

John Wesley's Amendment of Covenant Theology

WHAT WE KNOW OF John Wesley's covenant theology comes by way of the minutes of Conferences, the letters borne of controversy, counsel, and reflection, and the sermons, extracts, and journal entries comprising the Wesley corpus. These chronicle his encounter with the covenant theology instilled in the theological understanding of his companions, converts, and antagonists. One indicator of its status as the common currency of theological discourse is Wesley's confidence that his use of its technical terminology would be understood by his audience. And yet, as the opening paragraph of his sermon "The Righteousness of Faith" clearly demonstrates, he recognized that certain aspects of the covenant theology to which some of his audience subscribed bore the imprint of a covenant theology at odds at points with his own.

It is in piecing together the record of these encounters that Wesley's amendment of classic covenant theology comes to light and that we discover he was not a passive recipient of the covenant theology mediated to him. Instead, with theological precision he thoughtfully modified and revised what he had received. And what becomes clear upon close inspection of the evidence is that Wesley amended classic covenant theology at the level of its most basic component: the two covenants God has made with humanity—the covenant of works and the covenant of grace.

An exemplary case in point of this amendment may be found in his extract of *The New Covenant; or, the Saints' Portion*, a sermon by John Preston.¹ Expounding the phrase from God's declaration to Abram, "And I will make my covenant between me and thee" (17:2), Preston

1. Preston (1587–1628) was a Church of England clergyman, awakened under the preaching of the Puritan John Cotton and himself not infrequently accused of "puritanisme." Moore, "Preston, John (1587–1628)," *DNB* (<http://www.oxforddnb.com>).

provides a succinct description of the two covenants in terms consistent with classic covenant theology. His original wording was as follows:

You must know that there is a double *Couenant*, there is a *Couenant* of Works, and a *Couenant* of Grace: the *Couenant* of Workes runs in these termes, *Doe this, and thou shalt live*, and I will be thy God. This is the *Couenant* that was made with *Adam* and the *Couenant* that is expressed by Moses in the Morall Law, *Doe this, and live*. The second is the *Couenant* of Grace, and that runs in these termes, . . . *Thou shalt beleeeue, and take my Sonne, and accept of the gift of righteousness, and I will be thy God*. The difference between them you shall find, 2 Cor. 3. where you shall see 3. differences, . . .²

In his extract of Preston's work for *A Christian Library*, Wesley's additions and deletions to this paragraph are revealing:

You must know that there is a double covenant; 1. A covenant of works; and 2. A covenant of grace. The covenant of works runs in these terms, "Do this, and you shall live, and I will be thy God." This is the covenant that was made with Adam ~~and the covenant that is expressed by Moses in the Moral Law, "Do this and live"~~ *in paradise*. The covenant of grace runs in these terms, "You shall believe, and take my Son, and accept of the gift of righteousness, and I will be thy God." Between these two covenants you shall find a threefold difference, 2 Cor. 3.³

By adding the words "in paradise" and deleting "and the covenant that is expressed by Moses in the Moral Law, 'Do this and live,'" Wesley is addressing an element consistently present in classic (Puritan) covenant theology with which he fundamentally disagreed: the conflation of the Mosaic Law with the covenant made with Adam.⁴ The point is

2. Preston, *The new covenant*, 317–38.

3. Preston, "The New Covenant," *ACL* (Jackson), 6:31. Wesley's additions appear in italics; strike-through text indicates words and phrases deleted by Wesley.

4. It is difficult to assess the influence on Wesley of his reading of the covenant theology of Henry Hammond in *A Practical Catechism* and William Beveridge in *Thoughts on Private Religion*. Wesley read both works, Heitzenrater notes, while at Oxford. Heitzenrater, "John Wesley and the Oxford Methodists," 497, 506. In his *Catechism*, Hammond instructs his imaginary catechumen that "The Judiaccall law was not the first Covenant" for *that* covenant was "the law of unsinning perfect obedience made with Adam in innocency." However, Wesley specifically deletes from Preston the words Hammond next spoke to his catechumen: "The truth is, the Judiaccall law did represent unto us the first Covenant." Hammond, *A Practical Catechism*, 10. Wesley seems to have had a specific interest in clarifying the point. See the discussion below on the distinctiveness of Wes-

of sufficient importance that it prompts the addition of the following explanatory note inserted parenthetically into the extract at this very point:

In the passage of Scripture here referred to [2 Cor 3] the apostle is not contrasting the covenant of justice, or law of innocence, (termed not very properly the covenant of works,) made with man before the fall, and the covenant of grace made with man after the fall, but he is contrasting *the two last dispensations of the covenant of grace, the Mosaic and the Christian*, and showing, in a variety of particulars, the great superiority of the latter to the former.⁵

This point, in fact, is *so* important that it is pressed beyond Preston's reference to the Apostle Paul's discussion of covenant in the third chapter of 2 Corinthians:

And when, in the epistle to the Galatians, chap. iii. 10, he asserts that "as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse," he does not speak of the law given to our first parents before the fall, but wholly of the law of Moses, moral and ceremonial, signifying that as many as adhered to it, and confided in it for justification, rejecting the gospel, were under condemnation and wrath . . .⁶

Certainly, these distinctions indicate an important difference between classic covenant theology and the covenant theology operative in Wesley's theological thought. But what is at stake for Wesley? What does he gain or secure that warrants his taking such care to amend classic covenant theology on this point? There are, after all numerous points of correspondence between Wesley's covenant theology and classic covenant theology:

- a. The affirmation that God is a covenant-making God;
- b. The recognition of two covenants made with humanity (the covenant of works and the covenant of grace) and that the

ley's view of the perpetuity of the moral law.

