

## **Covenant Theology Under Attack** by Meredith Kline

The active obedience of Jesus is his fulfilling the demands of the covenant probation. By the passive obedience of his atoning sacrifice he secures for us the forgiveness of sins. But he does more than clear the slate and reinstate us in Adam's original condition, still facing probation and able to fail. Jesus, the second Adam, accomplishes the probationary assignment of overcoming the devil, and by performing this one decisive act of righteousness he earns for us God's promised reward. By this achievement of active obedience he merits for us a position beyond probation, secure forever in God's love and the prospect of God's eternal home.

This grand truth is a fruit of covenant theology. It grows out of the soil of the Reformed doctrine of federal representation, which is based on the biblical teaching about the two Adams whose responses under covenant probation are imputed to those they represent. Thus, God imputes to those whom Christ represents the righteousness of the victory of his active obedience in his probationary battle against Satan. Here was Machen's strong comfort in death. He knew that the meritorious work performed by his Savior had been reckoned to his account as if he had performed it. God must certainly bestow on him the glorious heavenly reward, for Jesus had earned it for him and God's name is just.

### Fuller versus Machen's Hope

Opposition to the covenant theology that affords the believer such a confident hope in Christ is the main burden of Daniel P. Fuller's latest book, *The Unity of the Bible* (Zondervan, 1992), [1] as it was of his *Gospel and Law: Contrast or Continuum?* (Eerdmans, 1980). The earlier book answered the question posed in its title with a vehement "Continuum - no contrast!" The contrast Fuller rejects is that between grace and the works principle which classic covenant theology asserts was present in the Law (the old covenant), governing Israel's retention of the kingdom in Canaan. This tenet of covenant theology is in agreement with the emphatic teaching of the apostle Paul. [2] Covenant theologians fully recognize that the eternal salvation of the elect is by God's grace alone, solely on the basis of Christ's merit. That is true from the Fall to the Consummation, not excluding the Mosaic economy. Accordingly, the old covenant is subsumed under the Covenant of Grace. But classic covenant theology also recognizes that at another level, that of the typological kingdom, the works principle was simultaneously operating under the old covenant. [3]

Fuller's refusal to acknowledge a works/grace contrast between the Mosaic covenant and gospel administrations (preeminently, the new covenant) is part of his broader insistence that divine-human relationship never entails a works principle. Human merit is an essential ingredient in the concept of works and Fuller denies the very possibility of human merit anywhere in history, even before the Fall. He repudiates covenant theology not only in its recognition of a works principle in the Law but in its identification of God's original covenant with Adam as a covenant of works. Fuller claims there is a continuum of divine "grace" throughout all God's dealings with man, pre-Fall as well as redemptive.

Because the theology Fuller promotes is in effect an assault on the foundations of the gospel and because its influence is insidious, infiltrating even our own theological community, it is important that we all acquaint ourselves with its distinctive ideas and favorite arguments. Hopefully our consideration of the issue (intricate though it is) will at the same time serve to sharpen our understanding of God's justice and grace and to enliven our appreciation of our Lord's active obedience. [4]

### The Eclipse of Divine Justice

Our focus here will not be on Fuller's mishandling of the Law but on the fallacies of his notions about the pre-Fall covenant. As covenant theology recognizes, there is a big difference (not a continuum) between the pre-Fall covenant and the subsequent Covenant of Grace. In the former, Adam does not receive the kingdom blessings (but rather a curse) if he forfeits God's favor by disobedience. Under the gospel, on the contrary, we do receive those blessings in spite of our having forfeited them by sin.

Grace is of course the term we use for the principle operative in the gospel that was missing from the pre-Fall covenant. Properly defined, grace is not merely the bestowal of unmerited blessings but God's blessing of man in spite of his demerits, in spite of his forfeiture of divine blessings. Clearly, we ought not apply this term grace to the pre-Fall situation, for neither the bestowal of blessings on Adam in the very process of creation nor the proposal to grant him additional blessings contemplated him as in a guilty state of demerit. Yet this is what Fuller and company are driven to do as they try to create the illusion of a continuum between the pre-Fall and the redemptive covenants. Only by this double-talk of using the term grace (obviously in a different sense) for the pre-Fall covenant can they becloud the big, plain contrast that actually exists between the two covenants (cf. Rom. 4:4).

