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The Puritans

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The Puritan Doctrine of Merit

The theological conception of merit with reference to God's covenant with man in the garden has undergone various shifts since the medieval period. The Reformers posited changes in the medieval conception of the covenants which continued developing through the period of the Puritans and is still a point of discussion for theologians today. The discussion of merit is particularly pertinent when addressing Federal Theology: the merit of Christ's work and the merit of Adam's work as mediators. Some theologians question the use of the term "merit" altogether, claiming that it does injury to God's grace in his covenantal dealings with men. John Murray writes,

From the promise of the Adamic administration we must dissociate all notions of meritorious reward. The promise of confirmed integrity and blessedness was one annexed to an obedience that Adam owed and therefore, was a promise of grace.¹

Although Professor Murray teaches the merit of Christ's work,² he denies any merit to Adam in the covenant of works (i.e. Adamic administration). Murray therefore employs the terminology of merit, but refuses its application to a prelapsarian Adam. However, his successor at Westminster Theological Seminary, Norman Shepherd writes,

We have rightly rejected the idea that a human being can do anything to achieve his own salvation. We have rightly rejected the idea that a person can work to merit the reward of eternal life. However, we have not always rejected the very idea of merit itself. The consequence is twofold. First, if we do not reject the idea of merit, we are not really able to challenge the Romanist doctrine of salvation at its very root. Either we have to grant that the good works of the believer are indeed meritorious, allowing us to boast in our own personal achievement, or

¹ John Murray. *Collected Writings vol. 2.* Banner of Truth: Carlisle, 1977. p.56.

² Murray writes, "...the merit of the Mediator is freely imputed to us, and the promise of grace in Christ is gratuitous." *Ibid., vol 1., p.225.*

we have to deny that the good works of the believer are really good.³

Shepherd decries the use of the term “merit” at all. He has further expressed his theological intolerance for merit in his recent taped lectures at the Christian Worldview Conference sponsored by the Southern California Center for Christian Studies where he denies the imputation of Christ’s active obedience to the believer⁴. Where Professor Murray retained merit for Christ’s work, Professor Shepherd denies the term outright. However, others strongly disagree with the casting away of the term and the possible implications thereof. Meredith Kline in *Kingdom Prologue*, writes,

Indeed, the principle of works forms the foundation of the gospel of grace. If meritorious works could not be predicated of Jesus Christ as second Adam, then obviously there would be no meritorious achievement to be imputed to his people as the ground of their justification-approbation. The gospel invitation would turn out to be a mirage.⁵

He states positively his position regarding Adam, writing,

If Adam obediently performed the assignment signified by the probation tree, he would receive, as a matter of pure and simple justice, the reward symbolized by the tree of life. That is, successful probation would be meritorious. With good reason then covenant theology has identified this probation arrangement as a covenant of works, thereby setting it in sharp contrast to the Covenant of Grace.⁶

He continues by focusing on merit with regards to Christ’s mediatorial work,

Underlying Christ’s mediatorship of a covenant of grace for the salvation of believers is his earthly fulfillment, through meritorious obedience, of his heavenly covenant of works with the Father.⁷

³ Norman Shepherd. *The Call of Grace*. P&R: Phillipsburg, 2000. P.61-2.

⁴ Tapes available from www.cmfnow.com

⁵ Meredith Kline. *Kingdom Prologue*. Two Age Press: Overland Park, 2000. p.120.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.107.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.121.

Kline is not an innovator in this regard. He has historical precedent for his views.

Princeton Seminary professor Charles Hodge writes,

In this sense, perfect obedience was the condition of the covenant originally made with Adam. Had he retained his integrity he would have merited the promised blessing. For to him that worketh the reward is not of grace but of debt. In the same sense the work of Christ is the condition of the covenant of redemption. It was the meritorious ground, laying a foundation in justice for the fulfillment of the promises made to Him by the Father.⁸

Hodge strongly asserts the idea of merit both with Christ and with Adam. Therefore the disagreement between those who find merit to be a vital part of covenant theology and those who would excise it entirely are clearly seen. This is a significant point to the current debate. But what of the history of this doctrine? Did the Puritan⁹ Fathers approve of the term, and if so in what way? As might be expected, there was not unanimous agreement among the Puritans regarding the use of merit with reference to Adam and Christ. However, they did for the most part agree on several points: 1) God condescended to enter into a covenant with Adam whereby he promised life upon condition of perfect obedience; 2) Adam's ability to merit (if granted) exists only within the bounds of the covenant; 3) Christ merited eternal life for his elect. *The language of "merit" with regards to Adam and Christ as covenant heads is the majority position of the Puritans.* To test this thesis, the works of John Owen, Thomas Watson, The Westminster Assembly of Divines, Francis Turretin, Stephen Charnock, Herman Witsius,

⁸ Charles Hodge. *Systematic Theology vol. 2*. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1993. p.364-5.

