

Works in the Mosaic Covenant: A Survey of Major Covenant Theologians

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One of the distinctive aspects of Meredith G. Kline's covenant theology is his identification of the Mosaic Covenant as an administration of the works-principle of inheritance. He writes:

The Sinaitic administration ... Paul interpreted as in itself a dispensation of the kingdom inheritance quite opposite in principle to inheritance by guaranteed promise: "For if the inheritance is by law, it is no longer by promise" and "the law is not of faith; but, he that doeth them shall live in them" ... The unquestionable fact emerges in Galatians 3 that Paul saw in the Old Testament alongside the covenant of promise another covenant which was so far from being an administration of promise as to raise the urgent question whether it did not abrogate the promise.¹

The purpose of this paper is to show that Kline's formulation of covenant theology, specifically his Pauline construction of the works element of the Mosaic Covenant, is neither eccentric nor recent, but stands foursquare within the mainstream of historic covenant theology. With respect to the validity of seeing a works element in the Mosaic Covenant, there has been, until recently, a relatively united conviction among Reformed theologians as they affirmed the ground of the Law-Gospel contrast and its implications for *sola fide*.

Study of the literature of the classic Reformed covenant theologians shows that there were two historic positions within mainstream Reformed covenant theology on the subject of the Mosaic Covenant. The first position is that the Mosaic Covenant is essentially a gracious covenant administered in a legal manner. The second, quite

¹ Meredith G. Kline, *By Oath Consigned: A Reinterpretation of the Covenant Signs of Circumcision and Baptism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 22-24.

widespread opinion is that the Mosaic Covenant is essentially a republication of the Adamic covenant of works. They held that the Mosaic Covenant was a “subservient covenant,” since it was not set up as a competing means of salvation but as subservient to the covenant of grace. Both historic Reformed positions held that there is a works aspect in the Mosaic administration, focused primarily on the Law’s function as a pedagogue to lead Israel to Christ.

It would appear that the viewpoint dominant in Reformed circles today, that the Mosaic Covenant is merely an administration of the covenant of pure grace, devoid of any works element, is a modern reaction against dispensationalism, and can claim very few advocates within the ranks of the covenant theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It is true, as Karlberg points out, that there were a few Puritan theologians, like David Dickson, who held that the Mosaic Covenant was a covenant of pure grace, and that Paul in Galatians 3 was merely refuting a Jewish misinterpretation of the Law.² But this viewpoint was not dominant until recently. John Murray, for example, recognized that his gracious construction of the Mosaic Covenant represented a departure from classic covenant theology: “The view that in the Mosaic covenant there was a repetition of the so-called covenant of works, *current among covenant theologians*, is a grave misconception and involves an erroneous construction of the Mosaic covenant.”³

Unfortunately, not all recognize that they are moving away from the historic Reformed tradition. A good example of this is Ernest F. Kevan whose thesis is evident in

² Mark Karlberg, “Reformed Interpretation of the Mosaic Covenant,” *WTJ* 43:1 (1980): 29-30.

³ John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977), 2:50.

the title of his book, *The Grace of Law*.⁴ But Karlberg has argued persuasively that Kevan fundamentally “misreads the Puritan literature,” capturing “only one aspect of the Puritan teaching on the biblical doctrine of law.”⁵

In view of the tendency today to view the Mosaic Covenant as solely gracious, and in view of the influence of theologians like Murray and Kevan, I have gathered together some significant quotes from important Reformed covenant theologians in order to demonstrate the existence of a Reformed consensus on the Law-Gospel contrast. This contrast was not understood by the Reformed in an abstract Lutheran manner, but as a historicoco-covenantal contrast between the Old (Mosaic) and New Covenants. Although within traditional covenant theology there are two distinct (but not entirely incompatible) formulations of the works aspect of the Mosaic Covenant, these differences are minor when compared with their overarching agreement. This tradition stands as a firm testimony against the gracious construction of the Law that is currently playing itself out in the Reformed community to the detriment of the clarity of our witness to the gospel of free grace in Jesus Christ.

The Mosaic Covenant as a Covenant of Grace Legally Administered

We begin our survey by noting the formulation which states that the Mosaic Covenant is a covenant of grace administered legally. On this view, the essential nature of

⁴ Ernest F. Kevan, *The Grace of Law: A Study in Puritan Theology* (repr. Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1993).