Not grace but simple justice was the governing principle in the pre-Fall covenant; hence it is traditionally called the Covenant of Works. God is just and his justice is present in all he does. That is true of gospel administrations too, for the foundation of the gift of grace is Christ's satisfaction of divine justice. If you are looking for an element of continuity running through pre-Fall and redemptive covenants (without obliterating the contrast between them), there it is - not grace, but justice. In keeping with the nature of God's covenant with Adam as one of simple justice, covenant theology holds that Adam's obedience in the probation would have been the performing of a meritorious deed by which he earned the covenanted blessings.

By what reasoning does Fuller disallow the possibility of meritorious human deeds and thus reject the doctrine of a covenant of works? One argument is that man cannot add to God's glory since he is already all-glorious; we cannot enrich God since everything already belongs to him. Do we not read that even when a man has done all that God requires of him, he is still an unprofitable servant, that he has done no more than his duty?

The statement of Jesus appealed to (Luke 17:10) does indeed indicate that we can never do something extra beyond our covenantal obligations, as a sort of favor for which God should be grateful. But this does not mean that human works of obedience are of no merit. Though we cannot add to God's glory, Scripture instructs us that God has created us for the very purpose of glorifying him. We do so when we reflect back to him his glory, when our godlike righteousness mirrors back his likeness. Such righteousness God esteems as worthy of his approbation. And that which earns the favor of God earns the blessing in which that favor expresses itself. It is meritorious. It deserves the reward God grants according to his good pleasure. Just as disobedience earns a display of God's negative justice in the form of his curse, so obedience earns a manifestation of God's positive justice in the form of his blessing (cf. Rom. 2:6-10; Ps. 62:12; Prov. 24:12). This is simple justice.

At this juncture, advocates of the Fuller approach adduce a second argument to justify their use of the term grace rather than works for the pre-Fall covenant. They say that even if it be granted that Adam's obedience would have earned something, the reward to be bestowed so far exceeded the value of his act of service that we cannot speak here of simple justice. We must speak of "grace."

We have already criticized the duplicity of using the term grace in the covenant with Adam in a sense totally different from the meaning it has in the gospel. Now we will focus on the denial of the simple justice of the pre-Fall arrangement. For one thing, the alleged disparity in value between Adam's obedience and God's blessing is debatable. It could be argued that insofar as man's faithful act of obedience glorifies God and gives pleasure to God, it is of infinite value. But the point we really want to make is that the presence or absence of justice is not determined by quantitative comparison of the value of the act of obedience and the consequent reward. All such considerations are irrelevant.

One way to show this is to note the theological trouble we get into if we let the factor of relative values be the judge of justice. For example, in the case of the eternal intratrinitarian covenant we would end up accusing the Father of injustice towards the Son. For the value of the Son's atonement payment was sufficient for all mankind, yet the Father gives him the elect only, not all. We can avoid blasphemous charges against the Father only if we recognize that God's justice must be defined and judged in terms of what he stipulates in his covenants. Thus, the specific commitment of the Father in the eternal covenant was to give the Son the elect as the reward of his obedience, and that is precisely what the Son receives, not one missing. Judged by the stipulated terms of their covenant, there was no injustice but rather perfect justice. By the same token there was no grace in the Father's reward to the Son. It was a case of simple justice. The Son earned that reward. It was a covenant of works and the obedience of the Son (passive and active) was meritorious.

What is true in the covenant arrangement with the second Adam will also have been true in the covenant with the first Adam, for the first was a type of the second (Rom. 5:14) precisely with respect to his role as a federal head in the divine government. Accordingly, the pre-Fall covenant was also a covenant of works and there too Adam would have fully

deserved the blessings promised in the covenant, had he obediently performed the duty stipulated in the covenant. Great as the blessings were to which the good Lord committed himself, the granting of them would not have involved a gram of grace. Judged by the stipulated terms of the covenant, they would have been merited by simple justice.

