

**The Subservient Covenant:
A 17th Century Precursor of Meredith Kline’s View of the Mosaic Covenant**

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This paper is an addendum to my earlier paper “Works in the Mosaic Covenant: A Survey of Major Covenant Theologians.” Since I wrote that paper, I’ve discovered some additional historical data on the second of the two main views within the Reformed covenantal tradition regarding the Mosaic Covenant, namely, the view that it was a typological republication of the Adamic covenant of works, or a “subservient covenant.”

I’m relying here on Michael Thomas’s Ph.D. dissertation on *The Extent of the Atonement*.¹ Before I quote from Dr. Thomas, I must candidly admit that he appears to be influenced by Brian Armstrong’s theory of discontinuity between Calvin and the subsequent Reformed scholastics.² Thus the larger thesis of his work no doubt needs correction in light of “the Muller thesis” which emphasizes the significant continuity between Calvin and his successors.³ Although I am not endorsing this aspect of Thomas’s thesis, his study nevertheless sheds light on the origins of the “subservient covenant” view in the historical development of Reformed covenant theology.

According to Thomas, the view of the Mosaic covenant as a “subservient covenant” was first proposed by John Cameron (1579-1625), a Scottish Presbyterian who

¹ G. Michael Thomas, *The Extent of the Atonement: A Dilemma for Reformed Theology from Calvin to the Consensus (1536-1675)* (Paternoster Biblical and Theological Monographs; Carlisle, Cumbria, United Kingdom: Paternoster, 1997).

² Brian G. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy: Protestant Scholasticism and Humanism in Seventeenth-Century France* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1969).

³ Richard A. Muller has written voluminously on this topic. See, for example, his *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), and more recently, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford, 2003). Paul Helm is another critic of Armstrong’s discontinuity thesis. See his *Calvin and the Calvinists* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982).

immigrated to France and became the founder of the Saumur school of Reformed theology. Cameron was the first Reformed theologian to depart from the traditional “two covenant scheme.” That is, he rejected the Ramist view that all covenants must be classified under one of two categories: either the *foedus operum* (covenant of works) or the *foedus gratiae* (covenant of grace). In his treatise on the covenants, *De Triplici Dei cum Homine Foedere Theses (Theses on the Threefold Covenant of God with Man)*, Cameron argued that there are actually three covenants in Scripture: the covenant of nature (with Adam), the subservient covenant (with Israel), and the covenant of grace (which was revealed in the promises before the Mosaic Law, but ultimately fulfilled in the new covenant).

Thomas describes Cameron’s view of *the Mosaic covenant* as follows:

The subservient covenant, introduced by Moses, was a repetition of the covenant of nature, in that it also required perfect obedience to the moral law, but it added ceremonial and civil regulations. The promise of this covenant was a happy life in Canaan, but its main purpose was to expose more fully human sinfulness and so prepare the way for the Saviour. Cameron explained that the subservient covenant was that after which the first part of the Bible was named in being called the Old Testament. The adjective ‘old’ did not imply that it was chronologically prior, for the covenant of nature fully and the covenant of grace partly had been revealed before it. Rather it was old because defunct, since the coming of Christ (p. 168).

Having described Cameron’s view of the Mosaic covenant, Thomas goes on to describe Cameron’s view of *the covenant of grace*:

The covenant of grace is that promise of eternal life through Christ to all who repent and believe ... Instead of having two covenants of nature and grace operating together, in various combinations, from the fall onwards, Cameron threw into sharp relief the progressive character of God’s dealings with the human race, by presenting three successive covenants, leading up to the climactic covenant of grace. This does not mean that he denied that the covenant of grace was revealed before Christ, but he insisted on the obscurity of the revelation, and its gradual clarification until the work of Christ had been accomplished in time (pp. 168-69).

Cameron's *De Triplici Dei cum Homine Foedere Theses* was published posthumously in 1642. The English Puritan Samuel Bolton, who was nominated as a commissioner to the Westminster Assembly,⁴ translated Cameron's theses into English and included them as an appendix to his *True Bounds of Christian Freedom* (1645).

Thomas writes:

Bolton listed a number of ways the Reformed had tried to fit the Mosaic law into their covenant theology, noting the difficulties of subsuming it simply under either nature or grace. His introduction to the 'Theses' claims that 'in the ensuing discourse, this doubt is resolved.' Clearly [Bolton] regarded Cameron's 'Theses' not so much as a new departure but as essentially a statement of what the best theologians had been trying to say all along. Indeed, in all the posthumous criticisms of Cameron's 'novelties,' there was little complaint about his use of three covenants (pp. 168-69).