⁵ Mark Karlberg, “Moses and Christ: The Place of the Law in Seventeenth-Century Puritanism,” *TrinJ* 10 NS (1989): 26 n. 49.

the Mosaic Covenant is that it was a gracious covenant, but as to form, it was administered in a legal manner that the grace of the New Covenant might shine forth more clearly.

William Ames (1576-1633)

The scholastic distinction between essence and form is appealed to by the theologians of this school. For example, in his *Marrow of Theology* (1629) William Ames argued in typical scholastic fashion:

The testament is new in relation to what existed from the time of Moses and in relation to the promise made to the fathers. But it is new not in *essence* but in *form*. In the former circumstances the form of administration gave some evidence of the covenant of works, from which this testament is essentially different.⁶

In order to explain in what sense the New Covenant is new in contrast with the Old Covenant, Ames argued that the New Covenant is not new in essence, but in form, because the form in which the Old Covenant was administered “gave some evidence of the covenant of works.” In the New Covenant, by contrast, the doctrine of grace is given a “more distinct expression than heretofore,” as a result of the “doing away with . . . the intermixture of the covenant of works” which held the people of God “in a certain bondage” in that former age.

Since the complete difference between the new covenant and the old appeared only in the administration which came after Christ, this administration is properly termed the covenant and testament which is new. This differs also from the former administration in quality and quantity. Its difference in quality is in clarity and freedom. Clarity occurs, first in the more distinct expression than heretofore of the doctrine of grace and salvation through Christ and through faith in him . . . Freedom comes, first, in doing away with government by law, or the intermixture of the covenant of works, which held the ancient people in a certain bondage. The

⁶ William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology* (transl. John Dykstra Eusden; Durham, N.C.: The Labyrinth Press, 1968), 206.

spirit of adoption, though never wholly denied to believers, is also most properly said to be communicated under the New Testament, in which the perfect state for believers most clearly shines forth. Gal. 4:4, 5.

There is a “complete difference” between the Old and New Covenants – a difference not of essence but of quality. The difference in quality is seen in the great clarity with which the doctrine of grace is taught, and in the freedom of the people of God from the works aspect of the Mosaic administration. As a result, now in the New Covenant, “the perfect state for believers,” namely, the spirit of adoption, though not totally absent in the Old Covenant, shines forth more clearly.

Francis Turretin (1623-1687)

In his *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (1679-85) – which many regard as the apogee of Reformed scholasticism – Francis Turretin took a position similar to that of Ames, although he employed the scholastic language of “a twofold relation.”

It pleased God to administer the covenant of grace in this period [from Moses to Christ] under a rigid legal economy – both on account of the condition of the people still in infancy and on account of the putting off of the advent of Christ and the satisfaction to be rendered by him. A twofold relation ought always to obtain: the one legal, more severe, through which by a new promulgation of the law and of the covenant of works, with an intolerable yoke of ceremonies, he wished to set forth what men owed and what was to be expected by them on account of duty unperformed. In this respect, the law is called the letter that kills (2 Cor. 3:6) and the handwriting which was contrary to us (Col. 2:14), because by it men professed themselves guilty and children of death, the declaration being written by their own blood in circumcision and by the blood of victims.⁷

It is interesting to observe that although Turretin regarded the Mosaic Covenant as essentially gracious, he nevertheless saw in it “a new promulgation of the law and of the

⁷ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (transl. George Musgrave Giger; ed. James T. Dennison, Jr.; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1994), 2:227.

covenant of works.” Here we see that the two Reformed formulations of the works aspect of the Mosaic Covenant are not far apart.

Turretin went on to describe the second, evangelical relation, which he identified with the function of the law as a schoolmaster unto Christ:

The other relation was evangelical, sweeter, inasmuch as “the law was a schoolmaster unto Christ” (Gal. 3:24) and contained “the shadow of things to come” (Heb. 10:1), whose body and express image is in Christ. Hence, as much of trouble and vexation as that economy brought in its former relation, so much of consolation and of joy it conferred in the latter upon pious men attending to it and seeking under that bark and veil the spiritual and evangelical truth (which the Holy Spirit taught them by a clearer revelation).

This twofold relation may also be understood in terms of an external vs. internal distinction:

According to that twofold relation, the administration can be viewed either as to the *external* economy of legal teaching or as to the *internal* truth of the gospel promise lying under it ... On the part of the people, [this external economy of legal teaching] was a stipulation of obedience to the whole law or righteousness both perfect (Dt. 27:26; Gal. 3:10) and personal and justification by it (Rom. 2:13). But this stipulation in the Israelite covenant was only accidental, since it was added only in order that man by its weakness might be led to reject his own righteousness and to embrace another’s, latent under the law.