5. Preston, "The New Covenant," *ACL* (Jackson), 6:31.

6. Ibid. It should be noted that while the changes to the text of Preston's sermon appear in the 50-volume first edition of *A Christian Library* [*ACL*, 10:81] published 1749–55, and in the edition published beginning in 1819, the extended explanatory note appears only in the later edition. Nevertheless, the extended clarification accurately reflects distinctions made by Wesley in his 1746 sermon, "The Righteousness of Faith," Wesley, *Works* (BE), 1:202–16.

inception of the covenant of grace may be traced to “the original promise made to [Adam] and his seed concerning the seed of the woman, who should ‘bruise the serpent’s head’” (Gen 3:15);⁷

- c. The insistence that gaining righteousness by works is impossible for fallen humanity;
- d. The concept of the double administration of the covenant of grace (one administration *before* Christ’s coming, another *since* his coming);
- e. The view that the administration of the covenant of grace before Christ’s coming was progressive in nature; and
- f. The declaration of the undiminished stature of the moral law and humanity’s amenability to it.

Yet, the correspondence on these points is not exact. This is not surprising. Given the incompatibility between Wesley’s evangelical Arminianism and the predestinarian template indigenous to covenant theology, some adaptation was inevitable. The question is, in what ways did Wesley amend covenant theology? The answer is discovered in surveying his understanding of the covenant of grace and his view of the perpetuity of the moral law.

The Covenant of Grace in Wesley’s Covenant Theology

If there is any point where Wesley’s amendment of the covenant theology mediated to him is most pronounced, it would be in the way in which the covenant of grace is conceived. This difference molds Wesley’s covenant theology into the form exemplified in his sermons, correspondence, and other publications and follows the fault line created by his rejection of the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination—and of double predestination, in particular. It is important to note, however, that his conception of the covenant of grace aligns fully with two firmly established tenets of covenant theology: first, the *foundation* of the covenant of grace is Christ by virtue of his mediation as “the lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Rev 13:8); and second, the *inauguration* of the covenant of grace is coincidental with the fall.

Of course, in the scheme of supralapsarian Calvinism everything flows from the divine decrees of election and reprobation. The covenant

7. Wesley, “The Righteousness of Faith,” *Works* (BE) §I.7, 1:206.

of grace is the means of executing the decree in behalf of the elect; the foundation undergirding this covenant, says Perkins, is "Christ Jesus, called of his father from all eternitie, to performe the office of the Mediator, that in him, all those which should be saved, might be chosen."⁸ This mediatorial work of Christ is a work on behalf of the elect of fallen humanity of *all* ages. Making this same point, Ames declares:

Now such a Mediator is not given, for one age onely but for yesterday, to day, and for ever. *Hebr.* 13.8. Jesus Christ yesterday, to day and is the same for ever: *Rev.* 13.8. The Lambe slain from the foundation of the World. Although he was only manifest in the fullnesse of time. *Col.* 1.27. *Tit.* 1.2. 1 *Pet.* 1.20. For this Meditation [*sic*] was equally necessary in all ages: Also, it was sufficient, and effectuall from the beginning, by virtue of God's decree, promises, and acceptation.⁹

Though John Deschner contends that Wesley did not subscribe to the distinction between *logos incarnandus* (Christ to be exhibited) and *logos incarnates* (Christ exhibited),¹⁰ the textual evidence convincingly argues otherwise. In his sermon, "The Original, Nature, Properties, and Use of the Law" Wesley declares:

But it was not long before man rebelled against God, . . . And yet God did not despise the work of his own hands; but *being reconciled to man through the Son of his love*, he in some measure re-inscribed the law on the heart of his dark, sinful creature. "He" again "showed thee, O man, what is good" (although not as in the beginning), . . . *And this he showed not only to our first parents, but likewise to all their posterity*, by "that true light which enlightens every man that cometh into the world."¹¹

8. Perkins, *The Golden Chaine* (1600), 24.

9. Ames, *The Marrow of Sacred Divinity*, 80–81. Note: pages in this edition of the work are numbered incorrectly. Page numbering shown here reflects the correct numbering.