As far as I can tell, the Puritan Paperbacks edition of Bolton's work leaves this appendix out. However, in chapter three (see below), Bolton describes Cameron's view in detail and concludes: "This is the opinion which I myself desire modestly to propound, for I have not been convinced that it is injurious to holiness or disagreeable to the mind of God in Scripture."⁵

Mark Karlberg has a helpful description of Bolton's "subservient covenant" view. Karlberg sees this view as distinct from the "hypothetical covenant" view. The "hypothetical covenant" view is the view that Leviticus 18:5 was a hypothetical offer of *eternal* life to the Israelites. Karlberg argues that this view would indeed create tension with the underlying covenant of grace. He writes:

⁴ "Bolton was sufficiently renowned in Puritan England as a scholar and divine, to be chosen as one of the Westminster Assembly of Divines." From "Publishers' Introduction," *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom* (Puritan Paperbacks; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994), 9. See also Robert S. Paul, *The Assembly of the Lord: Politics and Religion in the Westminster Assembly and the 'Grand Debate'* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1985), 546.

⁵ Samuel Bolton, *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom* (Puritan Paperbacks; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994), 99.

Positively, Bolton distinguishes within the Covenant of Grace the *typical*, subservient covenant under Moses. That is to say, the law-feature of the Mosaic Covenant has relevance only to the unique *typical covenant* which is of temporary duration ... Bolton regards the subservient, typical covenant as an integral aspect of the Mosaic administration of the Covenant of Grace.⁶

Moises Amyraut (1596-1664) was a follower of Cameron, and basically repeated Cameron's threefold covenant view. None of these men (Cameron, Amyraut, Bolton) held that the "subservient covenant" was a real, hypothetical offer of eternal life on the basis of works. All held that the Lev. 18:5 offer of life pertained only to the land of Canaan as a type of heaven, and that this republication of the works-principle on the typological level was given with gracious purposes in view, that is, "by way of subserviency to the covenant of grace" (Bolton, p. 94). As Bolton says:

Blessings in the possession of Canaan were promised to obedience, and curses and miseries to those who broke the covenant, and all to this end, that God might thus encourage their hearts in the expectation of the Messiah to come ... God spoke the words, 'Do this and live,' to show us our weakness and to stir up our hearts to seek Christ, who has fulfilled all righteousness for us, both positive and negative. He has undergone the penalties, and obeyed the precepts, borne our curses, and performed our services (pp. 95, 107).

What a glorious statement of the gospel!

In view of these qualifications by the original proponents of the "subservient covenant" view, I think it is legitimate to say that Cameron and Bolton were Reformed precursors of Kline. Yet, although I see continuity between Bolton and Kline, I also recognize that Kline, using Vosian biblical theology, takes covenant theology a couple of steps beyond Cameron and Bolton. The primary areas where Kline goes beyond them are:

(1) Kline's "two-layer" model more clearly affirms the underlying substratum of the covenant of grace during the Mosaic epoch:

⁶ Mark W. Karlberg, "Reformed Interpretation of the Mosaic Covenant," in *Covenant Theology in Reformed Perspective* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2000), 34.

The old covenant order was composed of two strata and the works principle enunciated in Leviticus 18:5, and elsewhere in the law, applied only to one of these, a secondary stratum. There was a foundational stratum having to do with the personal attainment of the eternal kingdom of salvation and this underlying stratum, continuous with all preceding and succeeding administrations of the Lord's Covenant of Grace with the church, was informed by the principle of grace (cf., e.g., Rom 4:16).⁷

It was probably the charge of being a “crypto-dispensationalist” that prodded Kline to make this clear.⁸ Cameron and Bolton also affirm that the pre-Mosaic period included some sort of covenant of grace in the form of the patriarchal promises. However, they do not affirm as clearly as Kline does that the covenant of grace (the Abrahamic covenant) continues throughout the Mosaic era as the underlying substratum at the *ordo salutis* layer.

(2) Kline emphasizes the type-antitype relationship between the typical kingdom of Israel (first level fulfillment) and the eternal kingdom of Christ (second level fulfillment). Again, the polemics with dispensationalism stimulated this insight. Dispensationalism fails to see the type-antitype relationship between the Israelite kingdom and the eschatological kingdom of the new creation. Kline spends much more time explaining the concept of typology than Cameron or Bolton did. Kline refers to the Israelite theocracy as “the typical kingdom.”⁹

(3) Kline sees the Mosaic republication of the Adamic covenant of works as having a Christological purpose. Again, Bolton affirms this, but Kline develops it and makes it central. Kline sees the typical kingdom as the proper redemptive-historical context

⁷ Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Overland Park, Kansas: Two Age Press, 2000), 321.

⁸ For example, Greg Bahnsen calls Kline's position “the functional equivalent of dispensationalism.” *No Other Standard: Theonomy and Its Critics* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991), 122.