⁹ Sinclair Ferguson writes, "The problem of defining the concept 'Puritan' in historical terms has been frequently and inconclusively discussed. One common aspect of the Puritan theology was the federal, or covenant structure within which the Christian gospel was normally understood. This is not to say that all Puritans held the same view of divine covenants, but covenant was coming to be recognized as a fundamental theme of redemptive history and biblical doctrine." Sinclair Ferguson. *John Owen on the Christian Life*. Banner: Carlisle, 1995. p.20

Thomas Boston, and James Buchanan will be examined as to their teaching on merit.

One of the difficulties in this undertaking is that many of the Puritans did not write on the ability of Adam to merit eternal life in the covenant of works. This is because it is a hypothetical question as to what would've happened had Adam kept the covenant.

However, just because it is hypothetical does not mean it is not important. In addition, Adam's ability is in no ways hypothetical. The question of merit is important because one's view of Adam as a federal head can significantly impact their view of Christ as a federal head.

John Owen (1616-1683)

John Owen engages in a helpful discussion of merit and begins his discussion on the matter by providing the following definition,

Now, that which by this name we understand is, the performance of such an action as whereby the thing aimed at by the agent is due unto him, according to the equity and equality required in justice; as, "To him that worketh, is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt" Rom. iv. 4.¹⁰

He addresses the point that the term does not explicitly appear in Scripture.¹¹ The context of much of his writing on the subject is regarding the error of the Socinians who attribute merit to sinful men. This, Owen decries. However he heartily affirms the meritorious work of Christ as he writes, "Christ then, by his death, did merit and purchase, for all those for whom he died, all those things which in the Scripture are assigned to be the

¹⁰ John Owen. *The Works of John Owen vol. 10*. Banner of Truth: Carlisle, 1993. p.287.

¹¹ "The word merit is not at all to be found in the New Testament, in no translation out of the original that I have seen....Nay, I suppose it will prove a difficult thing to find out any one word, in either of the languages wherein the holy Scripture was written, that doth properly and immediately, in its first native importance, signify merit. So that about the name we shall not trouble ourselves, if the thing itself intended thereby be made apparent, which it is both in the Old and New Testament...." Ibid., p.287.

fruits and effects of his death.”¹² This merit purchased by Christ’s work, although given to the believer by grace is merited by Christ on account of justice.¹³ He offers a more concise definitive example of his teaching here in his *Greater Catechism*, Chapter XII of Christ’s Priestly Office,

Q. 14. How did Christ procure for us grace, faith, and glory?

A. By the way of purchase [57] and merit; for the death of Christ deservedly procured of God that he should bless us with all [58] spiritual blessings needful for our coming unto him.¹⁴

More telling are Owen’s footnotes referred to in the body of the text, “[57] The death of Christ was satisfactory in respect of the strict justice of God, -- meritorious in respect of the covenant between him and his Father.”¹⁵ He points to God’s strict justice as the basis on which merit was procured by the terms of the covenant.

In regards to Adam’s ability to merit life, it is sometimes difficult to nail down Owen’s teaching. This is partly because of his constant polemic against the Socinians and Papists who posit the schemes of condign and congruous merit for the believer. In reaction to these errors, Owen argues hard and long against any possibility of human merit before God. But does this apply also to Adam in the garden? His teaching comes

¹² Ibid., p.287.

¹³ “It was absolutely of free grace in God that he would send Jesus Christ to die for any; it was of free grace for whom he would send him to die; it is of free grace that the good things procured by his death be bestowed on any person, in respect of those persons on whom they are bestowed: but considering his own appointment and constitution, that Jesus Christ by his death should merit and procure grace and glory for those for whom he died, it is of debt in respect of Christ that they be communicated to them. Now, that which is thus merited, which is of debt to be bestowed, we do not say that it may be bestowed, but it ought so to be, and it is injustice if it be not.” Ibid., p.288.

¹⁴ John Owen. *Two Short Catechisms*. <http://www.ccel.org/o/owen/catechisms/cache/catechisms.txt> [accessed April 12, 2005].

¹⁵ Ibid.

through remarkably clear concerning his views of Adam before the fall. When speaking of the advent of grace in Christ, Owen writes,

We can never state our thoughts aright in this matter, unless we have a clear apprehension of, and satisfaction in, the introduction of grace by Jesus Christ into the whole of our relation unto God, with its respect unto all parts of our obedience. *There was no such thing, nothing of that nature or kind, in the first constitution of that relation and obedience by the law of our creation.* We were made in a state of immediate relation unto God in our own persons, as our creator, preserver, and rewarder. *There was no mystery of grace in the covenant of works.* No more was required unto the consummation of that state but what was given us in our creation, enabling us unto rewardable obedience. "Do this, and live," was the sole rule of our relation unto God. *There was nothing in religion originally that which the gospel celebrates under the name of the grace, kindness, and love of God, whence all our favourable relation unto God does now proceed, and whereinto it is resolved; nothing of the interposition of a mediator with respect unto our righteousness before God, and acceptance with him; -- which is at present the life and soul of religion, the substance of the gospel, and the centre of all the truths revealed in it.*¹⁶ (italics added for emphasis)

