



COVENANT THEOLOGY IN CONSTRUCTIVE-REFORMED PERSPECTIVE

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Having suggested in a previous review that the contemporary preoccupation among confessional Presbyterians (aka Westminster Calvinists) with a covenant of works is myopic,² this return to the subject may seem somewhat contradictory. My reasoning is straightforward. If read well, Jeong Koo Jeon's volume *Covenant Theology: John Murray's and Meredith Kline's Response to the Historical Development of Federal Theology in Reformed Thought* could serve well to dissipate the suspicion that some federal theologians in confessional Presbyterian circles have capitulated to neo-orthodoxy. In my view, this suspicion has created, unnecessarily, some tension among those who really ought to be standing shoulder-to-shoulder in defense of federal (or covenant) theology.

The following review article serves, then, to publicize the fact that whether we are "of Murray" or "of Kline" (see 1 Cor 1:11-12) there is much to be gained from the reading of Jeon's balanced and dispassionate yet largely descriptive treatment of the debate. If he achieves nothing else, we may sincerely hope that his study will succeed in transforming what has been an intense debate into a mutually helpful discussion. For too long the debate served counter-productively the cause of federal theology and the unity of confessional Presbyterianism. Therefore, I aim in what follows to summarize and analyze Jeon's study, before teasing out its implications and usefulness for Reformed theology today.

¹ The following is a revised version of a review article of Jeong Koo Jeon's *Covenant Theology: John Murray's and Meredith Kline's Response to the Historical Development of Federal Theology in Reformed Thought* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1999). It originally appeared in the *Westminster Theological Journal* [[64], 2002, 387-404) under the title "Covenant Theology and Constructive Calvinism."

² *Westminster Theological Journal* 62 (2000): 153-57, esp.156-57.

I. The Account of the Debate

In the first of four lengthy chapters, Jeon traces the historical development of federal theology from John Calvin to Geerhardus Vos. He highlights:

- John Calvin, whose interest in natural law, while lacking a covenant of works, drew attention to the theological significance of Eden, thereby paving the way for the specific idea of a covenant of works (*foedus naturale, foedus legale, or foedus operum* [pp. 27-28]).
- Caspar Olevianus, "the forerunner of the antithesis between the covenants of works and grace hermeneutics" (p. 31).
- Robert Rollock, who was responsible for making the rubric of the covenant of works a staple of covenant theology (p. 34).
- The Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF), the first Reformed confession to place the doctrine of the covenant in the foreground (p. 40).
- John Owen, for whom the distinction between the covenants of works and grace was foundational (p. 54).
- Francis Turretin, who developed the hermeneutical role of covenant and applied its lessons to the doctrine of justification by faith alone (pp. 56 and 66).
- Charles Hodge, who defended against rationalism the covenantal distinction between works and grace (p. 69).
- Geerhardus Vos, who "characteristically developed his biblical covenant theology under the rubrics of eschatology and the Kingdom of God, responding to the Ritschlian moralistic Kingdom of God and the dehistoricization of biblical history [as represented] by the Wellhausen School, which emphasized the dynamic historicity of the biblical epochs" (p. 79).
- John Murray and Meredith Kline, who, "it is evident," says Jeon, "were greatly influenced by Geerhardus Vos" (p. 79).

Reflecting on this opening historical overview, Jeon argues, contra the neo-orthodox (p. 11), that for all the differences of expression between Calvin and the later Calvinists, the reformer's perception of an antithesis between law and gospel comports with the later distinction between the covenants of works and of grace (pp. 14 and 94). Despite, then, the historically variant ways of referring to federal theology, Jeon observes that Murray's sympathetic-critical reading (in that order!) of the Westminster doctrine of covenant has a precedent in the shape of

Calvin's federal theology.³ In the process, Jeon, perhaps unwittingly, offers a partial explanation as to why the neo-orthodox view the WCF's covenant of works–covenant of grace paradigm in the way that they do.

John Murray

Murray, Jeon explains in chapter 2, held to a modified version of covenant theology. The covenant of redemption he renamed “the inter-trinitarian economy of salvation” (p. 116), yet in addition, as is better known, Murray had reservations about WCF's construct of a covenant of works (*foedus operum*). This he renamed the Adamic administration. It is this latter covenant or administration which interests us here.

Like Calvin, Murray sought, with hermeneutical and exegetical sensitivity, to trace throughout Scripture the biblical contours of the covenant motif. In effect, he aimed to state explicitly what Calvin's sensitivity to Scripture implies; namely that, in contradistinction from Westminster's logicized, systemic approach, a biblical-theological approach to federal theology does not require a covenant of works (pp. 103–4). Even if it did (additional to the natural or legal bond arising from God's creation of Adam and Eve), the use of the term *covenant of life* (cf. WCF 7:2 and Westminster Larger Catechism [WLC] 20) would be more appropriate (p. 105 n.4). Nevertheless, Murray, preferred the idea of an Adamic administration, and considered it to be most consistent with the spirit if not the exact wording of Westminster Calvinism (WCF 7:2). This may well explain why—although I stand to be corrected—he did not share his views with the Westminster Seminary faculty before going public with them (p. 106 n. 4 cont.), and why it is unclear whether he registered with his presbytery a formal exception to the covenantal wording of the WCF.

