francis Turretin (1623-87), an Aristotelian, both held to the covenant of works.<sup>7</sup> One should be suspicious when Lusk and Jordan dismiss the covenant of works on the basis of alien philosophical or theological influence when they fail to cite evidence to support the claim. The primary sources simply do not support their contention. Lusk and Jordan’s claims are thinly researched and when they are, they

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<sup>7</sup> Amandus Polanus, *The Substance of Christian Religion: Sound Set Forth in Two Books* (London: 1595), p. 88; Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison (Philipsburg: P & R, 1992), vol. 1, pp. 574-78. On the nature of the covenant of works in 17<sup>th</sup>

cite discredited theories, such as Calvin vs. the Calvinists.<sup>8</sup> We may now proceed to an examination of the main tenets of Jordan and Lusk, what they call the Adamic covenant.

### ***The Adamic covenant according to Jordan and Lusk***

In lieu of the traditional doctrine of the covenant of works Jordan and Lusk offer a different explanation of Adam's state in the garden. We must first begin with their definition of the term *covenant*, for it is out of the definition of this term that we can begin to understand the contours of their view of Adam's state. Jordan defines a covenant as "a personal-structural bond which joins the three persons of God in a community of life, and in which man was created to participate."<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that proponents of the federal vision do not see the covenant as merely the means by which the trinity brings about the redemption of man, i.e., the *pactum salutis*, but rather the covenant is part of the *opera ad intra* of the trinity. That the covenant is part of the ontology of the trinity is evident in Jordan's definition—the covenant is the bond that joins the three persons of God in community. Ralph Smith, one associated with the federal vision and who is in agreement with Lusk and Jordan on the rejection of the covenant of works, spells out the implications of Jordan's understanding of covenant as it relates to Adam in the garden:

"The eternal covenant of love among the persons of the Trinity is the archetypal covenant that determines the covenant in the garden, rather than a covenant of works in the garden

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century theology see, Richard A. Muller, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford: OUP, 2003), pp. 175-90.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Lusk, "Response," p. 119; Muller, *After Calvin*, pp. 63-104. One such example of Lusk's historical-theological weakness is his uncritical reliance upon David Weir, whose theory of the origins of covenant theology has been called into question (cf. David Weir, *The Origins of the Federal Theology in Sixteenth-Century Reformation Thought* [Oxford: OUP, 1990]; Lyle D. Bierma, "Review of Weir, Origins of the Federal Theology," *Calvin Theological Journal* 26 [1991], pp. 483-85; Richard A. Muller, "Review of Weir, Origins of the Federal Theology," *The Journal of Religion* 72 [1992], pp. 597-98).

<sup>9</sup> James Jordan, *The Law of the Covenant* (Tyler: Institute for Christian Economics, 1984), p. 4, as cited in Ralph Smith, *Eternal Covenant: How the Trinity Reshapes Covenant Theology* (Moscow: Canon Press, 2003), pp. 51-52.

being the pattern for the Trinity.”<sup>10</sup> What this means, then, is that Adam’s state in the garden is based upon love and faithfulness, not merit.

Proponents of the federal vision will grant that Adam was indeed in a covenant relationship with God in the garden. What they will reject, though, is that the Adamic covenant was conditioned by merit. Jordan, quoting Lusk, writes that “the covenant of works construction strikes at the filial nature of covenant sonship. Adam was God’s son, not his employee. He wasn’t to earn anything. Eschatological life was promised *inheritance*, not something to be merited.”<sup>11</sup> Rather than meriting life in the garden, Jordan argues that Romans 5 clearly teaches that there are two stages in human existence, an Adamic and glorified stages, what Jordan calls “childhood and maturity.” He also bases this idea of a twofold existence upon 1 Cor 15.44: “If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.” Jordan writes, “A person does not become a mature adult by ‘earning’ or ‘meriting’ it by doing good works. Rather, a child is supposed to grow up to be an adult, unless he dies before attaining mature age.”<sup>12</sup> Jordan explains that

What is set before Adam is a choice. He is free to eat of every tree, including the special Tree of Life. He is forbidden to eat of the Tree of Knowledge. Approaching the garden’s center, he must choose which of the Trees to eat first. If he rejects the Tree of Knowledge and partakes of the Tree of Life, he will enter into a process of further life that will eventuate in eternal life. Having obeyed God in faith at the outset, he will set himself on a road of further faithful obedience. If, however, he chooses to eat of the Tree of Knowledge first, he will die and not move any farther down the road to eternal life. We notice that there is nothing of ‘merit’ or ‘work’ here.<sup>13</sup>

What would have been involved in Adam’s maturation process according to Jordan?