Note that Turretin quoted Deut. 27:26 in connection with the works principle. This is significant because it is also one of the major passages (in addition to Lev. 18:5) from the Mosaic Covenant quoted by Paul in Galatians 3:10-14 to demonstrate the existence of a works-principle in the Mosaic Law, in contrast with the faith-principle of the Gospel.

Leonard Riissen

Likewise Leonard Riissen, whose work was really a summary of Turretin’s, argued that the covenant of Sinai, “as to substance” was “nothing else than a fresh

administration of the covenant of grace, so that in actual substance it is the same as the covenant entered into with Abraham.” However, he added that “as to accidents and circumstances” it was “clothed as to outward administration in the form of a covenant of works, through a severe promulgation of law, but not with a view to exacting afresh a covenant of works with the sinner.” The purpose of God in outwardly administering the covenant of grace “through a severe promulgation of law” was “to remember the violated covenant of works, and so to make the Israelites feel their sin and impending curse, and give them the more burning a thirst for the righteousness of redemption. So in it there was a mixture of law and gospel; of the former to strike terror into sinners, of the latter to raise up and comfort contrite consciences.”⁸

These comments by Ames, Turretin, and Riissen make clear that even those Reformed theologians who held that the Mosaic Covenant was essentially gracious, did not so press this point as to overlook or downplay the works element that “strikes terror into sinners” and shows them their need of Christ.

The Mosaic Covenant as a Pedagogical Republication of the Covenant of Works

The second major view in historic covenant theology identifies the Mosaic Covenant as a republication of the Adamic covenant of works, not in order that Israel might achieve salvation thereby (which is impossible for fallen humanity), but for the pedagogical purpose of leading Israel to Christ, as Paul argues in Gal. 3:19-25. Hence it is also called “the subservient covenant” view. This view has a noble heritage in that it has

⁸ Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources* (transl. G. T. Thomson;

been espoused by many renowned Reformed thinkers in the past, and may have been the majority report among the principal covenant theologians of the seventeenth century.

Robert Rollock (1555-1599)

We begin with Robert Rollock, whose *Treatise of Our Effectual Calling* (1597) represents an early statement of what will later become a dominant viewpoint.

For that the Old Testament did serve specially to prepare men to receive Christ, which in his appointed time was to come. For law was a schoolmaster unto Christ (Gal. 3:24). *Therefore the greatest part of the Old Testament is spend propounding, repeating, and expounding the covenant of works.* And because Christ was not yet manifested in the flesh, therefore the doctrine of the Covenant of Grace is more sparingly and darkly set forth in it.⁹

However, Rollock was quick to add, this does not prejudice the truth that all people in all ages are saved by faith alone in Christ alone:

As touching the faithful in the Old Testament, which embraced Christ the Mediator of the Covenant of Grace, howsoever then but shadowed before their eyes in types and figures – to them, I say, being justified in him which was to come, and regenerated by his grace.

Rollock established the basic pattern that will be fleshed out in greater detail by subsequent theologians. The Mosaic Covenant is a repetition of the covenant of works, not as a means of salvation, but as a schoolmaster “to prepare men to receive Christ,” whose work was foreshadowed in types and figures.

Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 399.

⁹ Quoted by Jeong Koo Jeon, *Covenant Theology: John Murray's and Meredith G. Kline's Response to the Historical Development of Federal Theology in Reformed Thought* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1999), 39.

William Pemble

In *Vindiciae Fidei, or A Treatise of Justification by Faith* (1625), Pemble argued that the covenant of works was given in two distinct administrations. The first administration was with Adam before the fall:

By the covenant of works, we understand what we call in one word “the law,” namely, that means of bringing man to salvation, which is by perfect obedience unto the will of God. Hereof there are also two several administrations; the first is with Adam before his fall, when immortality and happiness were promised to man, and confirmed by an external symbol of the tree of life, upon condition that he continued obedient to God, as well in all other things, as in that particular commandment of not eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

The second administration of the covenant of works, Pemble argued, was with Israel at Mount Sinai, where the covenant of works was “renewed” and “revived” in the decalogue “after the light of nature began to grow darker.”