Regardless, Jeon defends Murray's orthodoxy due to his retention of the law-gospel antithesis (in that historical order [p. 111]). Jeon argues that Murray's unmodified and unsuffused retention of the antithesis (pp. 148 and 158ff.) left uncompromised his Protestant understanding of justification and his Reformed affirmation of the third use of the law (pp. 105, 143 n. 79 cont., 144ff.). Murray did, however, understand the Bible's forensic doctrine of justification within the broader context of union with

³ The term “sympathetic-critical” was likely coined by Klaas Schilder. See R. B. Gaffin, Jr.'s citation of the phrase in his essay “The Vitality of Reformed Dogmatics,” in *The Vitality of Reformed Theology: Proceedings of the International Theological Congress June 20-24th 1994, Noordwijkerhout, The Netherlands* (ed. J. M. Batteau, J. W. Maris, and K. Veling; Kampen: Uitgeverij Kok, 1994), 21.

Christ. Compensating, we may note, the WCF's omission of a chapter on this union, Murray, consistent with Calvin, understood the believer's pneumatological union with Christ to govern the application of redemption. Writes Jeon: “Union with Christ does not vitiate. . . the principle of justification by faith alone apart from good works. . . , because in his [Murray's] detailed discussion of justification, the Law and Gospel antithesis remains a vital reference point” (p. 163).⁴

For all Murray's fresh thinking, he nevertheless stood very much apart from both Roman Catholic theology and Protestant contemporaries such as C. H. Dodd and Emil Brunner. To many regarding Murray's theological orthodoxy to be impeccable, this is obvious. Yet others, suspicious of Murray's fresh formulation, have found in the Shepherd controversy (from the mid-1970s) reason to suspect that Murray's modest revisionism helped spawn Norman Shepherd's thought.⁵ This, though, is an injustice to Murray, as also to Shepherd.⁶ Jeon helpfully, fairly, and accurately notes that “Murray stands in the tradition of covenant theology by arguing that the antithesis between Law and Gospel and Letter and Spirit are interchangeable” (p. 187).

In short, then, good theology and apologetics require shoddy treatment of neither Murray nor his admirers. We may say that it is *Gemeingefährlich* (dangerous to the public) to cast a shadow over faithful men, ignoring, in this case, the covenantal diversity within the history of the Reformed tradition. Such a diversity was shared by theologians throughout the history of the Reformed tradition whose orthodoxy was unquestioned. To deny this or to assume that diversity equates to neo-orthodoxy would support Shepherd's lament that “Reformed orthodoxy has gone to seed.”⁷

⁴ Cf. Jeon, *Covenant Theology*, p. 175 n. 141; also p. 22 for Calvin's perspective on union with Christ.

⁵ For a significant historical narrative of the unfolding of the Shepherd controversy, see Ian A. Hewitson, *Trust and Obey: Norman Shepherd and the Justification Controversy at Westminster Seminary* (Minneapolis: Next Step Resources, 2011).

⁶ Rev. Norman Shepherd has shared with me a copy of the address given at his ordination by Dr. Cornelius Van Til in which Van Til encouraged Shepherd to work toward a creatively orthodox renewal of the theology of the tradition. “Maybe he saw the beginnings of such a reformation [in Reformed scholastic theology] in the biblical theology of Vos whom he greatly admired” (personal email to Tim J. R. Trumper, February 2, 2024).

⁷ A quote made by Rev. Shepherd in personal conversation with him. Used with kind permission.

Meredith Kline

In chapter 3, Jeon turns his attention to Meredith Kline, specifically to his focus on covenant or kingdom theology (they stand or fall together). Contrary to those permitting the covenant motif to overshadow that of kingdom, Jeon shares Kline's view that covenant hermeneutics must justify the kingdom motif (p. 191; cf. p. 194). Thereby, Kline offset the tendency in the theological tradition to allow the narrower concept of *covenant* to marginalize that of *kingdom*.⁸

When it comes to the covenant motif, Kline's references to covenant recognize, contra Murray, a covenant of works as well as a covenant of grace. The latter he labels the covenant of redemption and includes in it what has traditionally gone by the same name but which Kline relabels the intratrinitarian covenant [p. 213]]. Of the two covenants, it is the idea of a covenant of works that has become so contentious. Whereas Murray could fully support his colleagues in the publication of material countenancing a covenant of works (p. 106 n. 4 cont.), "Kline sees the modern rejection of the *foedus operum* as a serious theological deviation because it obliterates the antithetical principles of works and grace in subsequent covenants that impinge on the bestowal of the original eschatological kingdom goal" (p. 191).

Jeon chooses not to evaluate Kline's concern, preferring to explain Kline's overall perspective. Fundamentally, Kline taught that the antithetical principles of works and grace are critical to the redemptive-historical revealing of the divine kingdom.

To support a covenant of works (which he prefers to call a covenant of creation [p. 196]), Kline draws together a wide range of ideas. Indeed, Jeon later describes Kline's "extensive development of the original eschatology of the Garden" as his "distinctive contribution to covenant hermeneutics" (p. 272). For this reason, we ought to summarize it.