### The Employer Metaphor

Instructive for the concept of justice is the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matt. 20:1-16). In particular, it illustrates the point that in administering a work contract, the amount of the stipulated wages is irrelevant to the question of justice. Those who worked the full day challenge the owner of the vineyard when they discover that the same pay they received was given to others who labored fewer hours. But they were rebuffed by the reminder that their employer had dealt with them exactly as their work covenant prescribed. To honor the covenant commitment was justice. Similarly, the higher rate of pay received by the others did not transform that transaction into one of "grace." It too was a payment of what was "right" (v. 4). It was simple justice, no more, nothing other than justice.

This parable is also of interest in connection with another favorite contention of Fuller. He claims that to speak of a works principle in God-man relationship is to liken God to an employer. And that is blasphemous, he says, because an employer is a "client lord," one who has needs which compel him to hire employees, who earn wages from him for meeting those needs.

A couple of things by way of rebuttal. The rewarding of obedience is not something done only in an employer-employee relationship. It takes place in the parent-child relationship too, among others. When the parent promises the child a reward for doing some chore, that is tantamount to a covenant of works, and it is a matter of simple justice that the obedient child receive the covenanted reward. [5] So the doctrine of the Covenant of Works is not necessarily founded on the metaphor of God as an employer. The covenant-keeping parent is another option. The king conferring a royal grant on a loyal subject would be another.

But actually there is no need to refrain from likening God to an employer. This metaphor which Fuller abominates was used by Jesus himself in the parable of the vineyard workers (and other parables). As the example of Jesus' parable demonstrates, metaphors must not be pressed too far and, more specifically, used of the employer metaphor for God does not imply that God, like human employers, is a needy client lord dependent on his employees' services. What we can properly gather from that parable with its employer metaphor is that the God-man relationship is governed by the principle of divine justice, including its positive expression in God's granting covenanted rewards for the performance of stipulated duties. [6] The propriety of the Covenant of Works doctrine is thereby confirmed.

## Subversion of the Gospel

The ultimate refutation of Fuller's theology is that it undermines the gospel of grace. All the arguments employed by Fuller and sympathizers to prove that Adam could not do anything meritorious would apply equally to the case of Jesus, the second Adam. Thus, the Father was already all-glorious before the Son undertook his messianic mission, and their covenanting with one another took place, of course, within a father-son relationship. Moreover, the parallel which Scripture tells us exists between the two Adams would require the conclusion that if the first Adam could not earn anything, neither could the second. But, if the obedience of Jesus has no meritorious value, the foundation of the gospel is gone. If Jesus' passive obedience has no merit, there has been no satisfaction made for our sins. If Jesus' active obedience has no merit, there is no righteous accomplishment to be imputed to us. There is then no justification-glorification for us to receive as a gift of grace by faith alone.

There are only two consistent choices open to Fuller. He can carry through the logic of his present position by declaring the work of Jesus to be without merit and thus abandon the gospel in any recognizably biblical-Reformational form. Or he can affirm Christ's merit and the gospel - but then he must first recant his attack on the Covenant of Works.

The actual teaching of those in the Fuller school is an inconsistent mixture. They want to affirm the atonement accomplished through Jesus' passive obedience (thereby accepting the idea of negative, punitive justice), but they fail totally in their handling of his active obedience. There is simply no room in their system for a divine justice functioning positively in reward of obedience, no room for an accomplishment of righteousness by anybody that might be imputed to somebody else. The resultant tendency is to confuse justification and sanctification in a new legalism, in which the role of good works, which was not permitted entrance through the front door, now sneaks in the back door. What Christ could not do is left for us to do, somehow.

The irony of all this is that a position that asserts a continuum of "grace" everywhere ends up with no genuine gospel grace anywhere. An approach that starts out by claiming that a works principle operates nowhere ends up with a kind of works principle everywhere. What this amounts to is a retreat from the Reformation and a return to Rome.