In other places he speaks of a “graciousness” before the fall, however, here he clearly denies any operation of grace in the covenant of works. For Owen, then, it would seem that prelapsarian “graciousness” means benevolence. He posits strict obedience as the rule for the reward which is set forth. In his *Greater Catechism*, he writes,

Q. 4. Was man able to yield the service and worship that God required of him?

A. Yea, to the uttermost, being created upright in the image of God, in purity, innocence, righteousness, and holiness.

Q. 5. What was the rule whereby man was at first to be directed in his obedience?

¹⁶ John Owen. *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith*. <http://www.ccel.org/o/owen/just/cache/just.txt> [accessed April 12, 2005].

A. The moral [30] or eternal law of God, implanted in his nature and written in his heart by creation, being the tenor of the covenant between God and him, sacramentally typified by the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

Q. 6. Do we stand in the same covenant still, and have we the same power to yield obedience unto God?

A. No; the covenant was [31] broken by the sin of Adam, with whom it was made, our nature corrupted, and all power to do good utterly lost.¹⁷

In these three questions and answers, he sets forth man's ability to perfectly obey the law clearly revealed to him in creation and nature, and also our being now under a different covenant. Thus it is clear that John Owen believed and taught the covenant with man in the garden was a covenant of works conditioned on perfect obedience whereby man was able to merit the promised reward from God. Concerning this covenant of works, he writes,

Hence two things belonged unto this covenant:-- First, That all things were transacted immediately between God and man. There was no mediator in it, no one to undertake any thing, either on the part of God or man, between them; for *the whole depending on every one's personal obedience*, there was no place for a mediator. Secondly, that nothing but perfect, sinless obedience would be accepted with God, or preserve the covenant in its primitive state and condition. There was nothing in it as to pardon of sin, no provision for any defect in personal obedience.

Wherefore, this covenant being once established between God and man, there could be no new covenant made, unless the essential form of it were of another nature, -- namely, that our own personal obedience be not the rule and cause of our acceptance and justification before God; for whilst this is so, as was before observed, the covenant is still the same, however the dispensation of it may be reformed or reduced to suit unto our present state and condition. What grace soever might be introduced into it, that could not be so which excluded all works from being

¹⁷ Owen. *Two Short Catechisms*. Ibid.

the cause of our justification. But if a new covenant be made, such grace must be provided as is absolutely inconsistent with any works of ours, as unto the first ends of the covenant; as the apostle declares, Rom. xi. 6.

Wherefore, the covenant of grace, supposing it a new, real, absolute covenant, and not a reformation of the dispensation of the old, or a reduction of it unto the use of our present condition (as some imagine it to be), must differ, in the essence, substance, and nature of it, from that first covenant of works. And this it cannot do if we are to be *justified before God on our personal obedience; wherein the essence of the first covenant consisted*. If, then, the righteousness wherewith we are justified before God be our own, our own personal righteousness, we are yet under the first covenant, and no other. (italics added for emphasis)¹⁸

There is a parallel between Adam and Christ as both in their covenants were able to merit the reward held forth in the covenant by their works. Owen provides a comparison when he writes concerning the end of the death of Christ,

...In a moral sense. When the action and the end are to be measured or considered in reference to a moral rule, or law prescribed to the agent, then the means are the deserving or meritorious cause of the end; as, if Adam had continued in his innocency, and done all things according to the law given unto him, the end procured thereby had been a blessed life to eternity; as now the end of any sinful act is death, the curse of the law.¹⁹

In the broader context of discussing the end of Christ's death, Owen employs the case of Adam in the garden. It is precisely because of the moral rule that the works can be considered meritorious. It is the covenant that is the key to this, both with Adam and with Christ. Outside of the covenant, one cannot speak of man's meriting anything from God.

¹⁸ Owen. *Justification*. Ibid.

¹⁹ John Owen. *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*.

<http://www.ccel.org/o/owen/deathofdeath/cache/deathofdeath.txt> Book I, Chapter II, Section II. [accessed April 12, 2005].

Thomas Watson (1620-1686)

Although Thomas Watson was not as prolific a writer as Owen, he did write on the subject of merit. He readily ascribes merit to Christ, writing, “By Christ’s death and merits, God’s justice is more abundantly satisfied than if we had suffered the pains of hell for ever.”²⁰ One point that stands out in Watson is his singular focus on Christ’s divinity in his mediatorial work with the explicit exclusion of his humanity. Watson writes,

Christ himself, as he was man only (setting aside his Godhead), did not merit by his sufferings, for Christ, as he was many only, was a creature. Now a creature cannot merit from the Creator. Christ’s sufferings, as he was man only, were finite, therefore could not merit infinite glory. Indeed, as he was God, his sufferings were meritorious; but consider him purely as man, they were not.²¹

Watson is arguing vehemently against the Papists in this passage and is not directly addressing Adam in the covenant of works. However, given his insistence on bifurcating Christ in only his deity being able to bring about merit, it is hardly conceivable how Watson could allow merit from Adam in the garden. Watson, therefore is an example of a dissenting voice among the Puritans to the possibility of Adam’s merit in the covenant of works.