10. Deschner, *Wesley's Christology*, 72–73. The terms, *logos incarnandus* and *logos incarnates* are Deschner's. In a footnote, Deschner argues that Wesley denies this distinction, rejecting the idea of a pact between Father and Son and refusing to speak of "the Lamb who was slain from the foundation of the world," *Ibid.*, 81–82. Certainly Deschner is correct in noting that Wesley rejected the idea of a prelapsarian pact between the Father and the Son. See Wesley's preface to his extract of John Goodwin's, *A Treatise on Justification*, 15–16. However, the textual evidence is overwhelming that Wesley held firmly to the fundamental conviction of covenant theology that Christ's mediation is from the time of the fall as "the lamb slain from the foundation of the world."

11. Wesley, *Works* (BE) §1.4–5, 2:7. Emphasis mine.

For Wesley as for his Calvinist counterparts, every provision of grace throughout all ages flows only and always from the reconciling work of Christ. This is evidenced, in his view, by the re-inscription of the moral law¹² (“that true light which enlightens every man that cometh into the world”) on the hearts of our “first parents” and “likewise to all their posterity.” In “The Righteousness of Faith” Wesley underscores this point in words reminiscent of Ames: “But it is the covenant of *grace* which God through Christ hath established with men in all ages (as well before, and under the Jewish dispensation, as since God was manifest in the flesh) . . .”¹³ Without feeling compelled to adopt “the horrible decree”¹⁴ as his starting point, Wesley clearly retains in his own theological thought this essential element of covenant theology: that the mediatorial work of Christ is from the foundation of the world.

There may be no more clear affirmation of this by Wesley than in his October 15, 1756 letter to James Hervey in which he critiques Hervey’s *Theron and Aspasio* published that same year. In a footnote Hervey contended that “the faithful *Jews* no more died under the Curse of the Law, than the faithful *Christians*.”¹⁵ Wesley cites a sentence from Hervey’s footnote and declares his unequivocal agreement with him on this point: “‘The *Death of Christ* procured the *Pardon and Acceptance* of Believers, even before He came in the Flesh.’ Yea, and ever since. In this we all agree.”¹⁶ While the foundation of the covenant of grace is “the lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Rev 13:8), the re-inscription of the law upon the hearts of “our first parents” clearly iterates the basic tenet of orthodox Reformed theology that the fall is the event that occasioned Christ’s mediation and initialized the covenant of grace. However, though Wesley also held this view, it is in relation to this very affirmation that his covenant theology begins to distinguish itself.

The point of divergence is Wesley’s conviction that not only is the *inauguration* of the covenant of grace coincidental with the fall, but so is the *termination* of the covenant of works. This conviction is of supreme importance for Wesley in facilitating an Arminian adaptation of

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid., 1:203. Emphasis mine. Wesley is in full agreement on this point with his friend turned antagonist, James Hervey: “Though he laid down his life in the Reign of *Tiberias*, He was a real Redeemer in *all Ages*.” Hervey, *Theron and Aspasio*, 1:74.

14. The phrase was Wesley’s epithet for the divine decrees of election and reprobation. See, for example, “Free Grace,” *Works* (BE) §26, 3:556; and n. 65.

15. Hervey, *Theron and Aspasio*, 1:74.

16. See Wesley’s preface in Goodwin, *A Treatise on Justification: Extracted from Mr. John Goodwin, by Mr. John Wesley*, 7.

covenant theology—first, by reconfiguring the *reach* of the covenant of grace; and second, by disallowing any notion that there is a reinvigoration of the covenant of works beyond the fall.

On the first point, whereas the covenant of grace is treated by the Puritan divines only in terms of its provisions for the *elect*, Wesley declares unequivocally that *all* the sons of Adam were and are under the covenant of grace: “And who ever was under the covenant of works? *None but Adam before the fall*. He was fully and properly under that covenant, which required perfect, universal obedience, as the one condition of acceptance, and left no place for pardon, upon the very least transgression. *But no man else was ever under this*, neither Jew nor Gentile, neither before Christ nor since.”¹⁷

This is nothing short of a declaration that the covenant of works, along with the provision of life attached to it, reached its terminus at the fall. And together with his view that the covenant of grace is the covenant “which God through Christ hath established with men in all ages,”¹⁸ it is certain to Wesley that at no time *since* the fall has the covenant of works defined the terms of relationship between God and humanity.¹⁹ The ramifications of this declaration are far-reaching and clearly signal Wesley’s amendment of the covenant theology of Perkins, Ames, and the Westminster Confession.

The second aspect of Wesley’s assertion that the covenant of works reached its terminus coincidental with the fall is his conviction that the Mosaic Law belongs fully and *only* to the covenant of grace; that is, the giving of the Law to Moses at Sinai signals *neither a continuation nor a reinvigoration of the covenant of works*. Wesley makes this point repeatedly in “The Righteousness of Faith,” arguing against any discontinuity between “the former” and “the latter” words spoken by Moses to Israel as highlighted by the Apostle Paul in Romans 10:5–8, the sermon’s text: “The Apostle does not here oppose the covenant given by Moses to the covenant given by Christ. . . . But it is the covenant of *grace* which God through Christ hath established with men in all ages.”²⁰

17. Wesley, “The Law Established Through Faith: Discourse I,” §II.3, *Works* (BE), 2:27. Emphasis mine. This echoes the affirmation of the 1746 Conference. See *Minutes*, 1746 (Jackson) Q.24, 8:289.