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<sup>10</sup> Smith, *Eternal Covenant*, p. 74. Lusk cites Smith to support his concept of the covenant and Jordan then cites Lusk on the same point (Lusk, “Response,” p. 122, n. 16; Jordan, “Merit vs. Maturity,” p. 155, n. 13).

<sup>11</sup> Jordan, “Merit vs. Maturity,” p. 155.

<sup>12</sup> Jordan, “Merit vs. Maturity,” p. 151.

<sup>13</sup> Jordan, “Merit vs. Maturity,” p. 151.

Adam's maturation process was supposed to be marked by righteousness, what proponents of the federal vision define as covenant faithfulness.<sup>14</sup> Jordan argues that as Adam continued in his faithful obedience in the garden "someday God would give him permission to eat of the Tree of Knowledge, and that on that day he would die. The Tree of Knowledge, then, not the Tree of Life, was the eschatological tree, the tree of promise. The Tree of Knowledge would end Adam's first phase in life."<sup>15</sup> Lusk elaborates upon Jordan's idea and argues that once God would have given Adam the right to eat from the tree of knowledge that, "This tree would have represented the bestowal of kingly office and glory upon Adam."<sup>16</sup>

There is a clear difference between the traditional and federal vision understandings of the Adamic covenant. The traditional view posits Adam in a covenantal relationship that is conditioned by obedience in order to obtain eternal life. The federal vision, on the other hand, sees Adam in a covenantal relationship that is conditioned by the need for maturity, which when reached, he is allowed to eat of the tree of knowledge, die, and be raised to the higher state of eschatological life. Needless to say, these two understandings of Adam's state in the garden produce radically different results. Let us move forward so that we can not only critique the federal vision's understanding of the Adamic covenant but also explore how it compromises the system of doctrine contained in the Scriptures.

### ***Critique of the federal vision's Adamic covenant***

We will proceed to critique the federal vision's understanding of the Adamic covenant along the following lines: (1) their definition of a covenant; (2) the idea that a

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<sup>14</sup> Lusk, "Response to Smith," p. 147; Jordan, "Merit vs. Maturity," p. 174.

<sup>15</sup> Jordan, "Merit vs. Maturity," p. 160.



covenant is part of the ontological essence of the trinity; (3) the two-staged model of human existence, childhood and maturity; and (4) an exploration of the problematic implications for the system of doctrine that ensue from this defective view of the Adamic covenant.

### **Definition of covenant**

The first issue with which we must begin is the very definition of the term *covenant*. As we saw, Jordan defines a covenant as “a personal-structural bond which joins the three persons of God in a community of life, and in which man was created to participate.”<sup>17</sup> We must ask, however, where in the Scriptures do we see a covenant defined only as a relationship? While relationships certainly take place within the context of a covenant, we must recognize that Scripture sees a covenant primarily as an agreement. Defining a covenant as an agreement, pact, or treaty, for example, is evident in the use of the term *berith* in the OT.<sup>18</sup> We see covenants as treaties or agreements in Abraham’s covenant with Abimelech (Gen 21.27), Isaac and Abimelech (Gen 26.28), Jacob and Laban (Gen 31.44), Israel and the Gibeonites (Josh 9.15), to name just a few. In fact, anywhere one finds stipulations or conditions, such as blessing for compliance with the terms of the covenant and death for violation, we must conclude that the covenant is based upon an agreement.<sup>19</sup> Reformed theologians have noted the OT’s use of the term and have therefore defined a covenant in terms of an agreement. Zacharias Ursinus (1534-83), for example, in his exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism defines a covenant as “a mutual

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<sup>16</sup> Lusk, “Response to Smith,” p. 139.

<sup>17</sup> Jordan, *Law of the Covenant*, p. 4, as cited in Smith, *Eternal Covenant*, pp. 51-52.

<sup>18</sup> Francis Brown, et al., *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1979), pp. 136-37.