The Westminster Assembly (1643-1652)

The Westminster Assembly was called to revise the standards of the Church of England. However, in the midst of their work their course changed and they crafted an altogether new confessional standard. The Westminster Confession of Faith continues to be the

²⁰ Thomas Watson. *A Body of Divinity*. <http://www.ccel.org/w/watson/divinity/cache/divinity.txt> [accessed April 12, 2005].

²¹ Thomas Watson. *The Beatitudes*. <http://www.ccel.org/w/watson/beatitudes/cache/beatitudes.txt> [accessed April 12, 2005].

secondary standards of confessional Presbyterians. The Divines wrote in the Confession of Faith 7.1-2,

The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant.

The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.²²

The Divines predicated the covenant of works on God's voluntary condescension.

However, once within this covenant, the promise of life is held out as the reward for perfect obedience. The Divines write in the Confession of Faith 19.1, 6,

God gave to Adam a law, as a covenant of works, by which he bound him and all his posterity to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience, promised life upon the fulfilling, and threatened death upon the breach of it, and endued him with power and ability to keep it.

Although true believers be not under the law, as a covenant of works, to be thereby justified, or condemned...²³

Although the term "merit" is not used by the divines in relation to the covenant of works, reference is made to the person under a covenant of works being justified or condemned by works. The substance of merit is present, although the term is noticeably absent. The Divines readily used the term to refer to Christ's work in their Larger Catechism answer 55,

Christ maketh intercession, by his appearing in our nature continually before the Father in heaven, in the merit of his

²² *The Westminster Standards*. Great Commission: Suwanee, 2001. p.10.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.20-1.

obedience and sacrifice on earth, declaring his will to have it applied to all believers...²⁴

It is noteworthy that the Divines readily refer to Christ's merit, while refraining from doing the same with regards to Adam in the covenant of works. Doubtless, some of the commissioners were uncomfortable with the language of merit in the covenant of works, however the substance of merit is present within the confession's language though the term is absent.

Francis Turretin (1623-1687)

Francis Turretin, who chaired the philosophy department at the Geneva Academy was a brilliant theologian. The influence of his works can not be easily overestimated. R.S. Clark writes, "Francis Turretin is most famous for his *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (1679-85) which was the theology text for Princeton Seminary until Charles Hodge wrote his own system in English."²⁵ Turretin was not only influential in his day, he continues to influence today's theologians through his *Institutes*. Turretin provides his definition for merit, writing,

That the doctrine of the merits of works may be more clearly held, we must premise a few things concerning the word "merit" and the verb "meriting," from which a decision concerning the thing itself can be more easily arrived at. II. The word "merit" is used in two ways: either broadly and improperly; or strictly and properly. Strictly, it denotes that work to which a reward is due from justice on account of its intrinsic value and worth. But it is often used broadly for the consecution of any thing. In this sense, the verb "to merit" is often by the fathers put for "to gain," "to obtain," "to attain."²⁶

²⁴ Ibid., p.42.

²⁵ Scott Clark. *A Brief History of Covenant Theology*. http://public.csusm.edu/guests/rsclark/History_Covenant_Theology.htm [accessed 4/15/05].

²⁶ Francis Turretin. *Institutes of Elenctic Theology vol 2*. P&R: Phillipsburg, 1992. p.710.

Such a careful distinction in the use of the term “merit” shows careful systematic thought on Turretin’s part. If only present day theologians would be so careful in their use of terms. He recognizes the importance of the covenant in providing the framework in which merit can be spoken of. He writes,

If therefore upright man in that state had obtained this merit, it must not be understood properly and rigorously. Since man has all things from an owes all to God, he can seek from him nothing as his own by right, nor can God be a debtor to him—not by condignity of work and from its intrinsic value (because whatever that may be, it can bear no proportion to the infinite reward of life), but from the pact and the liberal promise of God (according to which man had the right of demanding the reward to which God had of his own accord bound himself) and in comparison with the covenant of grace (which rests upon the sole merit of Christ, by which he acquired for us the right to life). However, this demanded antecedently a proper and personal obedience by which he obtained both his own justification before God and life, as the stipulated reward of his labors.²⁷

It is only within the covenant that God can be a debtor to man. God makes himself a debtor to Adam. Within this framework merit can be postulated. However, Turretin maintains his distinction between proper and improper merit. He writes,

Thus Adam himself, if he had persevered, would not have merited life in strict justice, although (through a certain condescension [*synchatabasin*]) God promised him by a covenant life under the condition of perfect obedience (which is called meritorious from that covenant in a broader sense because it ought to have been, as it were, the foundation and meritorious cause in view of which God had adjudged life to him).²⁸

Turretin affirms Adam’s ability to merit life in the covenant, however this is only possible because of the covenant. It would be impossible for Adam to merit life from

²⁷ Ibid., vol 1., p.578.