18. Wesley, “The Righteousness of Faith.” *Works* (BE) §I, 1:202–3.

19. See Wesley’s 1784 sermon, ‘On Patience,’ *Works* (BE) §10, 3:174–75.

20. Wesley, *Works* (BE) §I, 1:202–3. “The latter” refers to those words spoken by Moses to Israel at Moab as recorded in Deuteronomy 30:11–14; “the former” refers to Moses’ words to Israel at Horeb (Lev 18:5).

In making this point, Wesley is voicing his opposition to the notion that the words spoken by Moses at Moab were themselves “another covenant” rather than the covenant given at Mount Sinai in Horeb. Thomas Goodwin seems to have espoused such a view: “The apostle pertinently quotes the words of this last great sermon of Moses, to distinguish the covenant of works and the covenant of grace.”²¹ Wesley counters that, rather than arguing for a kind of synonymy between the Mosaic Law given at Sinai (in Horeb) and the covenant of works, the Apostle Paul references Moses’ words in illustrative fashion in order to connect *both* the former and the latter words with the covenant of grace and thereby to *contrast* them with the covenant of works.

Of course, in the view of classic covenant theology, treating the Mosaic Law as a continuation of the covenant of works did not detract from its function as an instrument of grace *for the elect*. Indeed, by means of the re-encounter with the covenant of works and the impossibility of meeting its demand of perfect obedience, the effect of the Mosaic Law on the elect was to incite them to “flie unto Christ” and thus to deliver them into the provisions of the covenant of grace. This, however, was not the effect upon the so-called non-elect. Rather, they are wholly and irrecoverably segregated from the covenant of grace having been sentenced by divine decree to miss the pedagogical purpose of the Mosaic Law (“to train us up for *Christ*”²²), and, consequently, sentenced to the impossibility of establishing a righteousness of their own. In Wesley’s view this is unacceptable because it obscures the fact that God’s redemptive initiative extends to *all* of humanity—a certainty secured by the fact that the Mosaic Law belongs fully and only to the covenant of grace:

[The Jews] were ignorant that “Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone that believeth”; that by the oblation of himself once offered he had put an end to the first law or covenant (*which indeed was not given by God to Moses, but to Adam in his state of innocence*), the strict tenor whereof, with-

21. Goodwin’s comment is cited by Guyse, *The Practical Expositor*, 486. Wesley also steers clear of Guyse’s own view that Moses explained the strict demands of the law “as a covenant of works” in contrast to “The language of the gospel-doctrine of justification through the righteousness of Christ, which is proposed to, and received by faith, as Moses himself also hinted.” Ibid. Wesley, however, does seem to agree with Guyse that Moses’ speech in Deut. 30 “speaks with an ultimate view to gospel-days.” Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the Old Testament*, 1:679.

22. Wesley, *ENNT*, 603. Wesley’s assessment of the ceremonial law does not always include an emphasis on its pedagogical value. See Wesley, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount,” *Works* (BE) §I.2, 1:551–52.

out any abatement, was, "Do this and live"; and at the same time purchased for us that better covenant, "Believe and live": "Believe and thou shalt be saved"; now saved both from the guilt and power of sin, and of consequence from the wages of it.²³

In this brief statement, Wesley notes once again that the law given to Moses is not to be confused with "the first law or covenant"—the covenant of works—given to Adam prior to the fall. Rather, the law given to Moses belongs wholly to "that better covenant," the covenant of grace. There is no mixing of the covenant of works with the covenant of grace.

Wesley substantiates this point by making use of two related but distinct affirmations—one from scripture, "Christ is the *end* of the law" (Rom 10:4); the other from the *Book of Common Prayer*, "that Christ by the oblation of himself once offered . . . had put an *end* to the first law or covenant."²⁴ His aim appears to be simply to underscore the fact that the covenant of works is no longer in force. For this purpose, he moves on from his passing reference to Romans 10:4 to explain that this end came about by Christ's sacrificial death which also served to effect the inception of the *only* covenant now in effect, the covenant of grace. Again, it must be emphasized that when Wesley speaks of Christ having "put an end to the first law or covenant," his declaration is based upon Christ's mediation as *logos incarnandus* (Christ to be exhibited), for "no man else was ever under [the covenant of works], neither Jew nor Gentile, neither *before* Christ" was manifested in the flesh (*logos incarnates*) "nor since."²⁵

That the termination of the covenant of works upon the occasion of the fall is a mainstay of Wesley's theological thought is underscored by its reappearance in the opening of pages of his *Farther Thoughts upon Christian Perfection* published in 1763. Both elements are again present: a) Christ as the end of the law, and b) the specific role of Christ's sacrificial death in bringing about that end. In answering the question of how Christ is the end of the law, Wesley responds,

In order to understand this you must understand what law is here spoken of; and this, I apprehend, is (1) the Mosaic law, the whole Mosaic dispensation, which Saint Paul continually speaks of as one, though containing three parts—the political, moral, and ceremonial; (2) the Adamic law, that given to Adam in innocence, properly called "the law of works." This is in sub-

23. "The Righteousness of Faith," Wesley, *Works* [BE] §3., 1:203. Emphasis mine.