First, Kline taught that man's creation in the divine image was intentionally covenantal. By this, he meant that in the relationship

⁸ Herman Ridderbos touches on this in *The Coming of the Kingdom* (ed. Raymond O. Zorn; trans. H. de Jongste; Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962), 22–23. We get a visual of this predominant interest in covenant in the naming of churches. Contrast the numbers of those Presbyterian congregations in America labeled *Covenant Presbyterian* with those named *Kingdom Presbyterian*.

between God and Adam a covenant was essential. The covenant was not, then, supplemental to the natural relationship between God and man, for the creation account, argues Kline, contains no disjunction between nature and covenant (p. 196). Consider its various elements:

- The Sabbath was a covenantal blessing patterned after God's work in creation and was indicative of the fact that God's glorious work of creation was a process of covenant-making (p. 200).
- The awesome presence of the Glory-Spirit was a token of God's sovereign and covenantal lordship over creation (p. 203) and an act of covenantal engagement with creation (p. 204).
- The marriage ordinance, covenantally or communally reflected the nature of the relationship between Adam and Eve and their Maker (*ibid.*).
- The eschatological sanctions focused on the tree and were understood in sacramental and probationary (conditional) terms (Gen 2:9 and 3:22, and 2:16-17).
- The primal *parousia* of the Glory-Spirit attending the fall of Adam and Eve served as a portent of "the day of the Lord"—a later reference to the divinely administered lawsuit against covenant-breakers (p. 212).

If all these factors insufficiently evince the covenantal nature of the relationship between God and Adam, then consider, Kline urges, how the Old Testament, so full of covenant, makes use of the creation motifs that first appear in the Edenic order of things (p. 202).

With Kline's confident defense of a covenant of works in place, Jeon proceeds to unpack how Kline followed Vos in understanding redemptive history to have been governed by an *a priori* establishment of the covenant of works. Thereafter, he briefly unpacks Kline's case for the intratrinitarian covenant (generally known as the covenant of redemption, p. 214) before moving on to a lengthier treatment of Kline's view of the covenant of redemption (alias the covenant of grace). Along the way, Jeon repeatedly assures us that Kline was in the tradition of classic covenant theology. This seems overdone since the paradigm of a covenant of works–covenant of grace is laid out in the Westminster Standards, and since neither Murray nor his followers dispute this. They simply object to the dogmatism which implies that one has to be Klinian to be theologically orthodox.

That said, Jeon's reassurances are not without purpose. He aims to prepare his readers for his exposition of the discontinuity and continuity

in Kline's understanding of the covenant of redemption (aka the covenant of grace). The covenant has run historically from its inauguration through the prediluvian and postdiluvian Noachic covenants, the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenants, unto the new covenant. Yet, to safeguard Kline from criticism that these *modi administrationis* amount to a subtle form of Dispensationalism (pp. 214–35), Jeon notes that they are held together by the Old Testament's unfolding of the typological kingdom. Of course, the major discontinuity was to come in the transition from the old covenant to the new, from the typological to the antitypological kingdom, but the hiatus was overcome in Christ, who bridged the changeover from the Old Testament's typological kingdom to its New Testament eschatological fulfillment (pp. 239–40).

Kline eschewed, then, not only classic Dispensationalism but also revisionist, half-way or progressive Dispensationalism on the one hand (pp. 240–46), and Daniel Fuller's neoorthodoxy on the other (p. 252ff.). Jeon thus concludes that "if we carefully observe the substance of Kline's thesis, then we cannot identify Kline with a Lutheran or dispensationalist position because Kline adopts and builds on classic covenant theology in his understanding of the Old Covenant" (p. 238).

Westminster Calvinists will agree. Kline's straightforward hermeneutical distinction between the covenant of works and grace is confessional, equivalent to the law-gospel antithesis, and is supportive of the WCF's classic Protestant understanding of justification (WCF 11). Very appropriately, then, Jeon spends the remainder of the third chapter echoing Kline's insistence that Protestants safeguard their heritage. There must be no admixture of law and grace (pp. 262–63), nor any diminution of the Adam-Christ paradigm. Christ's meritorious obedience retrospectively and necessarily implies that Adam could only have received his justification by his merited obedience. The Edenic scenario was, then, a matter of law and not of grace. In Eden, up to the Fall, grace was superfluous.⁹

⁹ To hear from Kline directly, see his volume *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Overland Park, KS: Two Age Press, 2000), 107–17. Kline makes the point that since the principle of works in Eden was governed by either merit or demerit, determined juridically by either obedience or disobedience to the covenant, the introduction of the idea of grace (unmerited favor) must be inappropriate.

Murray-Kline findings

In his crucial fourth and final chapter, Jeon draws together his findings, focusing on three particular issues: the reaffirmation of the distinction between the covenant of works and grace, the Mosaic covenant, and the doctrine of justification.

First, the distinction between the covenant of works and of grace. Jeon lauds Murray's emphasis on divine sovereignty in his definition of *covenant*. He laments, though, that the definition only has the covenant of grace in view, and that the covenant concept is thereby applicable only to our need of redemption (p. 286). Jeon notes, by contrast, Kline's broader definition of covenant, which incorporates the covenants of works and grace, the concept of kingdom, and supplements Murray's emphasis on divine sovereignty with a counter-balancing attention to human responsibility (pp. 280–81).

