



CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: Getting Oriented toward Nature and Grace

God made humanity for fellowship with himself in this life and the next. Westminster Shorter Catechism 1 reminds us of a profound truth: ‘Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.’¹ *Forever* waits before us all, beckoning us to desire the best experience of everlasting life. That best prospect is living in God’s glorious presence as those *welcomed* to enjoy him. We are meant to be near to God in blessed communion: ‘Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, that I may tell of all your works’ (Ps. 73:25, 28). Nonetheless, only those who have received Christ are given ‘the right to become the children of God’ (John 1:12). Thus, a fate without the familial *enjoyment* of God’s glory rests before sinners who have not trusted Jesus for salvation. Life’s overwhelming question for every human being then ought to be: How can I reach the everlasting, highest enjoyment of God?

This book is about how God fashioned us for fellowship with himself from our very creation. God wove our very being together in such a way that we are intrinsically related to him, specifically as those who bear his own image (Gen. 1:27). We are fundamentally religious creatures who cannot escape a relationship with God. Moreover, God also crafted our

1. Philip Schaff (ed.), *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3 vol. (New York, NY: Harper and Brothers, 1877), 3:676.

nature with the inbuilt potential to advance to higher, deeper fellowship with him in the everlasting state. He built eschatology into creation itself, meaning that despite how good and wonderful creation was at the outset, God had even more blessedness in store for us in the new heavens and new earth. In this vein, Geerhardus Vos has famously summarized the biblical-theological shape of these dogmatic categories, writing, ‘the eschatological appears as predeterminative [for] both the substance and form of the soteriological.’² As we hope for the everlasting blessed enjoyment of God because of our salvation, God fixed that blessed end into our nature as he created us and before we sinned and needed saving.

Creation’s relation to eschatology does bear fruit in our soteriology. Although Adam sinned and plunged us all into death and misery, Jesus Christ restores that hope of blessed enjoyment of God’s presence to us as we take hold of him by faith. Westminster Larger Catechism 39 affirms that our mediator for salvation had to be man, among other reasons, ‘that he might advance our nature.’³ That advance occurred as Christ rose from the grave in glorified life (1 Cor. 15:20-23, 35-49). Since Jesus advanced our nature in himself at his resurrection, we will personally experience that advance when he raises us to join him in glorified life (Rom. 8:16-21, 29-30). The true, full sense of the advancing or elevating of human nature applies to our glorification at the resurrection. In salvation, Christ secures for us that eschatological advancement to which we already were oriented by creation.

What is the connection between creation and eschatology? What is the relationship among our created, fallen, and consummate states? How can we reach that new creation condition? Do the principles by which we reach that consummate state differ in any way from those by which God offered consummate life to Adam before the fall? This book probes these questions, seeking to establish what we ought to believe about how God made Adam in original righteousness, offered him – acting

2. Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1930; repr. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1994), 60; Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1948; repr. East Peoria, IL: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2020), 140.

3. John R. Bower, *The Larger Catechism: A Critical Text and Introduction* (Principal Documents of the Westminster Assembly; Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 73. Thanks to Ryan McGraw for his comments that made obvious my need to spell out this point more fully.

on behalf of us all – the prospect of highest blessedness in even greater communion, and used a covenant to connect original righteousness to the hope of eschatological fellowship in the new creation. Since God ‘has put eternity into man’s heart,’ showing how he fashioned us by our very creation to desire and to obtain consummate communion with him (Eccles. 3:11), how do we attain that end?

This book argues that God forged the covenant to our nature thereby connecting our eschatological destiny to the means to reach it. The covenant conjoins our natural orientation toward eschatological communion with God and our capacity as his image bearers for loving and reflecting him by obeying him with the way to realize that desire by acting upon that very design. Respectively, we recognize the distinction of how God *oriented* and *ordered* us toward an eschatological end. On the one hand, God *oriented* us by creation toward eschatological communion with him by tailoring our nature so that we have our ultimate resting point in consummate, glorified fellowship with God in the new creation. On the other hand, God *ordered* us toward that eschatological end by covenant, meaning that the covenant bound our nature’s native principles to terms that enabled us to attain the end for which we are made.⁴ Thus, God’s work of special creation naturally oriented us to that prospect of eschatological reward while his simultaneous judicial act of special providence to covenant with Adam ordered us to that end.⁵ God’s covenant with Adam then encompassed our natural propensity for God in order to provide terms for obtaining it.