²⁸ Ibid., vol 2., p.712.

God otherwise. Turretin shows how it is through Christ's merit that this life comes to the elect,

... since Christ died that through him we might recover what we lost in Adam and merited for us eternal life, it is necessary that it should have been lost for us in Adam and that Adam would have attained it, if he had persevered in obedience. Nor would Christ be called the tree of life, if he had not restored that life to us whose promise this tree sealed to our first parents.²⁹

Turretin affirms merit for Christ unreservedly. However, for Adam, merit is contingent upon the covenant of works where God condescended to make himself man's debtor upon fulfillment of his perfect obedience according to its terms. Turretin teaches the doctrine of merit for both Christ and Adam given the proper covenantal context and precise definition of the term.

Stephen Charnock (1628-1680)

Charnock wrote a great deal on the covenants and set forth his views clearly enough that one need not have to figure them out by implication. He affirms merit with Christ but places the primary emphasis on the covenant of redemption which was initiated by God's grace. He writes,

Though the satisfaction of Christ derives not its virtue of meriting from the grace of God, yet it derives its acceptation from the grace of God. The grace of God, and the merit of Christ, relate to one another as the cause and the effect, the antecedent and the consequent. The merit of Christ is the cause of our actual favour with God, but the merit of Christ is not the first spring of it; for it is subordinate to the general grace of God, which orders it as a means of that reconciliation which he purposed in himself.³⁰

²⁹ Ibid., vol 1., p.584

³⁰ Stephen Charnock. *A Discourse of God's being the Reconciliation.*

<http://www.ccel.org/c/charnock/reconcil/reconciliation.html> [accessed 4/12/05].

Charnock stakes everything upon the covenant. It is the basis for Christ's merit. Had there been no covenant, Christ's work would not have been efficacious to sinners. It is only within the covenantal structure that such a concept can be conceived.

Covenanted merit is a work done which does not in its own nature oblige, but by virtue of some preceding compact and agreement between the person meriting and that person of whom he does merit....If we speak of a covenant merit, Christ did fully merit at the hands of God eternal salvation, for he fully performed what was agreed upon; but if we speak of absolute merit, neither Christ nor any creature could merit anything at the hands of God, or render God obliged to them by a natural right, no more than any man that runs a race can oblige a king by his swiftness.³¹

This has pastoral implications for Charnock. It is not just a theological construction by which we can classify the works of God. He encourages his readers, saying,

Fly to this covenant of redemption, as well as to the covenant of grace, since that is the foundation of this. All other considerations of Christ's death, merit, and everything stored up in Christ, can give us little hope, unless we consider this covenant.³²

Looking to Christ's merit apart from the covenant in which it is brought forth is fruitless. It is from here that he launches into a miniature sermon on the wonders of God's grace as the Christian's refuge in times of difficulty. At a later point, he fleshes out the relationship of God's grace in making the covenant with Christ, and Christ's merit earned within the covenant, writing,

Though our justification, sanctification, and eternal blessedness be the fruits of the meritorious death of the Redeemer, yet the first source of all, in his mission and commission, was absolutely from the inconceivable love of God; whatsoever is merited by Christ for us, his first mission was not merited by himself; his personal relation to

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

God rendered him fit for the honour and office of a mediator, but as mediator he did not merit his own sending into the world, because he was settled mediator by God, and sent, too, before he could as mediator merit. Christ did not die to render God compassionate to us, but to open the passage for his bowels to flow down upon us, with the honour of his justice.³³

Although readily forthcoming in praising Christ's merit for the elect, Charnock is less willing to address the issue of Adam's ability to merit reward from God in the covenant of works. He does teach a covenant of works and believes that had Adam continued in his perfect obedience that he would've been given the promised reward.

The state believers have by this reconciliation is far happier than that Adam had in innocence. It is likely had he persisted in it some time, he might have been confirmed in that state; but how long time he might have lived in that mutable condition, and whether, if he had persisted, he would have enjoyed such a degree of glory, is not upon record. God was in Adam making a covenant of works, he is in Christ making a covenant of peace.³⁴

Charnock is not willing to address the hypothetical. He provides no comparison of Adam and Christ as covenant heads. He does, however, write of a contrast between Adam's hypothetical fulfillment of the covenant of works and Christ's actual fulfillment of the covenant of redemption, "As God in Adam had conveyed a natural righteousness to his posterity, had Adam stood, so God in Christ only conveys a spiritual righteousness to Christ's spiritual offspring."³⁵ It can be assumed from this comment that Charnock did not see Christ as bringing about the fulfillment of what was promised in Adam. Rather what was promised to Christ was something different and far better. Charnock does not discuss Adam's possible merit, however he does not rule it out either. Given his

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

unwillingness to view Christ's covenant with the Father in terms of justice, it is not likely that he would approve of Adam's possibility to merit, at least not without extensive qualifications.