The second administration of this covenant was the renewing thereof with the Israelites at Mount Sinai; where, after the light of nature began to grow darker, and corruption had in time worn out the characters of religion and virtue first graven in man’s heart, God revived the law by a compendious and full declaration of all duties required of man towards God or his neighbour, expressed in the decalogue; according to the tenor of which law God entered into covenant with the Israelites, promising to be their God in bestowing upon them all blessings of life and happiness, upon condition that they would be his people, obeying all things that he had commanded; which condition they accepted of, promising an absolute obedience, Exod. xix.8, “All things which the Lord hath said we will do;” and also submitting themselves to all punishment in case they disobeyed, saying, “Amen” to the curse of the law, “Cursed be every one that confirmeth not all the words of the law: and all the people shall say, Amen.”¹⁰

In support of the republication thesis Pemble appealed to the legal “tenor” of the Mosaic Covenant, namely, its promise of “all blessings of life and happiness,” upon

¹⁰ Quoted by Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity with Notes by Thomas Boston* (repr. Edmonton, Canada: Still Waters Revival Books, 1991), 59-60.

condition of “absolute obedience,” along with the threatened curse for the slightest failure to confirm “all the words of the law.”

Edward Fisher (1627-1655)

Edward Fisher was a Puritan theologian with great zeal for free grace as understood in light of a covenantally defined Law-Gospel contrast. Fisher vigorously defended the republication thesis in his *Marrow of Modern Divinity* (1645), citing many Reformed theologians in support of it. He spoke of the Mosaic Law as “a new edition and publication of the covenant of works.”

Their fall in Adam was almost forgotten [by the Jews] ... Nay, in that long course of time betwixt Adam and Moses, men had forgotten what was sin ... Rom. v.20, therefore, “the law entered,” that Adam’s offense and their own actual transgression might abound, so that now the Lord saw it needful, that there should be a new edition and publication of the covenant of works, the sooner to compel the elect unbelievers to come to Christ, the promised seed, and that the grace of God in Christ to the elect believers might appear the more exceeding glorious.

It is clear that Fisher did not confuse Law and Gospel as if salvation were attainable by works in the Old Covenant. On the contrary,

the Lord’s intention therein was, that they, by looking upon this covenant might be put to mind what was their duty of old, when they were in Adam’s loins; yea, and what was their duty still, if they would stand to that covenant, and so go the old and natural way to work; yea, and hereby they were also to see what was their present infirmity in not doing their duty: that so they seeing an impossibility of obtaining life by that way of works, first appointed in paradise, they might be humbled, and more heedfully mind the promise made to their father Abraham, and hasten to lay hold on the Messiah, or promised seed.

According to Fisher, the Mosaic covenant of works was *not* given to Israel in the same way that it was given to Adam in paradise. He made a distinction between adding the

works-principle “by way of ingredency” (which Fisher rejects) and “by way of subserviency and attendance.”

The apostle, speaking of the covenant of works as it was given on Mount Sinai, says, “It was added because of transgressions,” Gal. iii.19. It was not set up as a solid rule of righteousness, as it was given to Adam in paradise, but was added . . . You are not so to understand the apostle, as though it were added by way of *ingredency* as a part of the covenant of grace, as if that covenant had been incomplete without the covenant of works; for then the same covenant should have consisted of contradictory materials, and so it should have overthrown itself; for, says the apostle, “If it be by grace, then it is no more of works; otherwise grace is no more grace: but if it be of works, then it is no more grace; otherwise work is no more work,” Rom. xi.6. But it was added by way of *subserviency* and *attendance*, the better to advance and make effectual the covenant of grace; so that although the same covenant that was made with Adam was renewed on Mount Sinai, yet I say still, it was not for the same purpose.

The difference between ingredency and subserviency is made clear once we define the *end* for which the Mosaic Covenant was given:

God made it with the Israelites for no other end, than that man, being thereby convinced of his weakness, might flee to Christ. So that it was renewed only to help forward and introduce another and a better covenant . . . to discover sin, to awaken the conscience, and to convince them of their own impotency, and so drive them out of themselves to Christ. Know it then, I beseech you, that all this while there was no other way of life given . . . than the covenant of grace. All this while God did but pursue the design of his own grace; and, therefore, was there no inconsistency either in God’s will or acts; only such was his mercy, that he subordinated the covenant of works, and made it subservient to the covenant of grace, and so to tend to evangelical purposes.¹¹

The Mosaic Covenant, then, was not given as a means of justification, which would impute “inconsistency” to God’s covenant-making activity and would nullify the earlier Abrahamic promise. Rather, it was subservient to the covenant of grace since it was given to advance “evangelical purposes.” This is in perfect agreement with Paul

¹¹ Fisher, *Marrow*, 61-64.

himself, who asked: “Is the Law then against the promises of God? God forbid!” (Gal. 3:21).