Next, Jeon takes up the Mosaic covenant. Whereas Murray and Kline agreed that believers under the Old Testament were saved and justified by grace through faith, they took different approaches to the Mosaic covenant: "Murray seeks to revise, whereas Kline tries to mature and flower covenant theology in respect to the Mosaic covenant" (p. 307). Specifically, they differed sharply about the inauguration of the Mosaic covenant (Ex. 19–24). Murray believed it was unilaterally initiated by God and in continuity with the prior Abrahamic covenant and the subsequent new covenant, and thus is exonerated from any charge of Dispensationalism (pp. 312–13). Kline, by contrast, understood the inauguration to have been both continuous and discontinuous within the history of redemption. On the one hand, it continued God's revelation of his grace whereby he condescended to enter into covenant with his people, yet Kline claims that its principle of law harks back to the prelapsarian covenant of works in order that it may be reapplied (pp. 308–9, 311). On this understanding, the Israelites' national blessings and security in the typological kingdom were conditional on their ongoing corporate obedience.

Such an understanding unnecessarily complicates God's progressive revelation of his covenantal dealings with his people. It also blurs references to merit, for, as Jeon notes, the obedience of Israel needed to be perfect. Since this was impossible given the fall of Adam, the idea of Israel meriting national blessing and security does not work. Clearly, Israel needed the grace of God (pp. 313–14; cf. p. 333). Yet, to introduce the idea of grace into the Mosaic covenant immediately destroys the

claim that it was a reapplication of the covenant of works, for Kline strenuously disagrees that there was a place for grace in that covenant.

Third, we come to the doctrine of justification. Jeon concludes that by holding to the law-gospel antithesis, Murray and Kline each upheld the classic Protestant understanding of God's justifying grace (pp. 314 and 318). This is significant given the emergence of the new perspective on Paul, with its challenge to the Reformation doctrine of justification.¹⁰ There is room, then, for the followers of Murray and Kline to stand together to justify their continued adherence to the law-gospel antithesis and the Protestant doctrine of justification. What unites Murrayites and Klinians far outweighs what divides them. We can be very thankful to Jeon for making this clear, and take his point to heart as confessional Presbyterians. After all, the effective defense of federal theology and of God's justifying grace in Christ requires a united stand whenever and wherever it is possible.

II. The Significance of the Debate

Undoubtedly, there is real value in Jeon's description of the debate, in the benefit of having the respective arguments of Murray and Kline juxtaposed in a single volume, and in Jeon's lowering of its stakes. He omits, however, awareness of its broader ramifications for the theological health and future development of confessional Presbyterianism (Westminster Calvinism). For this reason, we now extend the discussion, identifying six significations that the debate has for our day.

1. *The educational significance:*

The value of confessional seminary education.

Jeon's factual error in referring to Murray as Kline's predecessor (p. 191), reminds us that only perhaps in the orbit of committed and consisted confessional seminary education can the thoughts of a systematic theologian and an Old Testament scholar be compared and contrasted. Yet, whereas many today dismiss confessionalism as a theological straightjacket, the Murray-Kline debate indicates that while their differences were free of heterodoxy their confessionalism allowed for an interesting variation in methodological approach.

On the one hand, Murray, under the influence of Geerhardus Vos and the recovery of interest in Calvin, subtly broke from the Reformed treatment

¹⁰ See Jeon's extensive comment on E. P. Sanders, *Covenant Theology*, n. 75 on pp. 314–18.

of systematic theology as a science (especially notable in the flow from Francis Turretin to Charles Hodge). The break entailed a move away from the tradition's highly logical-propositional exposition of doctrine toward the inclusion of greater exegetical and biblical-theological (redemptive-historical) considerations. On the other hand, Kline, as is not so widely recognized, sought to demonstrate, somewhat apologetically, how his Old Testament biblical theology coalesced with the teaching of Reformed orthodoxy (p. 192).

All this is somewhat ironic, for whereas those of a Klinian bent have been quick to suggest that Murray was biblicistic (Jeon included [pp. 286 and 331]), there has been inadequate overload of the dogmatic construal that has influenced the multiple terms and nuances found in Kline's exposition of Scripture. Both men sought to uphold the theology of the Reformed tradition, yet whereas for Murray this meant reforming its more ratiocinated system and feel, for Kline this meant weaving into his biblical theology nuances more reminiscent of the logicized system of Reformed orthodoxy. Thus, Kline represents the challenges implicit in the model of biblical theology that Brevard Childs has called "Biblical Theology within the Categories of Dogmatic Theology."¹¹ Jeon unwittingly implies as much when he claims that "Kline's biblical covenant theology *brings to maturity classic covenant theology* [italics inserted] while maintaining the validity of the antithesis between the covenants of works and grace" (p. 279).

Such divergent approaches to the interface between biblical and systematic theology should not blind us, though, to the benefits of a confessionally coherent theological education, nor to the room it leaves for legitimate discussion, theological apologetics, as also for theological reform. Handled aright, these discussions need not be destructive or contentious but can enrich the maturity, shape, and feel of a theological tradition, in this case, of Westminster Calvinism.

2. *The disciplinary significance:*

The need to distinguish method and theology.

In the room that confessional seminary education opens up for healthy discussion, issues of theological method loom large. While these are of second-order importance compared to those of biblical and theological

¹¹ Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 11–12. Childs argues that while the categories of historical and dogmatic need not be seen as intractable rivals, much "turns on the quality of the dogmatic construal."

orthodoxy, they remain highly influential in determining whether our theology reflects the shape and feel of Scripture, and, accordingly, whether our theology has credibility. In short, it helps a great deal when what we say is biblical sounds like it.