Herman Witsius (1636-1708)

One could not very well undertake to examine the Puritan views on merit in a covenantal context without noting the words of Herman Witsius in his influential two volume work *The Economy of the Covenants Between God & Man*. Witsius is very thorough in his exposition of the covenants, and offers a detailed treatment of the covenant of works.

Concerning this covenant, he writes,

Such a perfect observance of the laws of the covenant, quite to the period which God had fixed for probation, had given man a right to the reward. Not from any intrinsic proportion of the work to the reward, as the grosser Papists proudly boast; but from God's covenant, and engagement, which was no ways unbecoming him to enter into. Nor had man, before the consummation of his obedience, even in the state of innocence, a right to life. He was only in a state of acquiring a right; which would at length be actually acquired, when he could say, I have fulfilled the conditions of the covenant, I have constantly and perfectly done what was commanded; now I claim and expect that thou my God will grant the promised happiness."³⁶

³⁶ Herman Witsius. *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man*. den Dulk: Kingsburg, 1990. p.70.

Witsius also writes, "Here we are to observe a remarkable difference between *the promises of the covenant of works*, and those of *the covenant of grace*. The same eternal life is promised in both, which can be but one, consisting in the communion and enjoyment of God; but it is promised in a manner quite different in the one, from what it is in the other. In the covenant of works God promised life to man, on condition of perfect obedience, but he did not promise to produce, or effect this obedience in man. In the covenant of grace he not only promises life eternal, but also at the same time faith and repentance, and perseverance in holiness, without which life cannot be attained, and which being granted, life cannot but be obtained. And even in this sense it may be said that the covenant, of which Christ is the Mediator, is " more excellent, and established on better promises," Heb. viii. 6; because it does not depend on any uncertain condition, but is founded on the suretyship and actual satisfaction of Christ, does infallibly secure salvation to the believer, and as certainly promise faith to the Elect." *Ibid.*, p.284.

Witsius affirms the promised reward upon condition of perfect obedience, otherwise known as the works principle. However, he notes a disparity between the work and the reward. He focuses on the covenant terms as the means by which such great reward could be held out for Adam's work. The merit of perfect obedience is the only way to fulfill the covenant of works. Witsius writes,

But if this righteousness had not been sacred and inviolable, Christ would have been under no necessity to submit to the covenant of the law, in order to merit eternal life for his people. This therefore is evident, that there ought to be a merit of perfect obedience on which a right to eternal life may be founded. Nor is it material whether that perfect obedience be performed by man himself, or by his surety.³⁷

He is clear that ontologically, the creature can never on its own merit a reward from the creator.³⁸ Rather, it is only because God entered into covenant with man that he can then by fulfilling the terms of the covenant, merit eternal life, and claim it from God as his just reward.³⁹ For Witsius, Adam in the covenant of works was able to merit eternal life.

Although he expressly states that this only exists within the covenant which God benevolently entered into. So also does Christ merit for his elect eternal life in his perfect covenant keeping.⁴⁰

³⁷ Ibid., p.158.

Witsius also writes, "I therefore conclude, that to Adam, in the covenant of works, was promised the same eternal life, to be obtained by the righteousness which is of the law, of which believers are made partakers through Christ." Ibid., p.75

³⁸ "And first, I lay this down as an acknowledged truth, that God owes nothing to his creature. By no claim, no law is he bound to reward it. For all that the creature is, it owes entirely to God; both be cause he created it, and also, be cause he is infinitely exalted above it. But where there is so great a disparity, there is no common standard of right, by which the superior in dignity, can become under an obligation to give any reward, Rom. xi. 35, 36." Ibid., p.76.

³⁹ "For if God now conferred upon him such things while here, before the course of his appointed trial was finished; what might he not, nay, what ought he not to promise himself from that immense munificence, after he had acted his part well, when he had acquired a right to come with boldness to his rewarder, and ask for his most ample recompence?" Ibid., p.107

⁴⁰ "He therefore only engaged for these, according to the will of the Father: took their sins upon him, carried them on his heart, when he offered himself to the Father; claims them as his peculiar property, in

Thomas Boston (1676-1732)

Thomas Boston affirmed the federal headship of Christ and Adam referring to them as “public persons,” and taught a covenant of works in the garden. He posited this covenant as originating from God’s condescension by which he bound himself to the man through his covenant promise. Boston writes,

His admirable condescension, in stooping to make a covenant with his own creature. It is true he was a holy creature, yet he was but a creature. What God might have exacted of him by mere authority, he is pleased to require by compact, so making himself debtor to man upon man’s obedience, which without a covenant he could not have been.⁴¹

God voluntarily made himself a debtor to Adam’s fulfillment of the covenant of works.⁴²

Thus God bound himself to reward man’s obedience. However, Boston was not in favor of the language of absolute merit in the covenant of works.