<sup>19</sup> See Gordon J. McConville, “בְּרִית,” *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), vol. 1, pp. 748-54.

contract, or agreement between two parties, in which the one party binds itself to the other to accomplish something upon certain conditions.”<sup>20</sup> Similar definitions of the term persist to this day.<sup>21</sup> Even among those reformed theologians who prominently feature the idea of covenant defined as a relationship still see that it is a relationship based upon an agreement.<sup>22</sup> That a covenant by definition is an agreement, means that a covenant creates a relationship but that it is one that has a legal element. The legal element, for example, is clearly evident in the stipulated conditions of the covenant. If one fails to meet the terms of the covenant, or agreement, then there are consequences for such failure. The legal element in the covenant is not a problem unless one argues, as does the federal vision, that covenant is part of the *opera ad intra* of the trinity.

### **Trinity and covenant**

Part and parcel of the federal vision’s understanding of the covenant concept is that it is part of the ontological essence of the trinity. Many reformed theologians have readily acknowledged the *pactum salutis*, or covenant of redemption, as part of the *opera ad extra* of the trinity. For example, as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century we find evidence of this concept. The *Sum of Saving Knowledge*, a document appended to Scottish versions of the Westminster Confession states that God has revealed that salvation would be accomplished by “the eternal Son of God, by virtue of, and according to the tenor of the covenant of redemption, made and agreed upon between God the Father and God the Son, in the council of the Trinity, before the world began.”<sup>23</sup> We clearly see that the covenant of

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<sup>20</sup> Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. G. W. Williard (1852; Phillipsburg: P & R, n. d.), p. 97.

<sup>21</sup> Meredith Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Overland Park: Two Age Press, 2000), p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> So O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg: P & R, 1980), p. 6.

<sup>23</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, p. 324.

redemption is part of the *opera ad extra*, as it is an agreement among the members of the trinity. By contrast, the federal vision moves the covenant into the *opera ad intra*, arguing that it is part of the ontological essence of the trinity. Covenant therefore is not the means by which the trinity brings about the redemption of man but a part of the essential nature of the Godhead. This is why, for example, the federal vision defines a covenant as a relationship to the exclusion of any concept of agreement. In fact, proponents of the federal vision go as far as to say that “the ‘economic’ Trinity is the ‘immanent’ Trinity and the ‘immanent’ Trinity is the ‘economic’ Trinity.”<sup>24</sup> Smith states that

Unless the opponents of a *trinitarian* covenant can offer reasonable answers to these questions, the right of presumption falls on the side of those who see God’s covenantal work in history as an expression of the fact that He is a covenantal God in eternity, that covenant in history manifests the covenantal nature of the triune God Himself.<sup>25</sup>

Stated more succinctly, the federal vision believes that there is no difference between the economic and ontological trinity. To say the least, this theological construction is fraught with problems.

There is no direct scriptural evidence to suggest that covenant is part of the ontological essence of the trinity. Smith, for example, confesses that his argumentation in support of this idea is “theological rather than exegetical.”<sup>26</sup> This overturns the cardinal reformed methodology of theology. The Confession states that, “the supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined . . . can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture” (WCF 1.10). The federal vision has not, either by the express statements or good and necessary consequence of Scripture, established that

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<sup>24</sup> Ralph Smith, *Paradox and Truth: Rethinking Van Til on the Trinity* (Moscow: Canon Press, 2002), p. 80.

<sup>25</sup> Smith, *Eternal Covenant*, p. 37.

<sup>26</sup> Smith, *Paradox and Truth*, p. 79.

covenant is part of the ontological trinity. If there is no scriptural evidence of an ontological covenant among the Godhead, then the federal vision definition of covenant as strictly a relationship comes into question. If a covenant is no longer only a relationship but also an agreement, then the ideas of works and covenant are not at odds. At this point the federal vision relies upon a rationalistic assumption whereas the traditional view rests upon the authority of Scripture. What of Jordan's proposed two-staged model of human existence?

### **The two-stage human existence: childhood and maturity**

Jordan bases the idea of the two-stage human existence, childhood and maturity, on two passages of Scripture, Rom 5 and 1 Cor 15.44. The way that Adam was supposed to move from childhood to maturity and obtain a spiritual body was through faithful obedience to the command not to eat from the tree of knowledge. When Adam matured enough, then God would have allowed him to eat from the tree of knowledge, which would have brought about his death. But, God would have raised Adam to his new life and given him a spiritual body, according to Jordan. This aspect of the federal vision's understanding of the Adamic covenant is perhaps the most problem laden.

First, one must recognize that Jordan's construction introduces death not merely to the animal kingdom but to the human race apart from sin. According to Jordan and Lusk, had Adam obeyed and reached a level of maturity, then God would have let him eat from the tree of eschatological promise, the tree of knowledge, and he would have died. Scripture is clear that death does not enter the human race apart from sin: "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned" (Rom 5.12), or "For the wages of sin is death" (Rom 6.23).