Methodology, though, is significant for another reason. When we fail to appreciate the role it plays, we can attribute to theological erring what amounts to but a methodological variation. To illustrate this from the Murray-Kline debate, we follow up Jeon's theological analysis with a consideration of the methodological variations that played their part in it.

On paper, we would think that a systematic theologian seeking to inject greater biblical-theological considerations into his exposition of the Bible's theological *loci* and a biblical theologian aiming to safeguard the theology of Reformed orthodoxy would gladly combine to advocate Reformed orthodoxy. However, Kline read as *theological* Murray's *methodological* endeavor to improve the shape of Reformed orthodoxy, but was less able to see that his *theological* criticism of Murray was impacted *methodologically* by his overt embrace of the biblical-theological model "Biblical Theology within the Categories of Dogmatic Theology." It is in this light that we best weigh Kline's denunciation of Murray's biblicism.

More problematic is the precedent Kline set in placing Murray in a so-called "revisionist tradition" (p. 254 n. 120). While it is true enough to say that Murray was a revisionist in his rejection of the nomenclature covenant of works, he nevertheless maintained his Reformed orthodoxy. Kline thus misleads and ups the ante when ranking Murray alongside the neo-orthodox such as Daniel Fuller (America), Karl Barth (Switzerland), and James B. and Thomas F. Torrance (Scotland).¹²

To the point, I recall a conversation I had with Professor James Torrance in Edinburgh, Scotland, in the 1990s. I asked him whether he would regard Professor Murray as being of his school of thought. Professor Torrance swiftly answered "no," explaining his answer in terms of Murray's belief in definitive atonement. Evidently, then, Torrance understood Murray's druthers about the language of a covenant of works to do nothing to undermine his commitment to federal theology and its focus on God's faithfulness to those for whom Christ died. Thus, when Westminster Calvinists make the language of a covenant of works a non-

¹² Agreement with E. J. Young (cited by Jeon in *Covenant Theology*, p. 280 n. 1) that a covenantal understanding of Eden can alone do justice to the scriptural data, does not require the belief that a noncovenantal view of Eden is neo-orthodox.

negotiable of federal theology they give credence to the Torranian claim that a covenant of works is the regulating principle of federal theology and neglect or ignore those forefathers who did not necessarily think so. We need not either.¹³ Frankly, then, it is to the detriment of Kline's reputation that neither he nor his most eager followers have walked back the impression created that Murray was neo-orthodox. Jeon has nullified this idea, rendered further charges inexcusable, and offered confessional Presbyterians a way to reset consideration of the first things.

To promote this reset, it is important to note that Murray was influenced not by twentieth-century Basel but by sixteenth-century Geneva. We may ask, then, why Murray's theological credentials should have been any more suspect than Calvin's. After all, the reformer subsumed all redemptive history under the covenant of grace as is clear from his vague reference to "all men [being] adopted [*cooptat*] by God into the company of his people since the beginning of the world were covenanted [*foederatos*] to him by the same law and by the bond of the same doctrine as obtains among us."¹⁴ No denial there of grace in Eden! To be consistent Klinians must surely conclude that Calvin fell as far short as Murray of the standards they have set for Reformed orthodoxy. This is possible for Calvin was fallible, but it is also possible that the criteria Klinians have set for orthodoxy, while confessional, is more dogmatic than is required by the language of a covenant of works. This is especially so given that its inclusion in the WCF was brand new, and that WLC 20 refers instead to a "covenant of life."

In this regard, it is worth noting that whereas today's defenders of Protestant Scholasticism tend to be strong on church history and historical theology but less seasoned in exegesis and biblical theology, exegetes and biblical theologians are often deficient in appreciating how historical precedents play into the discussions of the present. Such has been the case in the treatment of Murray. The debate illustrates that our

¹³ See, for example, the perspectives of Hugh Martin (*The Atonement: In its Relation to the Covenant, the Priesthood, the Intercession of our Lord* [Edinburgh: Knox Press, 1976], 29, 39) and John L. Girardeau (*Discussions of Theological Questions* [ed. George A. Blackburn; The Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1905; repr., Harrisonburg, Va.: Sprinkle Publications, 1986], 68–69). Both authorities on federal theology understood the regulating principle of federal theology to be union with Christ.

¹⁴ *Inst.* 2.10.1 [CO 2 (30): 313]. For an overview of Calvin's covenant theology see Peter Lillback's study *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 126–41.

Reformed tradition could do with a greater propensity to distinguish the essence of theological orthodoxy from the linguistic constructs utilized, coupled with a greater generosity of spirit and self-awareness of how we portray Westminster Calvinism to the wider church.

It seems to me that hasty accusations of neo-orthodoxy arise because confessional Presbyterians perceive there to operate in the Reformed community of the English-speaking world but two parties, broadly speaking: those who accept the WCF as an acceptable and workable creed and those who do not. In discussions of federal theology, the logic runs as follows: To deny a covenant of works is contrary to the WCF, therefore the one denying the Edenic covenant must not accept the WCF. Consequently, such a person must be neo-orthodox (at best). This seems to explain, then, why Kline lumped Murray with Daniel Fuller in a revisionist tradition. While his deduction appears plausible, Jeon dismantles the concern that Murray was neo-orthodox. If not, how are we to understand his place in Westminster Calvinism?