Thomas Boston (1676-1732)

In 1718 Fisher’s work was discovered and republished by Thomas Boston with his own annotations, thus setting off the Marrow controversy in the Church of Scotland. Boston argued that at Mount Sinai God delivered two distinct covenants to his people: first, a fresh promulgation of the Abrahamic covenant of grace (as evidenced in the preface to the ten commandments), and, second, a repetition of the primeval covenant of works “as the original perfect rule of righteousness.”

Wherefore I conceive the two covenants to have been both delivered on Mount Sinai to the Israelites. *First*, the covenant of grace made with Abraham, contained in the preface, repeated and promulgated there unto Israel, to be believed and embraced by faith, that they might be saved; to which were annexed the ten commandments, given by the Mediator Christ, the head of the covenant, as a rule of life to his covenant people.

Secondly, the covenant of works made with Adam, contained in the same ten commands, delivered with thunderings and lightnings, the meaning of which was afterwards cleared by Moses, describing the righteousness of the law and the sanctions thereof, repeated and promulgated to the Israelites there, as the original perfect rule of righteousness, to be obeyed.

Having asserted a dual covenantal promulgation – both of works and of grace – as the proper framework for understanding the Mosaic Covenant, Boston immediately added that the Israelites were not bound to the renewed covenant of works as a means of justification. They were

no more bound thereby to seek righteousness by the law than the young man was by our Savior’s saying to him, Matt. xix.17, 18, “If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments – Thou shalt do no murder,” etc. ... Thus there is no confounding of the two covenants of grace and works; but the latter was added to

the former as subservient unto it, to turn their eyes towards the promise, or covenant of grace.¹²

The works-principle, then, was revealed as subservient to the covenant of grace in order to show Israel that they were destitute of the righteousness God demands, thus leading them to embrace the righteousness of Christ held forth in the covenant of grace. The covenant of works ...

was added to the covenant of grace, that by looking at it men might see what kind of righteousness it is by which they can be justified in the sight of God; and that by means thereof, finding themselves destitute of that righteousness, they might be moved to embrace the covenant of grace, in which that righteousness is held forth to be received by faith.¹³

Boston also argued that the purposes of the Adamic and Mosaic covenants of works differ. In the former, the purpose of God was to get his due from humans. But this was not God's purpose in the repeating of the covenant of works with Israel at Sinai. After Adam's failure, God gets his due only from the Man Christ Jesus.

John Owen (1616-1683)

In John Owen's magisterial seven volume commentary on Hebrews we see a significant new development in covenant theology – the application of the works-principle in the Mosaic economy to the typological, temporal level of Israel's retention of the land.

Commenting on Hebrews 8:6, which speaks of "a better covenant enacted on better promises," Owen explained in what sense the New Covenant is better than the Old. In so doing, he affirmed that "the covenant on Sinai" contained "a revival and

¹² Boston's annotation, *Marrow*, 56.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 63.

representation of the covenant of works, with its sanction and curse.” The purpose of this was “to shut up unbelievers, and such as would not seek for righteousness, life, and salvation by the promise, under the power of the covenant of works, and curse attending it.”¹⁴

However, the Mosaic Covenant “did not constitute a new way or means of righteousness, life, and salvation,” since these soteric blessings could only be attained by Christ alone, and by faith in him (p. 82). Although the Mosaic Covenant was a “renovation” (p. 91) of the “the commanding power and sanction of the first covenant of works,” and thus became, as Paul teaches, “a ministry of condemnation” (pp. 85, 92), yet no one was saved or condemned by virtue of it. “Believers were saved under it, but not by virtue of it. Sinners perished eternally under it, but by the curse of the original law of works” (pp. 85-86).

To what, then, did the republished covenant of works apply? “As unto what it had of its own, it was confined unto things temporal” (p. 85). “Having granted unto this people those great privileges of the land of Canaan … he moreover prescribed unto them laws, rules, and terms of obedience, whereon they should hold and enjoy the land” (p. 83). In other words, the covenant of works aspect of the Mosaic Covenant only operated on the temporal level of Israel’s retention of the land, not on the antitypical level of eternal salvation. Owen’s thinking here points the way to Kline’s distinction between the two levels – the level of the theocratic, typal kingdom, and the level of personal attainment of the eternal kingdom of salvation (see below).