The only thing that seems to separate the serpent's suggestion to eat from the tree of knowledge and Jordan's proposition is time. In other words, Adam's sin was not in eating from the tree of knowledge but in not waiting until he matured: "It was a promise of 'good-death' and resurrection, if Adam waited until God gave him permission to eat of it."<sup>27</sup> Jordan's suggestion clearly cuts against the explicit teaching of Scripture. Scripture does not speak of death in "good" terms. On the contrary, death is the arch-enemy of the people of God (1 Cor 15.54-58; Rev 19.20; 20.14).

Second, to describe Adam's state in the garden as childhood and maturity means that there was an ontological deficiency in Adam. Jordan basically affirms this when he states that, "Infants, such as Adam and Eve were, do not have the wisdom to know good and evil in this judicial sense (Deut 1.39), and frequently the aged lose this capacity due to senility (2 Sam 19.35)."<sup>28</sup> What does this say regarding the creation of man in the *imago Dei*? The Scriptures state that man was created in the image of God (Gen 1.28) and that this was "very good" (Gen 1.31). Jordan's construction, however, must be something less than good, or perhaps Adam did not fully reflect the image of God if he was ill-equipped to know the difference between good and evil. Moreover, Adam could legitimately blame God for his sin—he was ill-equipped for the test. Additionally, Adam's sin is therefore not rebellion but merely the consequence of his God given deficiency. Reformed theologians, on the other hand, typically ascribe greater powers to Adam: "After God had made all other creatures, He created man, male and female, with reasonable and immortal souls, endued with knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness, after His own image, having the law of God written in their hearts, and *power to fulfill it*"

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<sup>27</sup> Jordan, "Merit vs. Maturity," p. 165.

<sup>28</sup> Jordan, "Merit vs. Maturity," p. 167.

(WCF 4.2; emphasis). When we take these two factors as well as the other particulars of the federal vision's understanding of the Adamic covenant, the definition of covenant and the ontological covenant, they have systemic implications. Let us turn to explore those implications.

### **Systemic implications**

Reformed theologians have long noted the organic nature of doctrine. Change one part of the system and other parts are affected.<sup>29</sup> Concerning the covenant works, others have observed the importance of this doctrine and its foundational nature to the system of doctrine. Wilhelmus á Brakel, a 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch reformed theologian, writes concerning the covenant of works:

Acquaintance with this covenant is of the greatest importance, for whoever errs here or denies the existence of the covenant of works, will not understand the covenant of grace, and will readily err concerning the mediatorship of the Lord Jesus. Such a person will very readily deny that Christ by His active obedience has merited a right to eternal life for the elect.<sup>30</sup>

Though this statement was written several hundred years ago, it is nevertheless true especially concerning the federal vision's understanding of the Adamic covenant. Recall, for example, that Adam was supposed to mature in the garden until he was ready to eat of the tree of knowledge, at which point he would die and God would raise him to the higher eschatological state. Jordan carries these ideas over into the work of Christ, or what traditionally would be the covenant of grace.

Jordan argues that Christ's mission was essentially the same as Adam's. Jordan explains that

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<sup>29</sup> E.g., B. B. Warfield, "The Task and Method of Systematic Theology," in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, vol. 9, ed. Ethelbert D. Warfield, et al. (1932; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), pp. 91-108.

<sup>30</sup> Wilhelmus á Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, vol. 1, trans. Bartel Elshout (Morgan: Soli Deo Gloria, 1992), p. 355.

Jesus came under the Old Covenant, which is ultimately the Adamic Covenant. He properly ‘cultivated and guarded’ His garden. He grew from strength to strength within the Old Covenant, so to speak, but also from weakness to weakness. Becoming fully convinced, as a man, that there was no other way to accomplish God’s work save through total weakness and the death of the cross, after asking that ‘if it be possible, let this cup pass from Me’ (Matt 26.39), He willingly went to the cross. He became the first mature man, perfect in faith toward the Father and in obedience to the Father’s will. He thus became eligible for transformation into glory through death, not because he earned the right to it, but because He had matured to the point of being fit for it. He became fit for glory not by earning merits or by growing in strength, but precisely by coming to an awareness of need.<sup>31</sup>

Jordan completely restructures the work of Christ as it has been historically understood. To be sure, Jordan also states that in Christ’s death he took upon himself the liability for the sins of God’s people. He writes that Christ “had to pay back what Adam stole by making Himself the replacement fruit on the Tree of Death.”<sup>32</sup> Even though Jordan attaches atoning value to the crucifixion, he fails to explain adequately how Christ’s death atones for sin.