To answer the question, we need to nuance our understanding of the socio-theological dynamics of the Reformed tradition. While we may describe the neo-orthodox as revisionist Reformed, it helps to understand that within confessional Presbyterianism are two identifiable parties rather than one: the orthodox Reformed and the constructive Reformed.¹⁵ The methodological and attitudinal differences they represent within confessional Presbyterianism often also arise in parallel debates over confessional subscription, creation, the Sabbath, worship and so forth. While the labels are subject to the general problems endemic in the use of labels, they are useful for distinguishing the traditional Reformed who seek to be faithful to the form and content of the WCF (orthodox Reformed) from those who are faithful to the content of Reformed orthodoxy but wish to see its ratiocinated (highly logicized) form recast with greater sensitivity to the contours and feel of Scripture (constructive Reformed).

¹⁵ In my doctoral dissertation (Tim J. R. Trumper, "An Historical Study of the Doctrine of Adoption in the Calvinistic Tradition" [Ph.D., diss.: University of Edinburgh, 2001]), I coined the terms *orthodox Calvinism*, *constructive Calvinism*, and *revisionist Calvinism* (*op. cit.*, 26–35) and have used them since in different places, more recently acceding to the point made in the defense of Protestant Scholasticism that it is better to use the epithet *Reformed* since our tradition of theology has been shaped by many more theologians than John Calvin. Accordingly, in *Adoption: A Road to Retrieval* (Grand Rapids, MI: From His Fullness Ministries, 2022, 156, 157, 343–46, 389–91) I introduced the amendments *Revisionist Reformed*, *Orthodox Reformed*, and *Constructive Reformed*, and have gone furthest there in unpacking them.

As generalist as is this distinguishing of methods and attitudes within confessional Presbyterianism, it enables us to understand Murray's standing as the Father of the constructive Reformed and to tone down Kline's concern for neo-orthodoxy. Reformed orthodox through and through, Murray occupied a center-right position vis-à-vis the revisionist Reformed (neo-orthodox) to the left and the orthodox Reformed to the right. Likewise, Murray's followers. We are committed to Reformed-orthodox theology, but less so to Reformed-orthodox methods and attitudes. Accordingly, we are willing to concede legitimate kernels of truth in neo-orthodox criticisms of confessional Presbyterianism while answering them from the perspective of a high view and high use of Scripture, and in continuity with the theology orthodoxy of the Westminster Standards.

This means, so far as our federal theology is concerned, pursuing an expression of it that is shorn of dogmatic construal, intent on upholding the strict justice at the heart of the gospel, while appreciating that there is more to the gospel than a display of divine rectitude. In this way, the constructive Reformed seek to expound with biblical sensitivity the covenant motif, believing that the sensitivity holds the key to satisfactorily answering legitimate revisionist-Reformed criticisms of Westminster Calvinism, at least for the sake of those with ears to hear. We may then, at the same time, end years of theological sterility within confessional Presbyterianism and defend with greater effectiveness the biblical orthodoxy of federal theology.

3. *The biblical significance: The identifying areas of theological development.*

Far from operating a completed or closed system, confessional Presbyterians have the opportunity to develop further the theology of the Reformed tradition. After all, there are not only theological methods to be reformed and applied but issues to be addressed, which, to date, have yet to be settled in the WCF and the history of the tradition. Consider:

(1) *The question of grace in Eden.* For all the debate about the Edenic scenario, there has been little attempt to define the meaning of grace; specifically, whether grace (undeserved favor) has to be saving to warrant the term.¹⁶ Clearly, for Kline it has to be. On this understanding,

¹⁶ This helps explain other debates in the Reformed tradition, such as the ongoing reservations about the term *common grace* in the Protestant Reformed Church.

he assumes that the positing of grace in Eden is “the mischief “ which denies a covenant of works. In turn, he assumes that to deny a covenant of works is to deny the law-gospel antithesis, and thus, by a “blurring [of] the concepts of work and grace,” there is “the blurring of works and faith in the doctrine of justification.” He inevitably concludes, then, that the denial of a covenant of works arises “the subversion of the Reformation message of justification by faith alone.”

Naturally, we welcome Kline’s concern to preserve the gospel, yet the accumulated assumptions that lead him to conclude that the positing of grace in Eden is, *ex necessitate*, the result of a Romeward drift is simplistic, overly bold, and counter-productive to the maintenance of a genuine unity among orthodox Protestants.¹⁷ There is benefit in our tradition of theology going over Kline’s thought, probing rather than assuming what we mean when we determine, or otherwise, that grace was operative in Eden. As things stand, Klinians not only have to debate Murray, but also Calvin, the WCF (7:1), and doubtless others.

(2) *The question of Adam’s status in Eden.* This, too, is unresolved. Was he a son or a subject of God, or both? While the question has considerable significance for the positing of grace in Eden, the absence within the tradition of a definition of divine Fatherhood has, despite rare discussions, failed to settle the nature of the pre-Fall relationship between God and our first father.