⁹ Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, 340-55.

for the incarnation-event. The typal kingdom, with its works-principle, prepared “the appropriate context for the messianic mission” so that the probationary aspect of Christ’s work as Second Adam/True Israel would be “legible” and “perspicuous.” Kline writes:

In accordance with the terms of his covenant of works with the Father he was to come as the second Adam in order to undergo a representative probation and by his obedient and triumphant accomplishment thereof to establish the legal ground for God’s covenanted bestowal of the eternal kingdom of salvation on his people. It was therefore expedient, if not necessary, that Christ appear within a covenant order which, like the covenant with the first Adam, was governed by the works principle (cf. Gal 4:4). The typal kingdom of the old covenant was precisely that. Within the limitations of the fallen world and with modifications peculiar to the redemptive process, the old theocratic kingdom was a reproduction of the original covenantal order. Israel as the theocratic nation was mankind stationed once again in a paradise-sanctuary, under probation in a covenant of works. In the context of that situation, the Incarnation event was legible; apart from it the meaning of the appearing and ministry of the Son of Man would hardly have been perspicuous. Because of the congruence between Jesus’ particular historical identity as the true Israel, born under the law, and his universally relevant role as the second Adam, the significance of his mission as the accomplishing of a probationary assignment in a works covenant in behalf of the elect of all ages was lucidly expressed and readily readable.¹⁰

In other words, the Mosaic covenant is the typological stage upon which the incarnation-event was played out, so that we might understand the soteriological significance of Christ’s work as our substitutionary law-keeper and curse-bearer. The statement that Christ was “born under the Law” (Gal. 4:4) is thus typological idiom for “Christ’s obedience was performed under the archetypal covenant of works between the Father and the Son (*pactum salutis*).”

In conclusion, Kline's understanding of the Mosaic Covenant has significant links with 17th century developments in covenant theology. Of course, in the end, the most important question is not whether Kline's view is traditional but whether it is biblical. However, in the interests of fairness, Kline's Reformed critics would do well to

¹⁰ Ibid., 352.

acknowledge that on this issue Kline's formulation has precursors within the Reformed tradition.

**Samuel Bolton on the Mosaic Covenant:
Chapter 3, *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom* (1645)**

What follows is a summary of chapter 3, titled “Law and Grace” (pp. 77-109), of Samuel Bolton’s book, *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, originally published in 1645. I quote here from the Puritan Paperbacks edition published by Banner of Truth (1994).

Bolton’s primary purpose in this chapter is to defend the proposition that the law is not incompatible with grace. In the course of making the case for the compatibility of the law with grace, he provides a very important historical survey of the various views of the Mosaic covenant held by Reformed theologians of his day. Bolton recognizes that “the covenant of grace under the Old Testament seems to be so presented as if it were still a covenant of works to man” (p. 101). This creates a problem for covenant theology. Does it mean that the Mosaic covenant was a covenant of works in the sense that it offered eternal life to those who keep the law? Bolton says, No. He says that in his day there were two main views held by orthodox Reformed covenant theologians to explain the legal character of the Mosaic covenant without equating it with the Adamic covenant of works: (1) the view first proposed by John Cameron (1579-1625), that the Mosaic covenant was a subservient covenant which made temporal blessings in the land of

Canaan contingent on Israel's law-keeping; and (2) the view that the Mosaic covenant was "the same covenant ... under which we stand under the Gospel, even the covenant of grace, though more legally dispensed to the Jews" (p. 99). Although Bolton recognizes that the second view is the one held by "the majority of our holy and most learned divines," nevertheless it is the first view "which I myself desire modestly to propound, for I have not been convinced that it is injurious to holiness or disagreeable to the mind of God in Scripture" (p. 99).

The importance of this section of Bolton's book is twofold. First, Bolton's testimony proves that the subservient covenant view (which is a precursor to Kline's view) was regarded as being within the realm of Reformed orthodoxy. Bolton was nominated to be a commissioner to the Westminster Assembly, which indicates that he was regarded as an orthodox theologian. Furthermore, he published *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom during the Assembly* while Parliament was in session (in 1645), and with the approval of Parliament, which at that time was run by Puritans.

Second, Bolton bears witness to the state of Reformed thinking on the Mosaic covenant. As Bolton states, there were only two views within orthodox Puritan thought at the time, and neither view held that the Mosaic covenant was an administration of the covenant of grace, pure and simple. Both views were serious attempts to grapple with the legal character of the Mosaic covenant. The majority did so by arguing that the Mosaic covenant was a more legal administration of the covenant of grace, "which seems to reach man as though it were the repetition of another covenant of works" (p. 101), but only with respect to its external administration, not its internal essence. "The new and old covenants are both of them really covenants of grace, only differing in their

administrations” (p. 100). This toned-down version thus creates a degree of discontinuity between the old covenant and the new – at least at the level of administration. “The one was more onerous and burdensome, the other more easy and delightful. The one through the legal means of its administration gendered to bondage, the other to son-like freedom.” (p. 100). Even though Bolton ultimately disagrees with this toned-down version, he bears witness not only to its existence but to its majority status within the orthodoxy of his day. This is highly significant because it shows how far the Reformed churches of today have departed from the orthodoxy of the age that created the Westminster Confession. Both of these views are treated with suspicion today. The view of John Murray that the Mosaic covenant is nothing but an administration of the covenant of grace, without the “more legally administered” qualification, seems to have gained the upper hand.