## Fuller and Machen's Heirs

The assault on classic covenant theology of which Fuller has become a vociferous spokesman is being endorsed by some prominent leaders within even the broadly Reformed wing of evangelicalism. And the sad fact is that this theology, which undermines the biblical truths that provided Machen with his dying comfort, has had its aiders and abettors within the very movement that Machen founded. Strangely, it was the one who received Machen's deathbed telegram who opened the door a considerable crack for the views inimical to the doctrine of the active obedience of Christ.

John Murray's exegetical study of Romans 5 was supportive of the classic doctrine of imputation, but this was undercut by the recasting of covenant theology he undertook in the *Covenant of Grace* (Tyndale Press, 1953). [7] Murray did at least affirm the possibility of meritorious human work, with obedience receiving a just reward, but he limited this to a situation where the reward would perfectly balance the value of the work. (For Murray that meant an obedient Adam must remain in his original state without advancement.) This qualification restricted the possibility to a theoretical moment at the beginning before the covenant was superimposed on this primal state of nature, since on Murray's (mistaken) definition of covenant, "grace" came with covenant, and that spelled the end of any momentary hypothetical administration of simple justice.

The door left ajar by Murray was thrown wide open to Fuller's theology by Murray's successor. Norman Shepherd rightly rejected Murray's notion of a state of nature. (Such a pre-covenant situation never existed; the world was created a covenantal order from the outset.) However, this meant that for Shepherd, who adopted Murray's equation of covenant and "grace," there was no place at all left for a covenant of works or meritorious human obedience or simple justice. Though the ensuing controversy over Shepherd's views led to his departure, his teaching was not officially renounced by ecclesiastical or seminary arms of our movement, and key elements of the Fuller-Shepherd theology continue to be advocated among us. [8]

The current intensification of the Fuller crusade awakens anew our concern over the sympathy for his views that has continued to smolder within the Machen movement for more than a decade after the Shepherd case. The church must be alerted against the encroachment of this radical renunciation of the Reformation, this subtle surrender to Rome. May Machen's heirs not let go of their commitment to covenant theology but continue to cherish it, and in particular its precious doctrine of the righteousness secured for us by the active obedience of Christ. As Machen said: No hope without it!

## NOTES

[1] Fuller is a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary. The present article began as a review of his *The Unity of the Bible*.

[2] See, e.g., Acts 13:39; Romans 5:13, 14; 10:5-10; 2 Corinthians 3:6-9; Galatians 3:11-18; 4:21-26; Philippians 3:9.

[3] So, for example, Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Eerdmans, 1981), 2.375.

[4] For more detailed exegetical discussion of passages central to the controversy, see my "Gospel Until the Law," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34,4 (1991) 433-446 and my *Kingdom Prologue* (Overland Park, KS: Two Age Press, 2001). T. David Gordon, a New Testament colleague, has demonstrated that Romans 9:32, regarded by Fuller as a key proof text of his thesis, is on the contrary a straightforward statement of classic covenant theology's view of the Law. See his "Why Israel Did Not Obtain Torah-

Righteousness: A Translation Note on Rom. 9:32," Westminster Theological Journal 54,1 (1992) 163-166.

[5] Working with its faulty concept of justice, Fuller theology alleges that the parent-child relationship is always characterized by "grace," never by simple justice. The fact that God's covenants with Adam and Israel involve a father-son relationship is then urged as an argument against identifying them as works transactions.

[6] I am not suggesting that this is a central point of the parable but simply noting something implicit in the parable's metaphorical infrastructure.

[7] Fuller commented on this with approval in *Gospel and Law* (pp. 6 and 79, n. 23).

[8] As the following quote shows, Shepherd himself still adheres to the Fuller line: "But in the kingdom of God we don't work for rewards in this sense [as earned]. God does not relate to us as an employer to an employee." (*The Outlook* 42,3 [1992] 21).