We get a sense of this from the Candlish-Crawford debate of the 1860s. To counter Victorian liberalism with its espousal of the universal Fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man, Robert Candlish denied that God was Father to Adam in Eden and that Adam was a son of God. God, he taught, was but fatherly to Adam, and Adam was but God’s servant. Thomas Crawford, more in line with Calvin and thus less in reaction to the liberalism of the period, responded that Adam was indeed God’s son and that God was his Father. Yet, aside from the trans-Atlantic interest of the likes of John L. Girardeau and Robert A. Webb, there has been little movement since Candlish and Crawford toward a consensus on the nature of the Creature-creature relationship in Eden.¹⁸

(3) *The definition of the term “covenant.”* Jeon notes not only the difference of opinion between Murray (“a sovereign administration of divine grace and promise” [p. 286]) and Kline (“a particular

administration of God’s kingdom” [p. 194]), but also the mediating definition of O. Palmer Robertson (a “bond in blood sovereignly administered” [p. 281]). Murray’s definition is consistent with his positing of grace in Eden, but Kline’s vague definition obliges us to deduce that in Eden’s “particular administration of God’s kingdom” no divine grace was operative. We ponder, then, whether, on the presupposition of both a covenant of works and of grace, there is a definition of covenant that can do justice to both that of works and of grace. The dual use of Robertson’s definition seems feasible, yet we ponder whether the difficulty of defining covenant is due, in part at least, to a hang-up about questioning the language of a covenant of works.

(4) *The need for a fresh back-to-Scripture examination of the shape of classic covenant theology.* This is long overdue, first, to resolve the perennial debates over a covenant of works, and, second, to re-examine the shape of covenant theology.

Regarding the covenant of works, Murray has shown us that the said nomenclature is not necessary for the maintenance of the law-gospel antithesis. That is just as well, for besides the ongoing discussion of the warrant for the construct of a covenant of works, there is an array of questions to challenge the standing of the covenant of works as the *sine qua non* of federal theology. Could not God’s encounter with Adam have been rooted in natural law (the law written on his heart) rather than in a covenant? And if the Divine-human relationship in Eden was familial (Father-son) was not a covenant superfluous (what parents form covenants with their children?). Moreover, does not the idea of covenant presume an element of distrust? If so, would not a divine-human covenant have been superfluous or inappropriate before the Fall? Such questions, though, are rarely asked. If it is found that Adam could exercise no representative headship of the human race without that relationship to his posterity being defined in explicitly federal (*foedus*) terms, then so be it. Yet, the choice of affirming or not the explicit language of a covenant of works does not have to be that stark. Is it not possible that the Edenic scenario was non-covenantal, yet contained pre-covenantal (that is, anticipatory) emblems?

Regarding the shape of covenant theology, there comes to mind the question that has beset me since my training for the ministry (1989–93). I puzzle as to why our theological tradition settles so easily for the superimposing of the WCF’s covenant of works/grace paradigm onto the Bible’s paradigm of an old and new covenant. Moreover, it intrigues me that the matter does not seem to occur to conservative Reformed

¹⁷ Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, 114–15.

¹⁸ For more, see Trumper, “An Historical Study of the Doctrine of Adoption in the Calvinistic Tradition,” chs. 8 and 9.

theologians and pastors. The super-imposing is surely one of the clearer indications of biblical theology unpacked with dogmatic construal.

Understandably, some may balk at this assessment, but it is worth recalling that, so far as we know, WCF 7 was the very first confessional *chapter* on covenant in the history of the church. This does not mean to say that the content is erroneous, but it does raise the question as to why the covenant of works/grace paradigm became so cemented in the thinking of the tradition and is now commonly regarded among Presbyterians as the only legitimate arrangement of covenant theology. I have my doubts, not least because of the Scriptures' reference to the old and new covenants (e.g., Jer. 31:31-32; Heb. 8:13) and because there were those such as Calvin in the earlier Reformed tradition who, in my view, treated the contours of the Bible's covenant motif with greater exegetical care, and in a manner less construed by the need to extend the motif of covenant to cover all Scripture.

The renaissance in Calvin studies and the injection of biblical-theological considerations into the discipline of systematic theology—which, incidentally, were both factors in Murray's theological development—now call for an exegetical revisitation of the shape of covenant theology. In pondering this challenge to our Reformed tradition, Westminster Calvinists would do well not to assume that a back-to-Scripture reshaping of covenant theology will be hijacked by the neo-orthodox and will be aided by Barthian readings of Calvin. Admittedly, the divisions within the broader Reformed community are represented in readings of Scripture and in Calvin, but that is not what those of us working in the trajectory of John Murray have in mind. We believe that a restatement of covenant theology driven by a high view and a higher use of Scripture is warranted, long overdue, and can resolve the protracted contention over the covenant of works.

4. *The spiritual significance:*

The ensuring of the evangelistic use of the law-gospel antithesis.

Amid these avenues for the biblical development of confessional Presbyterianism, it is important that we not lose sight of the gospel. Murrayites and Klinians agree that the law-gospel antithesis is essential to it. The great strength of the antithesis is its emphasis on the objective nature of the atonement. It owns the biblical truth that Christ's once-for-all atonement for sin is rooted in the strictly judicial principle of meritorious obedience.

That said, we need to guard ourselves against referencing the law-gospel antithesis as if all we have in mind is a dry, lifeless legal process. There is something deeply unsatisfactory about the glib manner in which the hermeneutic may be appropriated. While the antithesis has become a convenient catchphrase for the essential core of the gospel, we need to ensure that we do not encourage a reductionist use of it, and a sheering of the gospel not only of its content but of its wonder as well. Rather, the Bible depicts the gospel in a holistic, pulsating way, which ought not only to fascinate our minds, but to warm our hearts, and to direct our lives and our ministries. Thus, without rejecting the forensic content of the gospel, we may put four matters on the table for future discussion.