In order to place Bolton’s discussion of these two orthodox views of the Mosaic covenant in context, I am going to start with the beginning of chapter 3 and summarize his argument as it leads up to the crucial passage on pp. 94-101 concerning these two views of the Mosaic covenant.

In chapter 3, as I said, Bolton’s burden is to show that the law is not incompatible with grace. The law was given to advance the work of grace by exposing our inability to keep the law perfectly, thus causing us to trust in Christ for righteousness and life.

The law was given us as a glass to reveal our imperfections in duty, and for this purpose the law remains with us. Through it we perceive the imperfections of our duties, our graces, and our obedience. By this means we are kept close to Christ and kept humble. The law takes us away from reliance on ourselves and casts us upon Christ and the promises (p. 88).

God’s purpose in giving the law was ultimately gracious. He gave the law to advance the work of grace.

At this point, Bolton deals with three objections that can be raised against this doctrine. The key passage concerning the two views of the Mosaic covenant arises in the course of his response to the second objection. But rather than jumping ahead to the second objection, I want to briefly summarize Bolton's answer to the first objection because it contains two important points that Bolton will refer back to in his later summary of the two views.

The First Objection

The first objection is that "the law was set up as a covenant, and if so, it was in contrast with grace and incompatible with grace" (p. 88). Bolton acknowledges that the law was indeed set up as a covenant with the Jews, and he cites Exod. 19:5; Deut. 4:13; Jer. 31:31-33 and Heb. 8:7-9 in support of this. This is the first important point that Bolton will refer back to later on, so the reader should remember that, for Bolton, the Mosaic law was given as a covenant.

The objector, however, looks at the evidence that the law was given as a covenant and concludes (erroneously) that God gave the law to the Jews as a covenant of works, pure and simple. The objector raises this point in order to argue that, if the law is in fact a covenant of works, pure and simple, then it is clearly incompatible with grace.

In response to this first objection, Bolton argues that the law could not be a covenant of works "in the true sense of the term" (p. 90) for a number of reasons. I will not list all of his reasons here, but quote Bolton's most salient point:

If the law was given as a covenant of works, then it would be opposite to, and contrary to, the promise; but the apostle shows that this is not so: "Is the law against the promises of God? God forbid" (Gal. 3:21) ... The apostle shows that the law was added to the promise (Gal. 3:19). If it had been added as a covenant,

then it would overthrow the nature of the promise. Therefore it was not added as a covenant, nor was it added as an ingredient of the promise, as if justification was to come to man partly by working and partly by believing ... It was so added to the promise, or covenant of grace, as to help and advance it, not subvert and destroy it ... It was never God's purpose to give life by the law, for He had given it before in another way, namely, by promise ... The law was utterly unserviceable and unsuitable to this end, to give life and salvation ... Such a covenant God could not make with man after man's fall, for man could not meet the least of its terms or perform the meanest of its conditions (pp. 90-93).

Bolton therefore concludes that the Mosaic law was clearly not a covenant of works in the true sense of the term, that is, "a covenant of works with reference to life and salvation" (p. 114). This is the second important point that Bolton will refer back to. Bolton agrees that the Mosaic law was not a covenant of works in the sense of offering salvation and eternal life to sinners by means of law-keeping. I should also point out that this is something that Kline also agrees with. Although Kline does not object to calling it *a* covenant of works (although not *the* covenant of works), yet he agrees that it was not "a covenant of works with reference to life and salvation."

The Second Objection

This brings us then to the second objection, which is: "That the law is not a covenant of grace, nor a third covenant, and must therefore be a covenant of works" (p. 93). Bolton's response is to agree that it is not a third covenant, if by a third covenant is meant "a middle covenant, consisting partly of works, and partly of grace, under which the Jews were placed, and by which they were saved" (p. 93). Bolton utterly rejects any such covenant, because there can be no middle course between works and grace, as Paul says: "If of works, then is it no more of grace" (Rom. 11:6). (p. 94).

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If man had been required to do anything to help in the procuring of life, though never so small, and if the Gospel had provided all the rest, yet it would still have been a covenant of works, and utterly inconsistent with the covenant of grace ... If a man should ask but a penny of us for the purchase of a kingdom, though he should give us the rest, yet would that penny hinder it from being a mere gift and grace. So it is here. And therefore I can by no means allow a middle covenant.