¹⁴ John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991), 6:80-81.

Lest we think that the republication thesis was peculiar to the Anglo-Scottish tradition, it is helpful to note that continental Reformed theologians also embraced it.

Amandus Polanus

For example, Amandus Polanus, in his *Syntagma Theologiae Christianae* (1609), affirmed the republication thesis:

The covenant of works is that in which God promiseth everlasting life unto a man that in all respects performeth perfect obedience to the law of works, adding thereunto threatenings of eternal death, if he shall not perform perfect obedience thereto. God made this covenant in the beginning with the first man Adam, whilst he was in the first estate of integrity: the same covenant God did repeat and make again by Moses with the people of Israel.¹⁵

Polanus identified the Mosaic Covenant as a repetition of the covenant of works because he perceived in it the tell-tale marks of the works-principle: the promise of everlasting life on condition of performing perfect obedience to the law of works, with the added threat of eternal death for the non-performance of that obedience.

Herman Witsius (1636-1708)

Witsius was an important Continental systematizer of covenant theology in the late seventeenth century, whose thought had affinities with that of Owen. He argued that the curse of the covenant, stated in a passage like Deut. 27:26 (and quoted by Paul in Gal. 3:10) “undoubtedly contained the sanction of the covenant of works.”¹⁶ Witsius regarded the Old Covenant as “typical or shadowy.” When the New Testament asserts the

¹⁵ Quoted by Fisher, *Marrow*, 59.

¹⁶ Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man: Comprehending a Complete Body of Divinity* (transl. William Crookshank; repr. Escondido, Calif.: The den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1990), 2:359.

superiority of the New Covenant over the Old, “a better covenant is opposed to that Israelitish covenant, which is not formally the covenant of grace, but is only considered with respect to typical or shadowy pomp” (p. 336). Notice that Witsius regarded the Mosaic Covenant as “not formally the covenant of grace.” It was a “national covenant,” in which “God promised the people, that, if they performed the obedience, he would accept and reward it,” although in the end, “they broke the covenant by their apostacy [sic] … and God refused to be called their God.” However, this pertained only to the typological level, for “the elect among Israel … besides their engagements by the Sinaitic covenant, were joined to God by the covenant of grace which he had solemnly renewed with Abraham.”

Witsius distinguished, but did not separate, the Mosaic Covenant (“the typical covenant”) from the Abrahamic Covenant (“a pure covenant of grace”):

As the covenant of grace, under which the ancients were, is not to be confounded with, so neither is it to be separated from, the Sinaitic covenant: neither are we to think that believers were without all those things which were not promised by the Sinaitic covenant, and which *the typical covenant*, because of its weakness and unprofitableness, could not bestow; as they were likewise partakers of the Abrahamic covenant, *which was a pure covenant of grace*: and hence were derived the spiritual and saving benefits of the Israelites (pp. 336-37).

A salient feature of the Mosaic Covenant making it “the typical covenant” may be seen in the fact that “long life in the land of Canaan was a pledge of eternal life in heaven” (pp. 354-55).

Peter van Mastricht

In a similar manner the Dutch Reformed scholastic, Peter van Mastricht, in his *Theoretico-practica Theologia* (1725), affirmed that the Mosaic Covenant was a “re-enactment” of the covenant of works in paradise:

The Apostle Gal. 4:24 ... mentions a double covenant, the former of which is “by works of the law” ... If you say the Apostle is speaking of a covenant not in Paradise, but the covenant at Sinai, the answer is easy, that the Apostle is speaking of the covenant in Paradise so far as it is re-enacted and renewed with Israel at Sinai in the Decalogue, which contained the proof of the covenant of works.¹⁷

Notice that van Mastricht appealed to the teaching of Paul in Galatians to corroborate the republication thesis. Indeed, it would seem that Paul was the first to set forth this thesis, which was later followed up and elaborated by many eminent covenant theologians in the seventeenth century, as we have seen.

