

## Extended Critique of Bavinck's Covenant of Works

(updated) Boyd Murrah, 11 Dec 2008.

In Bavinck's Reformed Dogmatics, v.2, Chap 13 (pp 563-580), Bavinck says that had Adam not sinned, he would have matured in his relationship to the Lord, so that at some point he would be translated to eternal life. He says this is a standard statement of the "Covenant of Works." Then Bavinck goes on to say that the religion of this covenant of creation, as held by unfallen Adam, is essentially and vitally the same as the religion of redemption, as held by us (p. 570). (My presentation of his views is only a snapshot of the whole teaching on this issue in that whole section.)

As I pondered this claim of the identity (in quality) of unfallen Adam's religion and ours, it seemed that this would imply that the Incarnation, Atonement, Resurrection, Ascension, etc., of the Second Person of the Trinity are not necessary in any sense to the essential quality of the worship of God shared between unfallen Adam and ourselves as redeemed sinners. Christ in his incarnation and earthly biography is not the object of worship; else, the religion of unfallen Adam could not have done without them. Rather, the Second Person in his deity is the object of worship (not the incarnate God-man). If the intrinsic nature of our religion is the same as the intrinsic nature of unfallen Adam's religion, then this clearly lowers the significance of Christ in his Incarnation and Work as the God-Man.

In my own mind, I pressed this idea that we could just as vitally worship God without the incarnate Christ. For unfallen Adam this would be worship much as the angels see it. However, since Christ, as Savior, is not the center of the unfallen Adamic religion, this implies that Christ's centrality as Savior is only contingent (even though ordained). It is a functional necessity, brought about by the need to redeem us from sin. Yes, we worship God for having redeemed us, yet this special worship of the Savior is not an essential component of the nature of the true worship of God, because our religion and the religion of unfallen Adam are supposed to be essentially the same.

Pressing the idea further, the revelation of Christ in the flesh as Redeemer does not involve worship of Him, as the God-Man, with an essential ultimacy. Of course, one could say, and people do say, now that Christ has come, it is essential, even for the angels. Nevertheless, if the worship of the Savior as Savior is now an essential ultimate, then it is necessary that the exact quality of the religion of redemption be different from that of the religion of unfallen Adam, even though they both legitimately worship God (from different perspectives).

All this raises a serious question: Does the Second Person, in his incarnation and saving works not have the level of significance within the theological habit in Bavinck's theology that it should? If redemption is only required because Adam sinned, and if the maturing and translation of the human race to eternal life really did not need Christ if Adam had not fallen, then it stands to reason that the worship of the God-Man stands lower in significance in Bavinck's theology than the worship of God. This question may be rephrased: Does the worship of God as creator, as the divine sovereign, transcend the worship of God as Redeemer? When stated this way, the answer seen in classical Reformed orthodoxy is, "Yes." It is a Reformed theological commonplace to say that we worship God more for his attributes of power, glory and sovereignty, than we worship him as Savior. To give preeminence to the work of salvation is often called "man-centered" (scholars will say "anthropological"), or "Lutheran" – or even self-centered!

But, this can't be right.

## Christ and the Covenants

1. If redemption is essentially construed as negating the Fall, and thereby functions to restore the covenant of creation to normal operation, this might be called the “Restitution of Creation.” In this view, Christ’s work is functional to restore the integrity of something else – man’s progress under the covenant of creation (or covenant of life, or works), which originally did not “need” Christ’s incarnation or work of redemption. Redeemed mankind now rejoins the trajectory that Adam left when he sinned, and by carrying forward the creation mandate, matures and works toward that originally intended fruition, which is translation to the resurrection state. Thus redemption, as the “restitution of creation” restores the creation covenant (the Law of which can now be fulfilled in Christ), and the human race moves from glory to glory unto that day of translation into eternal life.

This “return to creation” confuses the doctrine of the Biblical Covenants (Old and New), and moves faith away from a solid basis in the New Covenant. It tends to eliminate redemptive-historical Biblical interpretation, and induces a temporal and theological regression.

2. On the other hand, I use the term “Resurrection of Creation” for the viewpoint of the New Covenant, founded solely upon the finished work of Christ – a complete Savior. We are restored to fellowship with God, not under the auspices of the creation covenant and its Law (to which we have now died, Rom 7), but under the auspices of the New Covenant through the Spirit (who writes the Law on the heart by faith). Redemption unto the worship of the Triune God, and especially the worship of the God-Man who remains our adored head forever and ever, is a different and higher goal, attained through different means, than the goal for Adamic perfection proposed in the traditional covenant of creation.
3. Even though we Reformed have a sophisticated and wonderfully explanatory interpretation of the Scriptural Old and New Covenants in terms of theological covenants of Creation and Grace, this picture is often distorted by theological mistakes. We need to keep in mind that the Old Covenant is not restored by the New Covenant (Rom. 5-8). Rather, Christ died for our sins under the penalty of the Old Covenant, never Himself to live again in the old aeon governed by that covenant (Rom 6:9-10). Secondly, since Christ could not be held by death, he has been resurrected into the new and eternal aeon of the New Covenant to serve God forever. We died for our sins in him under that same covenant of creation which we both broke (he was carrying the blame for our sins on the cross – the sinless for the sinful). We have been raised in him, to live unto God together under the New Covenant, by grace, by the Spirit, in fellowship with God, never to serve sin again.

## Summary of Christological and Covenantal Reforms Needed

1. The developed covenant of creation (or life, or works) should not be taken in theological speculation beyond the Scriptural revelation.
2. The covenant of creation was a non-legalistic covenant, incorporating the Law of God, which brooked no sin. When Adam sinned, we died, and all hope of restitution under that covenant died, too. It was voided, and leaves its curse on all whom Adam represented. Now, our only hope is the Seed. The hope of unfallen Adam (according to the traditional covenant of creation

leading to eternal life) was not the full hope we have, even if he ultimately were confirmed in righteousness, like the angels. The elect (unfallen) angels desire to look into the salvation we have in Christ, to learn things about God and about us that they do not know in their own experience.

3. The Old Testament Scripture maintains its value for us, since it reveals our origins and directs our path in the New Testament/Covenant. The Old Testament is The Truth which we must hear, it contains warnings we must heed, and it is the Word of Promise of a better covenant and a better Mediator. The Scripture must be fulfilled in every jot and tittle. And, it isn't all fulfilled yet! But, redemptive history has moved irrevocably to the New Covenant, which is a fulfillment, not a restitution of the Old. Christ the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world is the center of history. He is not merely a contingent correction for the fact that Adam sinned. The biography of Christ is a vital resource for reflection and religious devotion in the church. Christ is the revealed God. He has now been seen! What Christ has done to secure our salvation and fellowship is the source of joy and worship unending. We long for his fellowship face to face. His worship, as the God-Man will never end.

Our redemption is not a contingent divine correction that enables us to be restored to the status of the first creation, so that we might achieve spiritual success, and admire God for attributes and works unrelated to salvation. That is a philosophical vision of the ideal "God," not a Christian vision. Scriptural examples of divine worship show the contrary (Rev 4-5). Almighty God has no greater glory in or through any of his sovereign works than that glory which he receives as Savior. The mightiest praise He will receive from any source, forever, is that praise He receives from us, the saints he has redeemed, who are praising him because he has shown us his glory in providing for our redemption (Rev. 5)! This is the great glory of God the Father, who was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not imputing our sins to us, but giving us the gift of the Spirit, so that we might be filled with all the inheritance of God.

None of this was possible under the first covenant.

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