There are two other opinions which I will here mention. Some men think it [the law] neither a covenant of works, nor a covenant of grace, but a third kind of covenant distinct from both. Others think it a covenant of grace, but more legally dispensed.

Those who consider it to be a third covenant speak of it as a preparatory, or a subservient covenant, a covenant that was given by way of subserviency to the covenant of grace, and for the setting forward or advancing of the covenant of grace. Those men who hold this view say that there are three distinct covenants with God made with mankind – the covenant of nature, the covenant of grace, and the subservient covenant.

The covenant of nature was that whereby God required from the creature as a creature perfect obedience to all divine commandments, with promise of a blessed life in Paradise if man obeyed, but with the threat of eternal death if he disobeyed the command, the purpose of all this being to declare how virtue pleased, and sin displeased God.

The covenant of grace was that whereby God promised pardon and forgiveness of sins and eternal life, by the blood of

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Christ, to all those that should embrace Christ, and this was purposed by God to declare the riches of His mercy.

The subservient covenant, which was called the old covenant, was that whereby God required obedience from the Israelites in respect of the moral, ceremonial and judicial laws. Blessings in the possession of Canaan were promised to obedience, and curses and miseries to those who broke the covenant, and all to this end, that God might thus encourage their hearts in the expectation of the Messiah to come.

This subservient or old covenant is that which God made with the people of Israel in Mount Sinai, to prepare them to faith, and to inflame them with the desire of the promise and of the coming of Christ; also it was meant to be as it were a bridle of restraint, and to withhold them from sin, until the time came when God would

send the Spirit of adoption into their hearts, and govern them with a more free spirit.

This covenant, of which the moral law is said to be a part, and which is called here the subservient covenant (under which were the Jews), is described by the writer who propounds it [John Cameron], to be a third and distinct covenant, midway between the covenant of nature and the covenant of grace. In his treatise on the matter he states the points of difference and agreement which he sees between it and the covenants of nature and of grace. Take first the differences and agreements with the covenant of nature. The agreements are these:

1. In both these covenants (i.e., of nature and of subserviency), one party covenanting is God, the other is man.
2. Both covenants have a condition annexed to them.
3. The condition is, in general, the same – “Do this and live.”
4. The promise is, in general, the same – Paradise and Canaan.

These are the agreements. I will now show the disagreements:

1. The covenant of nature was made with all men, the subservient covenant with the Israelites alone.

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2. The covenant of nature brings us to Christ, not directly by itself, but obliquely and “per accidens” (accidentally); but the old or the subservient covenant brings us to Christ of deliberate intent and “per se” (of itself), for this was the true and proper scope which God aimed at in the giving of it. “God did not make the covenant of nature with man, that he, being burdened with the weight of it, should go to Christ. In giving that, God aimed at this, to have that which was His due from man. But in this subservient covenant God requires His right for no other end than that man, being convinced of his weakness and impotency, might fly to Christ.”
3. The covenant of nature was made with man, that by it men might be carried on sweetly in a course of obedience, for it was engraven on their hearts. But the subservient covenant was made that men might be compelled to yield obedience, for it did naturally beget to bondage (Gal. 4:24).
4. The covenant of nature was to be eternal, but this subservient covenant was but for a time.
5. The covenant of nature had no respect to the restraint of outward sins, neither in its principal nor lesser uses, but the old covenant in its less uses had this in view, as explained in Exod. 20:20.
6. The covenant of nature was engraven in the heart, but the other was written on tables of stone.
7. The covenant of nature was made with Adam in Paradise, but the subservient covenant at Mount Sinai.

8. The covenant of nature had no mediator; the subservient covenant had Moses for a mediator.
9. The one covenant was made with man perfect, the other with a part of mankind fallen.

These are stated to be the main agreements and differences between the covenant of nature and this subservient covenant. We come now to show the differences and agreements which it has with the covenant of grace: first the points of agree-

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ment: God is the author of both, both are contracted with fallen men, both reveal sin, both bring men to Christ, both are contracted by a mediator, in both, life is promised.

Their points of difference are as follows:

1. In the subservient covenant, God is considered as condemning sin and approving only of righteousness, but in the covenant of grace He is seen as pardoning sin and renewing holiness in fallen man.
2. They differ in the stipulation or condition attached to each: that in the old covenant runs, "Do this and live"; that in the new, "Believe and thou shalt be saved."
3. They differ in age. The promise was more ancient than the law. It is recorded that the law was added to the promise, and that, four hundred and thirty years after the promise was given (Gal. 3:17).
4. The subservient covenant restrains man, but by coercion and slavish restraint; but the covenant of grace works in him a willing and child-like inclination of spirit, so that obedience is free and natural.
5. In the subservient covenant, the spirit of bondage is given, but in the covenant of grace the Spirit of adoption is given.
6. The old covenant terrified the conscience; the covenant of grace comforts it.
7. The object of the old covenant was man asleep, or rather man dead in sin; of the other, man awakened, and humbled for sin.
8. The one shows the way of service but gives no strength for the service; the other both shows the way and gives the power to serve.
9. Both covenants promise life, but the one in Canaan, the other in heaven.