24. "The Communion," *The Book of Common Prayer* (1732), np.

25. Wesley, "The Law Established through Faith: Discourse I," *Works* (BE) §II.3, 2:27.

stance the same with the angelic law, being common to angels and men. . . . But Adam fell; . . . consequently, no man is able to perform the service which the Adamic law requires. And no man is obliged to perform it. God does not require it of any man, for Christ is the end of the Adamic, as well as the Mosaic, law. By his death he hath put an end to both; he hath abolished both the one and the other, with regard to man; and the obligation to observe either the one or the other is vanished away. Nor is any man living bound to observe the Adamic any more than the Mosaic law.²⁶

What is significant about *this* explanation of Christ as “the end of the law” when compared to his statement in “The Righteousness of Faith,” is its expansion of his description of Christ’s law-terminating work. Christ is the end not only of the law given to Adam in his innocence but also of the Mosaic Law given subsequent to the fall. Admittedly, Wesley’s assertion that Christ, by his death, has put an end to *both* the Adamic and the Mosaic laws, at first glance seems to portray the Mosaic Law as on a par with the covenant of works. After all, upon Christ’s death, “the obligation to serve either the one or the other is vanished away.” Wesley, however, carefully avoids conflating the covenant of works with the Mosaic Law, and his covenant theology is profoundly shaped by his vigilance on this point—a vigilance stemming from his conception of the perpetuity of the moral law.

The Moral Law in Wesley’s Covenant Theology

It is true that Wesley clearly associated the moral law with the Mosaic Law, affirming that God “chose out of mankind a peculiar people, to whom he gave a more perfect knowledge of [the moral law]” and noting that “the heads of this, because they were slow of understanding, he wrote on two tables of stone.”²⁷ In this regard he stands shoulder to shoulder with both Perkins and Ames in acknowledging the Decalogue as the particular historical embodiment of the moral law.

Yet, while the moral law was indeed “contained in the Ten Commandments,”²⁸ Wesley also insisted that the moral law itself, while thus affixed to the Law given at Sinai, stood in transcendent relation-

26. Wesley, *Farther Thoughts Upon Christian Perfection*, 3–4.

27. Wesley, “The Original, Nature, Properties, and Use of the Law,” *Works* (BE) §I.5, 2:7–8.

28. Wesley, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, V,” *Works* (BE) §I.2, 1:551–52.

ship to it. The moral law, he declares, “is not, as some may possibly have imagined, of so late an institution as the time of Moses.”²⁹ Wesley asserted, “[The moral law] was from the beginning of the world, being ‘written not on tables of stone’ but on the hearts of all the children of men when they came out of the hands of the Creator.”³⁰ Continuing the previous sentence, he declared, “Every part of this law must remain in force, upon all mankind, and in all ages; as not depending either on time or place, or any other circumstances liable to change, but on the nature of God and the nature of man, and their unchangeable relation to each other.”³¹ This very point is emphasized in the deliberations of the 1746 Conference as well:

Q. 24. But do you consider, that we are under the covenant of grace, and that the covenant of works is now abolished?

A. All mankind were under the covenant of grace, from the very hour that the original promise was made. If by the covenant of works you mean, that of unsinning obedience made with Adam before the fall, no man but Adam was ever under that covenant; for it was abolished before Cain was born. Yet it is not so abolished, but that it will stand, in a measure, even to the end of the world; that is, If we “do this,” we shall live; if not, we shall die eternally: If we do well, we shall live with God in glory; if evil, we shall die the second death. For every man shall be judged in that day, and rewarded “according to his works.”³²

This conviction is buttressed by Wesley’s affirmation of the distinction between the ceremonial law and the moral law³³—a distinction common to covenant theology. Thus, while the ceremonial law was *abolished* in Christ and the whole Mosaic dispensation itself was concluded upon the appearance of Christ, the moral law remains a vital component of the covenant of grace, having Christ as its *perfecting* end.³⁴

29. Wesley, “The Original, Nature, Properties, and Use of the Law,” *Works* (BE) §I.1, 2:6. This view is not unique to Wesley, as Perkins and Ames, for example, seem to hold a similar understanding on the binding effect of the moral law before the time of Moses.

30. Wesley, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, V,” *Works* (BE) §I.2, 1:551–52.

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Minutes*, 1746 (Jackson), 8:289.

33. See Wesley, “The Original, Nature, Properties, and Use of the Law,” *Works* (BE) §II.1, 2:8.

34. See Guyse’s exposition of Romans 10:4. Guyse, *The Practical Expositor* (1792), 3:486. Compare Wesley’s commentary on Romans 3:20. Wesley, *ENNT*, 469.