This connection then bears direct fruit upon how we construe protology in relation to soteriology with a specific connection to the law-gospel distinction.⁶ More precisely, Adam’s original righteousness, which was natural to him by creation, came with the demand for perfect

4. Concerning technical considerations for the category of ‘order,’ see Bernard Wuellner, SJ, *Dictionary of Scholastic Philosophy* (Milwaukee, MN: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1956), 85.

5. As argued and applied more fully in chapter six, the terminological distinction between the *work* of creation and the *act* of special providence reflects the language of Westminster Shorter Catechism 9–12; Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:677–78.

6. ‘Protology’ refers to the study of first things, making it the other end of the redemptive historical spectrum from eschatology. It includes distinct consideration of the constitution, function, and purposes of creation as God made it before sin entered the picture.

obedience. By the covenant, God's offer of the reward of eschatological life accompanied that demand. As further argued, this structure was a situation of *covenantal merit*, helping Reformed theology uphold the integrity of humanity's original creation, truly differentiate our created and fallen conditions, defend the freeness of grace in justification by Christ's work alone, and make room for a robust doctrine of sanctification as our present experience of exclusively grace-based salvation.

This argument reflects upon what it means to bear God's image. We will reckon with how bearing the divine likeness entails a natural righteousness. Furthermore, God built an eschatological potential into our very nature as he made us, focusing our existence upon a higher state of fellowship with him, everlastingly confirmed in true righteousness. God's covenant with Adam, which should not be radically separated or disjointed from our created nature, was how he met us in the way that he made us as his image-bearing creatures. In this manner, he provided the method for how a creature, who intrinsically (*realiter*) could never place God in his debt, can obtain that eschatological blessedness.⁷ In this manner, our argument is a defense of the law-gospel distinction, covenantally understood, from the vantage of the *imago Dei*.

From the outset, we should mark how these truths display God's rich love for his creatures. Humanity is blessed to bear God's image, thus being uniquely fit for special relationship with God. Amidst God's true care for all his earthly creatures, he forged humanity alone for a destiny

7. This study distinguishes 'inherence' and 'intrinsic' precisely to keep in view the issue of contingency related to the notion of *realiter*. If something has *realiter* status, it cannot be otherwise in an absolute sense – which is why older theologians denied that we have a 'real' relation to God, since we are contingent beings rather than beings related *realiter* to the divine essence. Respectively, *inherence* means 'existence in another being as in a subject of being or as modification of another being.' Particularly the last aspect of this definition shows how something can inhere in a subject without being *sine qua non* part of it. On the other hand, especially as we consider these issues, *intrinsic* means 'pertaining to the nature of a thing or person; constitutive.' In other words, intrinsic involves a *sine qua non* aspect and contributes essentially to the nature of a particular thing; Wuellner, *Dictionary of Scholastic Philosophy*, 61, 64. Regarding the issue above, the point of *intrinsic* is that human beings do not have the right before God to deserve a reward that constitutes what it means to be human – or even more what it means to be God – as such. The covenant of works as related to our natural capacities for supernatural realities can be said to have given Adam an inherent right, although it could in fact be modified, namely by sin in breaking the covenant of works. Some versions of Roman pure nature theology confuse this issue so that merit remains possible for sinners, meaning that this view casts the standing to deserve reward as intrinsic.

of everlasting enjoyment of his beauty. As God's creatures, our obedience to him was by nature always the way that we needed to express our love to our Maker. In his infinite love, God wove the prospect of even higher reward into our natural obligation to show us that he made us to know his kindness, care, love, and tenderness, displaying his generosity in that even as he made us as most blessed among his creatures, our abounding God is inexhaustible in how much blessing he can pour upon his people so that it seems that he could always outgive what he has already given. By this book's end, we will see how God's covenant with Adam manifests the Lord's deep love for humanity both in the nature of that covenant itself and in how it informs our understanding of how God saves sinners in the gospel covenant he made after Adam's fall.⁸

Charting the Course: The Aim and Outline

Retrieval dominates the landscape of theological discourse in contemporary discussions. Rightly so, since much of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries saw Christian theology lose its moorings concerning even some of our most important doctrines, such as the Trinity.⁹ Doctrinal formulation always needs a strong dose of historical theology, a reminder of our theological grammar from ages past, and a reconnection to the nourishing roots of our confessional heritage.¹⁰ True retrieval, however, must be far richer than finding quotes from the past that support our present position. Lifting a particular phrasing, even if recurring, from some early-modern sources does not count as retrieval but amounts to superficial proof-texting. In this regard, true retrieval involves understanding doctrines not simply in sound-bite quotes but within the context of doctrinal development across the centuries.