I have thus explained the opinion of certain divines which, though they do not seem to meet all difficulties, are nevertheless reasonable. The main reason underlying the opinion seems

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to be this. The law is said to be a covenant, as I have showed from various Scriptures, and if so, it is either a covenant of works, or of grace, or else a third type of covenant, neither of works nor of grace.

It cannot be a covenant of works, as I have explained at length previously, for there was a former covenant, a covenant of grace, made, and this was but added to it, not by way of opposition to it, but by way of subserviency. Besides, this covenant, being broken, was capable of renovation, which a covenant of works is not capable of. And again, when they had broken it, they were not to think the case hopeless, but had liberty to appeal from the law to the Gospel, from God's justice offended to God's mercy pardoning and covering their sin, as we find the people frequently doing when they implored mercy and pardon for His Name's sake: "For thy name's sake forgive, and for they name's sake cover our transgressions"; under which expressions Christ was darkly foreshadowed.

Again, if it had been a true covenant of works, a covenant of life and death, then could they have had no mercy, no pardon, but must needs have perished. But against this the apostle speaks: "We believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, we shall be saved, even as they" (Acts 15:11). Nay, and then it would have been utterly inconsistent with the covenant of grace; there would have been some ends and uses for which the law was promulgated which were altogether destructive to the promise and covenant of grace. But I have already showed that there were no such ends. Therefore it must be concluded that it was such a covenant as did not stand in contradiction to the covenant of grace; therefore it could not be a covenant of works. If so, say these divines of whom I am speaking, then it must be either a covenant of grace, or some kind of third covenant.

But they say that it could not be a covenant of grace either. For our divines in general reckon this to be one part of our freedom in Christ, that we are freed from the law as a cove-

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nant, and if the law were a covenant of grace, only more legally dispensed and administered after a more legal manner, it might seem better to say that we are freed from this aspect of it rather than to say we are freed from it as a covenant. Therefore, if we say we are freed from it as a covenant, it cannot possibly be held to be the covenant of grace. This seems to be the reason underlying this opinion.

If it be neither a covenant of works, nor a covenant of grace, then must it of necessity be a third kind of covenant: and it must needs be such a covenant as does not stand in opposition to grace, nor is inconsistent with the covenant of grace, for if this be so, then God will have contradicted Himself, overthrown His own promise which He had given before. Hence it is called a subservient covenant. It was given by way of subserviency to the Gospel and a fuller

revelation of the covenant of grace; it was temporary, and had respect to Canaan and God's blessing there, if and as Israel obeyed. It had no relation to heaven, for that was promised by another covenant which God made before He entered upon the subservient covenant. This is the opinion which I myself desire modestly to propound, for I have not been convinced that it is injurious to holiness or disagreeable to the mind of God in Scripture.

Bolton at this point goes on to describe the other main Reformed view of the Mosaic law, the one I called "the toned-down version" at the opening of this paper.

Bolton does not agree with this view, but in fairness to these divines, admitted to be in the majority, Bolton wants to set forth their view as objectively as possible. He does not even attempt a major critique of this view, perhaps because it is so close to his own "subservient covenant" view.

There is, however, a second opinion in which I find that the majority of our holy and most learned divines concur, namely, that though the law is called a covenant, yet it was not a covenant of works for salvation; nor was it a third covenant of works and grace; but it was the same covenant in respect of its nature and design under which we stand under the Gospel, even the covenant of grace, though more legally dispensed to the Jews. It differed not in substance from the covenant of grace, but in degree, say some divines, in the economy and external administration of it, say others. The Jews, they agree, were under infancy, and therefore under "a schoolmaster". In this respect the covenant of grace under the law is called by

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such divines "foedus vetus" (the old covenant), and under the Gospel "foedus novum" (the new covenant): see Heb. 8:8. The one was called old, and the other new, not because the one was before the other by the space of four hundred and thirty years, but because the legal administrations mentioned were waxing old and decaying, and were ready to disappear and to give place to a more new and excellent administration. "That which decayeth and waxeth old is ready to vanish away". The one covenant was more obscurely administered, shadowed, darkened with shadows; the other was administered more perspicuously and clearly. The one was more onerous and burdensome, the other more easy and delightful. The one through the legal means of its administration gendered to bondage, the other to son-like freedom. All this may be seen clearly in Col. 2:17; Heb. 10:1; Gal. 3:1-4:3. Hence, as Alsted tells us, the new and old covenants, the covenants of the law and Gospel, are both of them really covenants of grace, only differing in their administrations. That they were virtually the same covenant is alleged in Luke

1:72-75: “To perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant”. What was “his holy covenant”? It is made clear in verse 74 that in substance it was the same as the covenant of grace: “That he would grant unto us, that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our life.”