In what way does Christ’s death atone for sin if death is part of the process by which one progresses from childhood to maturity? If Adam was to eat from the tree of knowledge and die, how is his death different from Christ’s? In Jordan’s understanding, death is no longer sacrificial. Jordan goes on, of course, to reject the traditional doctrine of the active and passive obedience of Christ: “Everything Jesus did was passive under the command of the Father and the prompting of the Spirit. Moreover, of course, everything He did was active on His part, as He agreed to do it, including His active refusal to come down from the cross until the Father’s will had been perfected.”<sup>33</sup> The question still remains, however, in what way does Christ’s death atone for sin? If Christ’s death is

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<sup>31</sup> Jordan, “Maturity vs. Merit,” pp. 193-94.

<sup>32</sup> Jordan, “Maturity vs. Merit,” p. 194.

<sup>33</sup> Jordan, “Maturity vs. Merit,” p. 194.

merely because he is the first one to obey the Father's will, then Jordan fails to explain how this is propitiatory. Other problems arise in the area of imputation.

The traditional reformed view of the work of Christ understands that it is Christ as the second Adam who fulfills the obligations of the law and it is his obedience that is imputed to the believer by faith in justification: "Justification is an act of God's free grace unto sinners, in which he pardons all their sins, accepts and accounts their persons righteous in his sight, not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but only for the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Christ, by God imputed to them, and received by faith alone" (LC q. 70). Now, regarding imputation there is some divergence between Jordan and Lusk. Jordan affirms the idea of double imputation, but not as it is traditionally argued. Jordan argues that the sins of the believer are imputed to Christ and that the glory of Christ is imputed to the believer.<sup>34</sup> Yet, if Christ simply opens the way for believers to obtain eschatological life, then what need is there for the imputed glory of Christ? Can not the believer simply live obediently, die, and be raised to the eschatological life? Similarly, Lusk argues that the believer has no need for the imputed righteousness of Christ but that everything the believer requires comes through union with the Savior. In fact, Lusk states that "there is no necessary, logical connection between a meritorious covenant of works and a gracious, forensic justification."<sup>35</sup> This, of course, leads to further divergence from the historic reformed faith.

It was James Buchanan (1804-68) who, commenting on the doctrine of Johannes Piscator (1546-1625), stated that while Piscator "ascribed the remission of sins to the passive obedience, or the sufferings and death of Christ, it excluded the imputation of His

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<sup>34</sup> Jordan, "Maturity vs. Merit," p. 194.

<sup>35</sup> Lusk, "Response to Smith," p. 145.



active obedience, or righteousness, as the believer's title to eternal life; and thus left a door open for the introduction of his own personal obedience, as the only ground of his future hope, after he had obtained the remission of his past sins."<sup>36</sup> This pattern is also true of proponents of the federal vision. Lusk, for example, argues that there is an eschatological justification, namely "final judgment according to deeds."<sup>37</sup> Lusk, for example, agrees with the formulations of Norman Shepherd, another proponent of the federal vision, who argues that a "justifying faith is not only a penitent faith but also an obedient faith."<sup>38</sup> Contrast this description, which is a mixture of trusting in Christ and obedience, with how faith has been traditionally defined: "Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation, as he is offered to us in the gospel" (SC q. 86). Notice the divines make no mention of obedience in their definition of faith. By contrast, Lusk's mixture of faith and works is evident when he writes: "Biblically, judgment according to works comes at the end of history, not the beginning. Only after we have had time to mature into fruit bearers does God give a full evaluation of our covenant fidelity. Judgment according to works is eschatological, not protological."<sup>39</sup> In Lusk's understanding, no longer are the saints "openly acknowledged and acquitted" (LC q. 90) on the day of judgment but instead their works are judged to determine whether the believer deserves to receive final justification. No longer does a person cling solely to the work of Christ at the final judgment but also his own obedience.

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<sup>36</sup> James Buchanan, *The doctrine of Justification* (1867; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991), p. 175.

<sup>37</sup> Lusk, "Response to Smith," p. 146.