Conclusion

Both Reformed traditions concerning the Mosaic Covenant affirmed the pedagogical function of the Law, elucidated by Paul in Gal. 3:10-25. Whether they held that the works-principle obtained only with regard to the “form” of an essentially gracious covenant, or that it was “renewed,” “re-enacted,” and “repeated” in the Law itself, “the majority of covenant theologians have attempted to do greater justice to the biblical teaching on the works-feature of the Mosaic Covenant.”¹⁸ Reformed theology therefore upholds the Law-Gospel contrast, as expressed in covenantal form in the Old and the New Covenants. It is this covenant theological formulation of the Law-Gospel contrast

¹⁷ Heppe, 289-90.

which sets Reformed thought apart from Lutheranism, which makes that distinction in terms of eternally competing abstract principles, thus failing to take account of the historico-covenantal unfolding of the divine plan of redemption as taught by Paul in Galatians 3. As Karlberg states when summarizing the views of the Puritans, “The antithesis between the principles of law and grace was properly carried over to the contrast between the Mosaic covenant and the new covenant.”¹⁹

The works principle in the Mosaic Covenant was not given so that the Israelites might achieve eternal life by it – the path to life via works being forever closed off to humans after the fall – but that God’s people might despair of achieving eternal life by their own works, and thus be “shut up” to faith in Christ as the only way of attaining justification and eternal life. As Paul teaches, the Law came 430 years after the Abrahamic Promise, and it was added in order to bring about covenant transgressions, thus functioning as a disciplinarian to lead God’s people to Christ. The Law is therefore a parenthesis in the plan of God, and one that is not at odds with the gracious purposes of the Promise, for the Law was subservient to the Promise.

Employing a distinction (adumbrated in the thought of Owen and Witsius) between the operation of the works-principle at the typological level and the underlying foundational promises of grace, Kline explains further how the Mosaic Covenant did not annul the Abrahamic promise:

The explanation for this is that 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

¹⁸ Karlberg, “Reformed Interpretation,” 54.

¹⁹ Karlberg, “Moses and Christ,” 26.

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). Because the Abrahamic covenant of promise found continuity in the Mosaic order at this underlying level, it was not abrogated by the latter. The works principle in the Mosaic order was confined to the typological sphere of the provisional earthly kingdom which was superimposed as a secondary overlay on the foundational stratum ... The Israelite people corporately could maintain their continuing tenure as the theocratic kingdom in the promised land only as they maintained the appropriate measure of national fidelity to their heavenly King.²⁰

By distinguishing these two levels – the typal kingdom of the Israelite theocracy in the land, and the antitypal eternal kingdom of salvation – Kline is able to argue that the works-principle applied only to the former, which was “superimposed as a secondary overlay” on the foundational stratum of the Abrahamic promise, through which alone the eternal kingdom of salvation was attained by the elect within Israel.

Kline’s position is in continuity with that of his seventeenth century forebears, who also recognized the validity of speaking of a works-principle in the Mosaic order, and yet who emphatically denied that any Israelite was saved by works, for in every epoch of redemptive history salvation is possible only by faith in Christ. While few seventeenth century covenant theologians worked this out with the same rigor, Kline’s appeal to typological distinctions must be regarded as a further elaboration and refinement of the consensus of the older Reformed theologians.

The view that the Mosaic Covenant is to be understood as nothing but an administration of the covenant of grace fails to take account of this works element. One of the great dangers of this view is that it erases the Law-Gospel contrast by equating the dual sanctions of the Mosaic Covenant (blessing and curse) conditioned on faithfulness or

²⁰ Kline, *Kingdom Prologue* (Overland Park, Kans.: Two Age Press, 2000), 321-22.

unfaithfulness to the Law, with the requirement of the New Covenant that believers bring forth evidence of faith by good works. But the distinct roles played by works in the Mosaic Covenant and in the New Covenant are diametrically opposed. In the Mosaic Covenant, works were the legal condition for obtaining the blessings of long life in the land, and Israel's covenant breaking was the basis for her eventual exile from the land under the divine curse. Under the New Covenant the believer's good works do not function as the legal ground for receiving the inheritance, but are the necessary result of having received a right and title to the eternal inheritance on the legal ground of *Christ's* obedience.

Confusion reigns if we do not distinguish the radically divergent ways in which works function in their respective covenantal contexts. By acknowledging the propriety of speaking of a works-principle in the Mosaic Covenant, a works-principle which stands in antithetical contrast to the faith-principle which governs the covenant of grace in Christ, we are enabled to offer a clearer witness to the gospel of justification by faith alone (*sola fide*).