For brevity’s sake I will give a summary of the thoughts of those divines who maintain this second opinion. They assert:

1. There were never more than two covenants made with mankind, which held out life and salvation; the first was the covenant of works, made with man in innocency; the other is the covenant of grace, made after the fall.
2. There was but one way of salvation, one only, since the Fall, and that way by a covenant of grace; God never set up another covenant of works after the Fall; He sets us now to believe, without working for life.

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3. Nevertheless, all Adam’s posterity lie under the covenant of works, as Adam left them after his fall, until they come over to Jesus Christ.
4. The law was never given as a covenant of works, but added to the promise by way of subserviency to the covenant of grace.
5. Though the law was given with merciful purposes, and as subservient to the covenant of grace, yet it seems to reach man as though it were a repetition of another covenant of works under which man stands. Or rather, the covenant of grace under the Old Testament seems to be so presented as if it were still a covenant of works to man. And it is worthy of observation that the covenant of grace, like the sun in the firmament, as it rises to its zenith, becomes ever clearer. From Adam to Moses it was very dark and obscure; from Moses to the time of the prophets light began to appear. The light was clearer still when John the Baptist began his ministry. Then came the ministry of Christ Himself, when there were more clear and glorious manifestations of the covenant, for He revealed the bosom counsels of His Father. After Christ’s resurrection and the sending of the Holy Spirit, the book previously clasped became fully opened, that he that runs may read. Hence some have called the covenant of grace before Christ’s coming, “foedus promissi” (the covenant of promise); and now, under the Gospel, the covenant of grace in respect of its full, clear, and ample unfolding. The shadows which obscured it in former times have been taken away, and the whole platform of God’s design to save man by sheer grace is so clearly revealed that he that runs may read it.

So much for Bolton’s description of the “toned-down version.” Bolton merely states this view and provides the arguments used to defend it, but he does not engage in

polemics against it. He had already given his primary reason for not adopting this view. It is quoted above, but it is worth repeating here:

For our divines in general reckon this to be one part of our freedom in Christ, that we are freed from the law as a covenant, and if the law were a covenant of grace, only more legally dispensed and administered after a more legal manner, it might seem better to say that we are freed from this aspect of it rather than to say we are freed from it as a covenant. Therefore, if we say we are freed from it as a covenant, it cannot possibly be held to be the covenant of grace. (pp. 98-99).

Note the striking difference between Bolton and modern Reformed theologians. Whereas modern Reformed theologians would say that the Mosaic covenant is nothing but an administration of the covenant of grace, Bolton holds that “it cannot possibly be held to be the covenant of grace.”

I would also point out that in chapter four, Bolton adds another reason why the Mosaic covenant cannot be the covenant of grace:

While the terms lasted, the people were said to break God’s covenant by their disobedience. This cannot mean the covenant of grace, for that cannot be broken; it is an everlasting covenant, like that of the waters of Noah (Isa. 54:9). The covenant of grace does not depend upon our walk and our obedience; it is not made upon our good behaviour. Obedience might be the end, but it was not the ground or motive God had in making it ... The covenant under which the Israelites were put was a subservient covenant (p. 114).

This is the same argument that Kline makes when he appeals to Jer. 31:31 which says that the new covenant will not be like the Mosaic covenant “which covenant they broke.” The breakability of the Mosaic covenant clearly identifies it as a covenant grounded in the works-principle, rather than an administration of the covenant of grace which can never be broken.

The Third Objection

The third objection to Bolton's larger thesis concerning the compatibility of the law and grace is "That as the covenants of law and of grace are opposites, the law cannot be linked with grace" (p. 101). The objector is alluding to the terms of the law, "Do this and live" (paraphrasing Lev. 18:5), which stand in opposition to the terms of the Gospel, "Believe and thou shalt be saved." In response, Bolton provides six potential ways of interpreting Lev. 18:5, some of which he rejects entirely. He merely lists them to show the variety of interpretations of this text. He then concludes:

I grant that, viewed externally, the law and the Gospel do seem to stand upon opposite terms. But these seemingly opposite terms had, in the case of the law, ends subservient to Christ and grace. For the terms of the law were intended to awaken men, and convince them of their own impotency, to humble them for their impotency, and to drive them to Christ ... God spoke the words, "Do this and live", to show us our weakness and to stir up our hearts to seek Christ, who has fulfilled all righteousness for us, both positive and negative. He has undergone the penalties, and obeyed the precepts, borne our curses, and performed our services (pp. 105, 107).