<sup>38</sup> Lusk, "Response to Smith," pp. 145-46; Norman Shepherd, "Justification by Faith in Pauline Theology," in *Backbone of the Bible: Covenant in Contemporary Perspective*, ed. P. Andrew Sandlin (Nacogdoches: Covenant Media Press, 2004), p. 91.

<sup>39</sup> Lusk, "Response to Smith," p. 146, n. 73.

## **Summary of the systemic impact**

The federal vision's formulation of the Adamic covenant naturally leads to a different understanding of the covenant of grace. Because death is a natural part of the created order and simply one step on the road to the higher eschatological life, the death of Christ has no special significance—it is no longer atonement for sin. The death of Christ is no longer an innocent man suffering the penalty of sin on behalf of God's people but simply the first mature man elevated to eschatological life. While Jordan does affirm that Christ's death is atonement for sin, he does not explain how Christ's death is a sacrifice if he simply dies as the first mature man. Death *qua* maturity and death *qua* sacrifice are incompatible. Their construction of their Adamic covenant brings them closer to a semi-Pelagian Arminian theory of the atonement than anything that one might find in historic reformed theology. Moreover, by removing the need for the imputation of the active obedience of Christ, they create a vacuum which is filled by the believer's obedience. The federal vision mixes what reformed theology has historically distinguished, faith and works. Given these divergences, it is fair to say that the federal vision does not simply represent a variation within reformed theology but virtually an entirely alien system of doctrine, one at odds with the reformed system of doctrine outlined in the Westminster Standards. With the completion of the exploration of the systemic implications of the federal vision's Adamic covenant, we may move forward and make some concluding observations.

## **Conclusion**

We began our investigation with a brief survey of the historic understanding of the covenant of works. We then surveyed the federal vision's understanding of the Adamic covenant. The evidence has demonstrated that the federal vision does not merely

represent one variant of reformed theology but an entirely different system of doctrine. They deny the primary authority of Scripture in theology, the covenant of works, the adversarial nature of death, the ability of man to obey the command in the garden, the traditional distinction of the active and passive obedience of Christ, the imputation of the active obedience of Christ, the historic understanding of the work of Christ, and the traditional definition of faith. What is troubling is that proponents of the federal vision claim they are building upon the historic reformed faith. One writer, for example, states that “we do understand ourselves to be in the *middle* of the mainstream of historic Reformed orthodoxy.”<sup>40</sup> Yet, at the same time Jordan states that his views bring forth “much that is ‘new’ and doubtless controversial.”<sup>41</sup> For a long time many in the reformed church have not desired to introduce anything new because innovation has often produced error. Charles Hodge (1797-1858), for example, once wrote in the *Princeton Review* that “an original idea in theology is not to be found on the pages” of the journal.<sup>42</sup> Now, this is not to say that the reformed church should stop writing theology because everything was settled in 1647 with the Westminster Standards.

Machen, writing about a new reformation, once stated that “the last thing in the world that we desire to do is to discourage originality or independence of mind.” He went on to state that, “What we do insist upon is that the right to originality has to be earned, and that it cannot be earned by ignorance or by indolence. A man cannot be original in his treatment of a subject unless he knows what the subject is; true originality

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<sup>40</sup> Douglas Wilson, “Union with Christ: An Overview of the Federal Vision,” in *The Auburn Avenue Theology: Pros & Cons. Debating the Federal Vision*, ed., E. Calvin Beisner (Ft. Lauderdale: Knox Theological Seminary, 2003), p. 6.

<sup>41</sup> Jordan, “Merit vs. Maturity,” p. 195.

<sup>42</sup> D. G. Hart, “Systematic Theology at Old Princeton Seminary: Unoriginal Calvinism,” in *The Pattern of Sound Doctrine: Systematic Theology at the Westminster Seminaries*, ed., David VanDrunen (Philipsburg: P & R, 2004), p. 3.

is preceded by patient attention to the facts.”<sup>43</sup> The federal vision has not earned the right to be original. They do not exhibit an understanding of the historic reformed faith. For example, they attribute the covenant of works to alien philosophical or theological influences rather than engaging the Confession’s exegesis. The writings of the federal vision are self-referenced—they have largely read one another and appear to have sparingly read historic reformed sources. It is to no surprise, then, that their doctrinal conclusions, at least as they pertain to their rejection of the covenant of works, place them beyond the bounds of the historic reformed faith.

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<sup>43</sup>J. Gresham Machen, *What is Faith?* (1925; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991), p. 19.