But what differentiates Wesley's covenant theology from that of the Puritan divines is what he views as the distinguishing feature of the covenant of works. Ames, like Perkins before him, presents the *moral law itself* as the primary distinguishing feature of the covenant of works. Thus, the moral law and the covenant of works become functionally synonymous on the basis of the requirement common to both: the demand of perfect obedience. Consequently, with this requirement remaining in force even after the fall—on account of the fact of the perpetuity of the moral law as evidenced by its embodiment in the Decalogue—there is necessarily a reinvigoration of the covenant of works *beyond* the fall. A consequence of this view which Wesley found to be unacceptable was the bifurcation of the Mosaic Law: on the one hand, the Mosaic Law represented a re-invigoration of the covenant of works—on account of which the non-elect are ultimately condemned due to their inability to fulfill its terms; while on the other hand, it belonged to the covenant of grace inciting the elect to “flie unto Christ.”³⁵

Wesley, however, presents *not* the moral law but Adam's *innocence* as the primary distinguishing feature of the covenant of works and the original foundation upon which the moral law was put into effect. *Absent* such innocence, the original foundation of the moral law—“the ability of man himself”³⁶—is irrecoverably compromised, rendering the covenant of works obsolete since the covenant of works cannot possibly extend farther than does humanity's state of innocence. So then, for Wesley, the *perpetuity of the moral law* does not signal a *continuation* or re-invigoration of the covenant of works since the *loss of Adam's innocence* signals the *end* of the covenant of works. Therefore, in Wesley's view, the covenant of works does not re-emerge at *any* point after the fall for the simple fact that original innocence is no longer either a characteristic or a possibility of the human condition.

Indeed, the situation is drastically changed on account of the fall. The moral law “not wrote indeed upon tables of stone, or any corruptible substance, but engraven on [Adam's] heart by the finger of God, wrote in the inmost spirit both of men and of angels” is now “wellnigh effaced . . . out of his heart.”³⁷ While the moral law had once stood upon

35. Perkins, *The Golden Chaine*, 102.

36. Ames, *The Marrow of Sacred Divinity*, 115. Despite the differences between Wesley and Ames described above, both recognized “the ability of man himself” to be confined to the time of his innocence.

37. Wesley, “The Original, Nature, Properties, and Use of the Law,” §1.3–4, *Works* (BE), 2:7.

Adam's *innocence*, now, after the fall and solely on account of the mercies of God, the moral law stands on Jesus Christ, the lamb slain from the foundation of the world. This provision, Wesley declares, is an outcome of the fact that God "did not despise the work of his own hands" but was "reconciled to man through the Son of his love." As a result of this initiative of grace, God "in some measure re-inscribed the law on the heart of his dark, sinful creature."³⁸ Thus, rather than indicating a continuation or re-emergence of the covenant of *works*, the perpetuation of the moral law is a witness to the triumph of the initiating love of God demonstrated in the covenant of *grace*³⁹—the one and only covenant under which *all* of humanity now lives and has *ever* lived *since* the fall.

This point was important to Wesley in serving to clearly underscore that while the moral law, with its continued requirement of perfect obedience, perpetually serves a salvific *purpose*, it holds no salvific *promise* (as the Jews had mistakenly thought). Indeed, under the Mosaic dispensation the endeavor to keep the moral law produces at best only "a bare outward service"⁴⁰ and actually "inflames" the "motions of sins," "discovers" sins, and "drags them out into open day."⁴¹ In this way humanity's desperate predicament is set forth by the Mosaic Law. And *purely from the view of this demand of perfect obedience*, Wesley declares in his commentary on Romans 4:15 that grace "though it was in fact mingled with it, is no part of the legal dispensation."⁴² In his commentary on Acts 2:1 Wesley makes this same point with a poignant comparison of the legal and evangelical (gospel) dispensations of the covenant of grace: "At the Pentecost of *Sinai* in the Old Testament, and the Pentecost of *Jerusalem* in the New, were the two grand manifestations of God, the legal and the evangelical: the one from the mountain, and the other from heaven; the terrible, and the merciful one."⁴³ Thus, though the moral law remains incumbent upon all persons, it is at best a schoolmaster by which the standard of "do this and live" is shown as that which is to be *abandoned* (not as a standard of conduct, but as a basis for securing one's justifi-

38. Ibid., §I.4. *Works* (BE), 2:7.

39. Of course, classic Puritan covenant theology would also affirm that the perpetuation of the moral law is a demonstration of God's love in the covenant of grace. The difference, however, in Wesley's covenant theology is that, since the fall, all of humanity lives under the covenant of grace.