Bolton then appeals to the case of the rich young ruler in Matt. 19:16-22. When the man asked, "What good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life," Jesus replied, "If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments." Although this seems to be a strange answer, if we consider why Jesus said this and to whom he said it, then it becomes clear:

The person was a proud ruler, one puffed up with the proud notion that he had kept the whole law and therefore ought to have been saved by the law, as he says afterwards; "All this have I kept from my youth up". Therefore Christ sets him upon fulfilling the law, not as an instrument of justification (for He answers the same question otherwise in John 6:28-29), but that he may find in the law a glass to reveal to him his imperfections and impotency, and that, being humbled by it, he might seek unto Christ for life and salvation (p. 107).

By answering these three objections, Bolton has shown that the law is not incompatible with grace but was given by way of subserviency to it, in order to advance the covenant of grace.

A Final Note on Typology

This brings us to the end of chapter three. Yet there is one additional section (pp. 112-14) in the next chapter that is worth quoting since it fleshes out Bolton's conception of the typological nature of the blessings and curses in the Mosaic subservient covenant:

I have already explained that some divines distinguish between three kinds of covenant – a covenant of nature, a covenant of grace, and a subservient covenant. This last was that which was made with the Israelites at Sinai and was contained in the moral, ceremonial, and judicial laws. It was a covenant which, though it stood upon opposite terms to the covenant of grace, served the purposes of the covenant of grace subserviently. It was a covenant which God made with Israel when they were to enter into Canaan, and it had chief respect to the good or evil which would come upon them in that land. In it God promised blessings upon obedience, and threatened calamities and judgments on them if they disobeyed. All this is set out clearly in the twenty-eighth and twenty-ninth chapters of Deuteronomy. Yet, as I have explained, it was subservient to the covenant of grace, for when they saw that they were neither able to obtain life and outward mercies, not to ward off death and temporal evils, by their obedience to it, they were to look for the promise of grace and to long for the coming of the Messiah,

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and to expect all these upon better grounds. Into this covenant they all entered, and bound it with a solemn oath to God, and a curse, as is shown in Deut. 29:12 and 19. God for His part engaged Himself to bless them in the land of Canaan whither they went, if they obeyed His commands; He also threatened to punish them there if they failed to obey Him. To all this they subscribed, and bound it with an oath and a curse. Therefore some interpret the words, "Do this and live", as if they merely had respect to their well-being in the land of Canaan, and during this life.

When Bolton says that "some" interpret Lev. 18:5 as if it "merely" respect to Israel's well-being in the land of Canaan, he implies that he does not agree with such a

reductionistic view. As he will state in a moment, he sees the temporal blessings in the land as a type of the eternal blessings in heaven. But it is important to see how Bolton builds up to this point – he brings up the Sadducees who, due to their denial of the resurrection, were classic examples of the “some” who reduced Lev. 18:5 to the mere temporal level. Bolton says that he had heard that a certain man asked some Sadducees why, if they denied the resurrection, they bothered to observe the law. They answered: “In order that it may go well with them in this life, that they might inherit temporal blessings by their obedience to them.” (p. 113). Bolton comments on this that, in a sense, these Sadducees had it right since “there seems much” support for this notion in

Scripture:

I will not say that they served the end of the law in this, for certainly God gave the law for higher ends. But this I may say, that it is possible they served the end of it better than the man who asked the question. It may be that the questioner was keeping the law to be justified by it. We read of such a spirit in Rom. 10:3-4 where the apostle speaks of some who thought they would be justified by obedience to the law, and that was further from the mind of God in giving it than was the motive of those who kept the law that it might go well with them in this life. For the former there is not a tittle of support in the Book of God, but for the latter there seems much. We read of something to this purpose in the fifth commandment: “Honour thy father and thy mother, that thy days may be long in the land which thou goest to possess.” There is something of it, too, in the second commandments, and a great deal more in Deut. 26:16-19, and throughout the whole of its twenty-eighth chapter; though under these temporal blessings spiritual blessings were shadowed and apprehended by those who were spiritual (pp. 113-14).

Note the last sentence, which provides the solution to the problem. Lev. 18:5 cannot be reduced to the mere temporal level, since under these temporal blessings (long life in the land of Canaan), God was shadowing spiritual blessings. As Bolton said earlier in his list of differences between the covenant of grace and the subservient covenant (p. 97), both covenants promised life, but with this key difference, the covenant of grace

promised eternal life in heaven, whereas the subservient covenant only promised long life in the land of Canaan. Yet, even at this point of discontinuity, there is a type-antitype continuity. For as Bolton says here, these spiritual blessings “were shadowed” under the temporal blessings, and this typological connection was “apprehended by those [Israelites] who were spiritual.”

This final point about typology is not one that Bolton spends a great deal of time expounding. Yet it is significant, because it provides a bridge leading to Kline’s position. For Kline makes the typological layer of the Mosaic economy central to his two-layer pictorial metaphor which he uses to show how the works principle could exist in the Mosaic economy without annulling the underlying stratum of the covenant of grace.