This book aims at systematic-theological construction through the lens of historical retrieval, focusing on precisely formulating the doctrine of the covenant of works. Westminster Confession 7.2 outlines this doctrine: "The first Covenant made with Man, was a Covenant of Works,

8. Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, trans. Bartel Elshout, ed. Joel R. Beeke, 4 vol. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1992), 1:355.

9. Matthew Barrett, *Simply Trinity: The Unmanipulated Father, Son, and Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2021), 17-94.

10. J. V. Fesko, *The Need for Creeds Today: Confessional Faith in a Faithless Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020).

wherein Life was promised to Adam, and in him to his Posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.¹¹ Given that we had no claim to demand anything from God in our position as simple creatures, God's covenant with Adam joined the prospect of blessed reward to our obligation to obey our Maker. The condition of this covenant was the law's demand for perfect obedience. Although some Reformed theologians have thought otherwise, the best way to understand Adam's potential reward is as the prospect of heavenly, eschatological, glorified life.¹² The covenant of works was then our original condition before God, prior to sin, wherein we were naturally oriented to supernatural, that is eschatological, communion with God and ordered to obtain that end by virtue of our covenant relationship with him.

Adam's breach of the covenant of works did not make it irrelevant. It has tremendous categorical significance within the full system of Reformed theology. In the early-modern period, Reformed theologians introduced the distinction between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace to express categorically *and* redemptive-historically their view of the law-gospel distinction, the unity of salvation across the Testaments, and Christ's centrality in God's plan of redemption.¹³ Despite the characteristically Reformed terminology, the contents of the doctrine were highly traditional, packaging together concerns about Adam and original sin, the natural law, the role of works in relation to our right standing before God, and the basis on which we might relate to God for blessings.¹⁴ God's covenant with Adam was, therefore, based on

11. John R. Bower, *The Confession of Faith: A Critical Text and Introduction* (Principal Documents of the Westminster Assembly; Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2020), 204.

12. For the historical issues, see Mark A. Herzer, 'Adam's Reward: Heaven or Earth,' in Michael A.G. Haykin and Mark Jones (eds.), *Drawn into Controversie: Reformed Theological Diversity and Debates within Seventeenth-Century British Puritanism* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 162-82. For exegetical and theological defense of this position, see Harrison Perkins, *Reformed Covenant Theology: A Systematic Introduction* (Lexham Press, 2024), 56-75.

13. Concerning the historical development and decline of this doctrine, see J. V. Fesko, *The Covenant of Works: The Origins, Development, and Reception of the Doctrine* (Oxford Studies in Historical Theology; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020). For exegetical and theological considerations, see J. V. Fesko, *Adam and the Covenant of Works* (Fearn: Mentor, 2021).

14. For the argument that Reformed theology depended on ecumenical ideas in building the doctrine of the covenant of works, see Harrison Perkins, *Catholicity and the*

the law and on Adam's obedience in order to obtain reward, helping the Reformed to express how they differentiated Adam's ability before the fall from sinners' ability after the fall to obtain salvation by contributing works. In the former, Adam could earn blessings; in the latter, our works cannot contribute to our right standing with God in the slightest.

This book focuses on how to formulate our understanding of Adam's original righteousness, specifically his ability to keep God's law before the fall in relation to our explanation of how the covenant of works offered a reward to Adam. This focus clarifies our perception of how God made us as fundamentally religious creatures, fashioned for fellowship with him. The integrity of our original state and its connection to the covenant shows how God formed us in an inescapable relationship with him but also loved us enough to offer even greater experience of his blessed presence.

The connection between a doctrine of covenantal merit to the wider issue of our fundamental relationship to God may not be immediately obvious. As one historian of medieval theology contended, our understanding of merit helps measure our central theological and anthropological convictions, the severity of sin, and grace's role in how we relate to God.¹⁵ The relationship between our natural capacities as humans, especially before the fall and distinguished from our abilities as sinners, informs how we understand our very constitution.¹⁶ In other words, a proper understanding of our capacities in original righteousness, namely that ability to obtain eschatological life with God without any supplementing of our created nature, shows that our original nature was ordered to, and meant for, supernatural communion with God in eschatological life.

The underlying problem in this discussion is the issue of finding an adequate principle to explain why the Creator should recompense his creature, who *de facto* owes obedience to his Maker, with a reward of heavenly value. The question revolves around how no (even hypothetical) situation exists wherein a creature made in God's image is not obliged

Covenant of Works: James Ussher and the Reformed Tradition (Oxford Studies in Historical Theology; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020).

15. Joseph P. Wawrykow, *God's Grace and Human Action: 'Merit' in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), vi.

16. Wawrykow, *God's Grace and Human Action*, 64-65n12, 66n13.