40. Wesley, "The Original, Nature, Properties, and Use of the Law," *Works* (BE) §2, 2:4–5.

41. Ibid., §2, IV.4, 2:4–5, 17.

42. Wesley, *ENNT*, 472.

43. Ibid., 351.

cation) in order that the better covenant, “believe and live,” might be *embraced*. It is in this sense that the Mosaic Law, by pointing to Christ, is unquestionably, even in its terror, “nothing else than a fresh administration of the covenant of grace.”⁴⁴

For this reason, Wesley could, on the one hand, assert that the moral law is “holy, just, and good”⁴⁵ and, on the other hand, as noted above, declare that “Christ is the end of the Adamic, as well as the Mosaic, law.” He is able to make this last declaration on the basis of his conception of Christ’s mediation both as *logos incarnandus* (Christ to be exhibited) and as *logos incarnates* (Christ exhibited) introduced earlier. As he explained in the passage from *Farther Thoughts Upon Christian Perfection* referenced above, the Adamic law is “the law of works” (i.e., the covenant of works) and remains restricted to “that given to Adam in his innocence” while the Mosaic Law is identified as “the whole Mosaic dispensation” of the covenant of grace.⁴⁶ Christ is first of all the end of the Adamic law (the covenant of works).⁴⁷ This follows from the fact that the fall immediately occasioned the *need* of a mediator (there being no such need in the time of Adam’s innocence) and God’s gracious *provision* of such a mediator: Christ as *logos incarnandus*. As noted earlier, an important result of this mediation of Christ was that God graciously re-inscribed the moral law on the heart of fallen humanity, “although not as in the beginning.”⁴⁸

In keeping with the superstructure of covenant theology, Wesley affirmed that the mediatorial work of Christ was brought to *fullness* in his revelation as *logos incarnates*. Thus, whereas the inaugural work of his mediation—as *logos incarnandus*—occasions the end of the Adamic law (i.e., the covenant of works), his mediation as *logos incarnates* occasions the end of “the entire Mosaic dispensation.”⁴⁹ It is in this sense that Wesley declares, “We are ‘dead to the law, by the body of Christ’ given for us (Rom 7.4), to the Adamic as well as Mosaic law. We are wholly freed therefrom by his death, that law expiring with him.” He further affirms that “In the room of this”—the Adamic law and the

44. Leonard Rijssenius cited by Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 399.

45. The phrase belongs to Rom 7:12, the text of Wesley’s sermon, “The Original, Nature, Properties, and Use of the Law,” *Works* (BE), 2:4–19.

46. Wesley, *Farther Thoughts Upon Christian Perfection*, 3–4.

47. See also “The Righteousness of Faith,” *Works* (BE) §3, 1:203.

48. Wesley, “The Original, Nature, Properties, and Use of the Law,” *Works* (BE) §2, 2:4–5.

49. *Ibid.*, IV.4, 2:17.

Mosaic law—"Christ hath established another, namely, the law of faith. Not everyone that doeth but everyone that believeth now receiveth righteousness."⁵⁰ Thus Wesley clarifies: "Every believer has done with the law as it means the Jewish ceremonial law, or the entire Mosaic dispensation . . . ; yea, allowing *we have done with the moral law* [only in the sense of our regarding it] *as a means of procuring our justification* (for we are 'justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that is in Jesus')."⁵¹ Therefore, although the moral law is "established" (Rom 3:31) rather than abolished, it is established *not* as the basis of justification but as "an incorruptible picture of the high and holy One that inhabiteth eternity" and is nothing less than "the heart of God disclosed to man."⁵²

The achievement of Christ as *logos incarnates* (which occasions the end of the Mosaic dispensation) is what Wesley is referencing when he states that the Apostle Paul has proved "that the Christian had set aside the Jewish dispensation, and that the moral law itself, though it could never pass away," now stands "on a different foundation from what it did before."⁵³ This different foundation is not faith itself; rather, the "different foundation" is Christ as *logos incarnates* rather than as *logos incarnandus*.⁵⁴ That is, it is on the basis of his death *in realiter* that those who believe are "brought . . . under a new dispensation" of the covenant of grace (i.e., the gospel dispensation) and are enabled to "bring forth fruit unto God" on account of their knowing the power of Christ's resurrection.⁵⁵

Wesley and the Idea of Progression within the Covenant of Grace

In speaking of being "brought . . . under a new dispensation" of the covenant of grace, Wesley is reflecting an identifying feature of covenant theology: *the idea of progression within the covenant of grace*. Federal theologians had early on conceived the covenant of grace in terms of three economies or dispensations: before the law, under the law, and upon and

50. Wesley, *Farther Thoughts Upon Christian Perfection*, 4.

51. Wesley, "The Original, Nature, Properties, and Use of the Law," *Works* (BE) §2, IV.4, 2:4–5, 17. Bracketed insert and emphasis mine.

52. *Ibid.*, §II.3, 2:9.

53. *Ibid.*, §3, 2:5–6.

54. Wesley, 'The Righteousness of Faith,' *Works* (BE) I. §11–12, 1:208–9.

55. Wesley, 'The Original, Nature, Properties, and Use of the Law,' *Works* (BE) §2, 2:5.

after Christ's coming. This division is evident in Wesley⁵⁶ and in covenant theologians more than a century earlier.⁵⁷ The various economies (or dispensations) of the covenant of grace represent more than the mere *segmentation* of salvation history; rather, each dispensation represents an *augmentation* in the unfolding story of God's saving purposes. In the gospel or Christian dispensation (sometimes also called the evangelical dispensation), the covenant of grace is *advanced* to its perfection,⁵⁸ the fullness of time having come when "God sent forth his Son . . . to redeem those under the law,"⁵⁹ i.e., the Mosaic dispensation. A fuller exploration of Wesley's conception and presentation of the idea of progression within the covenant of grace and its import for his soteriology will be undertaken later in this study.