...Adam’s innocent works could not have properly merited at God’s hand, Rom xi. 35, “Who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again?” *They could have only merited improperly, by virtue of compact, not by the intrinsic worth of the thing.* Here,

[1.] The continuation of life to Adam, even while he continued obedient, was entirely due to the covenant God was pleased to make with him. And *here was grace even in the covenant of works*, that God was pleased by promise to secure the continuance of man’s being, while he continued obedient.

virtue of his merit, according to agreement, challenges them for his own, and will, at length in due time, present them holy and glorious to his Father, saying, “behold I, and the children which God hath given me,” Heb. ii. 13.” Ibid., p.268.

“And this is the way; either that men shall obtain the salvation of God by a most personal obedience, as proposed to Adam in innocence, which is now impossible for the sinner; or, that sinful man be converted, and united by faith to Christ, then examine himself whether he be in the faith, and in Christ, which being discovered, he may then indeed glory and exult in God his Savior...” Ibid., p.156

⁴¹ Thomas Boston. *The Complete Works of the Late Rev. Thomas Boston Vol. 11.* William Tegg & Co.: London, 1854. p. 184.

⁴² Boston writes, “The Lord’s making over to him a benefit by way of a conditional promise, which made the benefit a debt upon the performing of the condition.” Ibid., p.178

[2.] The right that Adam could have pled to eternal life in heaven, by virtue of his obedience, was entirely founded on the covenant. If God had not revealed to him the promise of it, he could not have known that he should have had it, nor could he have demanded it. The natural law had no such promise. And *here was more grace in the covenant of works.*⁴³ (italics added for emphasis)

He shies away from strict merit and proposes an improper merit. This is merit given only on the basis of the covenant and not on the basis of the worth of the action itself. Boston also clearly refers to the operation of grace in the covenant of works. However it is important to contemplate what he means by grace. He is not referring to God's grace towards sinful man as expressed in the covenant of grace. Rather, he is referring to God's goodness and benevolence toward his created son whereby he promised him life upon condition of perfect obedience. That this is what he means is clear when he writes,

His abundant goodness, in annexing such a great reward to man's service, which it could never merit; Heb xi. 6, "He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him." Here was a full fountain of goodness opened afresh, after he had let out signal goodness to man in his creation and settlement in the world, after all appears a method how to make him eternally happy in another and better world.⁴⁴

Boston does not differ greatly in the substance of his teaching on merit from those who proceeded him, although he emphasizes God's benevolent condescension. He clearly teaches Christ's merit, writing,

...faith founding its plea on Christ's merit, urges God's covenant and promise made thereupon; Psalm lxxiv. 20, his glorious perfections shining in the face of Jesus, the honour of his name manifested in Christ.⁴⁵

⁴³ Ibid., p.207

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.184

⁴⁵ Ibid., p.91

Moreover, when speaking of faith he says, "...it is founded on a word of God, and the merit of Christ."⁴⁶ Boston was influenced by Edward Fisher's *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, so much so that an edition was published containing Boston's notes on the work in which he writes,

And the truth is, that the terms in which this demand stands here conceived, are so very agreeable to the style and language of the covenant of works expressed in these texts, and elsewhere, that the law, without receding in the least from the propriety of expression, might have addressed innocent Adam, in the very same terms; changing only the word salvation into life, because he was not yet miserable; and so saying to him, Good works must be done, and the commandments must be kept, if thou wilt obtain life. What impropriety there could have been in this saying, while as yet there was no covenant known in the world, but the covenant of works, I see not. Even innocent Adam was not, by his works, to obtain life, in the way of proper merit; but in virtue of compact only.⁴⁷

Boston affirms the language of merit, however with the caveat that in the covenant of works it was not proper merit in view, but merit in virtue only of the terms of the covenant to which God condescended to enter into.

James Buchanan (1804-1870)

James Buchanan, in his tome on justification, has a good deal to say about merit. He prefers to refer to the prelapsarian covenant with Adam as the "covenant of life" rather than the "covenant of works." Whether one refers to it as the covenant of life, works, or nature, is not of great import. It boils down to how they spell out this covenant.