For the moment, however, it is important to note that Wesley was consistent in giving careful attention to the idea of progression and regularly accessed the language of *The Epistle to the Hebrews* from which some of the standard terminology of covenant theology had long been derived. In particular, the terms "type" and "shadow" described the divinely-appointed role of the Mosaic Law as an instrument of the covenant of grace pointing toward the revelation of Christ. This same way of speaking of the Mosaic Law in relation to Christ's appearing is seen with some frequency in Wesley as well.⁶⁰

In order to highlight and preserve distinctions important in conveying the idea of progression, Wesley employed the familiar terminology of covenant theology with a consistent and admirable precision. This is particularly evident in his taking pains to sustain the critical distinction between "covenant" and "dispensation" in order to lessen the confusion of his audience. Whenever he is speaking of any of the economies of the covenant of *grace* he uses the term "dispensation" and adds the appropriate modifier ("legal" or "Christian," for example) when needed. Wesley's resistance to the notion that the covenant of works in any degree continues alongside the covenant of grace motivates him in

56. Wesley, 'The Righteousness of Faith,' *Works* (BE) §1, 1:202–3.

57. See McCoy and Baker, *Fountainhead of Federalism*, 65.

58. See Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament*, 1:1.

59. Galatians 4:4–5.

60. See, for example, Wesley's sermon, "The Original, Nature, Properties, and Use of the Law," *Works* (BE) §II.2, 2:8–9. Compare Perkins, *A Golden Chaine*, 103; Ames, in *The Marrow of Sacred Divinity*, 193; *The Westminster Confession*, Chap. VII, 21. These words resurface frequently in Wesley's *Notes* on both Testaments. See, for example, Wesley's commentary on Exod 39:1 (Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament*, 1:337); Heb 8:5; 9:23; 10:1; and Rev 11:19 (Wesley, *ENNT*, 723, 727–28, 859).

taking care to avoid using the word “covenant” as a synonym for, say, the Mosaic dispensation. The precision with which he maintains this distinction requires that he carefully recast for his audience the Pauline antithesis of law and grace in terms that are technically consistent with the language of his covenant theology.⁶¹ By way of example, in his commentary on Romans 6:14 Wesley writes,

Sin shall not have dominion over you—It has neither right nor power. *For ye are not under the law*—A dispensation of terror and bondage, which only shews sin, without enabling you to conquer it; *but under grace*—Under the merciful dispensation of the gospel, which brings compleat Victory over it; to every one who is under the powerful influences of the Spirit of *Christ*. . . . Plainly, “the law” (the Mosaic Law) is *not* the covenant of *works* but is the Jewish dispensation of the covenant of *grace*, “a dispensation of terror and bondage.”⁶²

To be “under the law” is to not have progressed from the Jewish dispensation into the privileges of the gospel dispensation. Thus, while both bear witness to the covenant of grace exclusively, the witness of the gospel (or, Christian) dispensation was more complete than the witness of the Jewish dispensation.

It is clear enough by now that the place of covenant theology in Wesley's theological thought was neither incidental nor uninspected. He recognized and knowingly subscribed to the superstructure of covenant theology represented in the ideas of the covenant of works and the covenant of grace, convinced that these faithfully portrayed the history of God's redemptive activity. At the same time, he thoughtfully and precisely adapted the presentation of these two covenants to reflect his evangelical Arminianism. At the core of this adaptation lay his unrelenting conviction that the Mosaic Law belonged wholly and only to the covenant of grace, and thus brought all of humanity within reach of the provisions of that covenant. And at the heart of this conviction was his understanding that the distinguishing feature of the covenant of works was not the moral law, but was the innocence of “our first parents.” Thus, the perpetuity of the moral law from before the fall until the present moment involves no reinvigoration of the covenant of works; rather, the covenant of works was brought to an end coincidentally with the fall

61. This is not to say that Wesley always *explicitly* recasts the Pauline antithesis. See, for example, his commentary on Romans 11. Wesley, *ENNT*, 498–501.

62. Wesley, *ENNT*, 478, 604.

and the inception of the covenant of grace. Yet, in concert with classic covenant theology, he centered everything on the mediatorial work of Christ as “the lamb slain from the foundation of the world,” and affirmed the Incarnation and outpouring of the Spirit as the culmination of God’s saving activity in and for the world.

With this background and a sense of the breadth of the ancestry of Wesley’s covenant theology, we are now in a position to examine his exegesis and exposition of Holy Scripture as a further critical resource for learning of the influence of covenant theology on him, particularly as imaged in his use of the servant-son metaphor. As previously noted, the fact that the metaphors of servant and son belonged to the sacred text of the Christian canon was first and foremost to Wesley. This not only legitimized his use of the metaphor, but also created a sense of obligation to employ it as a way of ensuring that he articulated a soteriology that was faithful to divine revelation. For Wesley, the superstructure of covenant theology reflected such faithfulness and, for this reason, also served as a hermeneutic for his interpretation of Scripture.