Buchanan writes,

⁴⁶ Ibid., p.66

⁴⁷ Edward Fisher. *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*. Westminster Discount Book Service: Scarsdale. p. 164-5

In this form, the law continued to be binding on man by its precept, but God condescended, also, to bind Himself by His promise, and became, in the expressive words of Boston, ‘debtor to His own faithfulness’ to make that promise good. A new element was thus introduced into man’s relation to God: he was still a creature dependent on the power, and subject to the law, of his Creator; but he was now advanced to be a ‘confederate’ with Him, and, as long as he continued to obey, could look to Him as his covenant God.⁴⁸

As has been seen in the men before, Buchanan sees God’s covenant making activity as a benevolent condescension. However, the terms of the covenant are firm. So much so that God binds himself to man to make himself a debtor to his own promise. Buchanan set forth an advanced doctrine of federal headship. He writes concerning Adam,

He was constituted, by divine appointment, the trustee for the whole race which should spring from him; and was placed in the deeply responsible position of their covenant head, and legal representative.⁴⁹

Commenting on the law, he writes, “...as a revealed covenant of life, it was imposed on Adam as the representative of his race, and made them dependent, for good or evil, on his conduct as their federal head.”⁵⁰ Adam’s actions as a federal head are imputed to all mankind whether for good or evil, life or death. Commenting on Paul’s words concerning works, Buchanan writes,

Such being ‘the law,’ and such ‘the works,’ of which the Apostle speaks, it is necessary to consider the design and object of his argument. It can scarcely be supposed—that he intended to prove, that men cannot be justified by works which are evil and sinful; for this is self-evident, and could scarcely need to be proved;—nor can it be supposed he intended to prove, that men cannot be justified by works which are good and perfect; for that is untrue, and could scarcely be affirmed in opposition to the terms of the first

⁴⁸ James Buchanan. *Justification*. Banner of Truth: Carlisle, 1997. p. 272-3

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.273

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.275-6

covenant of life, or to our lord's own reference to these terms, when He said to the Pharisee, 'Thou has answered right: this do, and thou shalt live.'⁵¹

A justification by works is thus set forth within the covenant of life (works). It is the Federal Head's duty to keep the covenant by perfect obedience in order to merit the promised reward. Buchanan sees a remarkable parity between Adam and Christ in this regard. He writes,

We find, again, that in all the three cases, imputation, whether of sin or of righteousness, is founded on a federal relation subsisting between one and many,—for Adam was constituted the head and representative of his race, and Christ the substitute and surety of His people; and that this relation may be fitly described as amounting to a union between them, in virtue of which they are regarded and treated as being, in some respects, one; but that this union is not such as to destroy the distinction between their respective personalities, or to confound their several acts: for it is still true, that the representative was personally different from those whom he represented, and that his obedience, or disobedience, was his own act, and not theirs, although it is imputed to them; for 'a union of representation is not a union of identity.'⁵²

Buchanan's views on federal headship are more developed than his predecessors. However, he continues in the Reformed tradition in his strong affirmation of federal theology. He strongly affirmed Christ's meritorious work, and clearly understood himself as being in line with the Puritan tradition preceding him.⁵³ Buchanan did not use the term "merit" when speaking of Adam in the covenant of works, but the concept of

⁵¹ Ibid., p.351

⁵² Ibid., p.325

⁵³ Buchanan writes, "Such writers as Owen, and Goodwin, and Charnock, and Howe, and Trail adhered firmly to the doctrine of Justification as proclaimed by Luther and Calvin, while they checked every tendency to Antinomian license by the firm assertion of the indispensable necessity of personal holiness as one of the essential part of the great salvation, and by the full and masterly exposition which they were honoured to give of the office and work of the Holy Spirit. (7) These great and good men taught that the good works of believers were really acceptable to God and agreeable to the divine will, while yet, being imperfect and defiled by much remaining sin, they could form no part of the ground of Justification, but were themselves accepted through the only merit of Christ." Ibid., p.363

Adam's perfect obedience being the cause of the reward by God's justice is clearly present. The substance of merit is present, although the term is lacking.

Conclusion

A variety of views has been seen among those in the Puritan tradition. Most of those surveyed affirmed the language of merit as long as it be within the covenant of works. However, Watson and Charnock are examples of diversity within the Puritan tradition. They did not believe Adam could merit anything from God, even within the bounds of the covenant of works. It is the language of voluntary condescension that is repeated over and over by the Puritans which provides the context of this covenant. Those today who disagree with Adam's possibility to merit life have historical precedent in the Puritan tradition, even if it be in the minority. However, none of the Puritans surveyed would ever deny the merit of Christ's righteousness. For them, to do so would be outrageous. Moreover, confessional Presbyterians must seriously struggle with this issue in that the Westminster Confession clearly refers to Christ's merit, and sets forth the covenant of works with Adam although failing to use the term merit in that instance. Granted, the value of such a broad historical survey on a narrow topic is of limited value. It lacks the authority that an exegetically based study would carry. However our theology is never formed in a vacuum. It is always influenced by a history of interpretation of which we are a part. May the theologians of today continue to wrestle with these issues with both eyes on God's Word while ever having an ear attentive to the voices of the past who have wrestled with these same issues long ago. May wisdom be prayed for and granted for God's glory in all things. May we all keep trusting in Christ's

meritorious work on behalf of his bride whom he saved from sure damnation in the death merited by Adam.

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