First, the antithesis and the grace of God. To continue an earlier thought, the historical prioritization of the antithesis (law in Adam, gospel in Christ) has too little to say of the underlying cause of the gospel. To consider the origin of the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God is to better understand why there must have been either grace or graciousness at work in Eden (contrary to Kline's teaching [p. 287]). However this grace or graciousness is understood to have emanated from God (whether as Judge, Father, or both), it is clear that it set the context for the operation of divine justice in the garden, and encircles or encapsulates the forensic core of the gospel. This language of encircling, then, helps us to affirm the teaching of the WCF that the gospel began with a voluntary condescension of God (7:1), was activated by the condescension of God in Christ, and is to be consummated in the descent of God himself to a regenerated earth (Rev 21:1–5). References to law and gospel must avoid, accordingly, negating the reality of grace encircling the entire trajectory from protology (predestination) to eschatology (consummation), from election to glorification. In safeguarding the grace of God in the gospel we are to ensure due justice is done to both the gracious intent of God and the internal forensic workings of the gospel. Both are prominent in God's inscripturated revelation of the gospel.

I make this point, for Kline's strong defense of orthodoxy threatens to make implicit the explicit lavishness of God's saving grace. Briefly stated, the Klinian emphasis on strict terms of justice expresses, in Reformation terms, the necessity of *sola fide* but not necessarily the wonder and joy of *sola gratia*! I question then not the validity of the law-gospel antithesis *in se*, but any use of it which obscures its encircling by divine grace from first to last. From eternity God has so ordered things in his grace that the

second or last Adam merited our eschatological blessing where the first Adam had failed.

To appreciate this, it is best to understand law and grace multi- rather than uniperspectively. Whereas law comes before grace in the preaching and subjective experience of salvation, theologically and historically the grace of the gospel comes before law. The law of God was a gift of his grace, and the grace of God his answer in Christ to the conviction instilled by the law. Thus, historically the gospel forms a series (grace-law-grace), while homiletically and experientially remaining an antithesis (law-grace). Talk of the antithesis works for the heart, preaching, and experience of the gospel, but the series fits better the broader history and application of salvation. As a series, grace comes before law, and law before grace in the accomplishment and application of our salvation.

Notice in this regard, that whereas Calvin set God's justifying grace within the context of God's grace, Kline sets it within the context of God's law. Whereas Calvin was reacting against the heavy forensic burden of medieval Catholicism, thus preferring the series grace-law-grace. Kline, by contrast, reacted under the influence of the deeply-embedded Reformation and post-Reformation defense of the doctrine of justification. This understandable fixation developed amid, first, the push-back of the counter-Reformation and then the threats from within Protestantism to God's free justifying grace (antinomianism and neonomianism).¹⁹ Kline thus focused more on the narrower antithesis and its sharp contrasting of law and grace.

Second, the antithesis and the love of God. It follows that the law-gospel antithesis provides little explicit systematic expression of the love of God. The hermeneutical principle understandably focuses our attention on the satisfaction of strict justice, but to the detriment of the gospel as a remarkable placarding of God's love for sinners. While safeguarding the forensic core of the gospel is most necessary, any portrayal of the gospel that fails to celebrate the superlative love of God in providing us with a meritorious Savior is surely tantamount to a heresy of silence. The ultimate challenge to Reformed orthodoxy, then, is not the defense of God's right to apply strict justice in the face of sin, but to offer that

defense without smothering the gospel as a proclamation of the good news of God's abundant love in Christ. Thus, however we understand the original relationship between God and Adam (whether as a covenant of creation or as an Adamic Administration), we should leave no one in any doubt that God so lavished on Adam his love that, even upon his failure to merit the blessedness and reward of obedience God "was pleased [no judicial sanction or reticence there]" to make with Adam and his posterity a covenant of grace. In this Covenant of Grace God "freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved; and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto life his Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe" (WCF 7:3).

To put the matter more colloquially, God, in love, so threw himself into saving his people that he found a way whereby, in his impeccable wisdom, he could save sinners while yet retaining the integrity of his justice. So great was his love that he paid in the death of his Son the ultimate cost of satisfying his justice. As God, Christ, to draw from Anselm's theory of satisfaction, could alone atone for the sin, and yet as man his was the responsibility to suffer for it. Thus, again, we observe the law-gospel antithesis encircled, not simply by God's proclamation of his gracious condescension—for grace need not imply a knowledge of those benefiting from it—but by God's proclamation that God he so loves sinners as to have found a way in which, at great cost to himself, the unholy and the unlovely can enter a relationship with the Holy One.

Third, the antithesis and the family of God. A bare exposition of the law-gospel antithesis is also inadequate to express the familial tenor of the gospel. As a consequence of the historically ingrained fixation on the forensic and the knock-on neglect of Paul's doctrine of adoption, there has been little concern that it should do so. Things, however, are slowly changing. It is for the good that they are, for today the defense of a classic Protestant doctrine of justification lies, counter-intuitively, in the recovery of the familial. Only by juxtaposing the forensic and more individualistic elements of the application of salvation and its relational/familial and communal elements do we get to the heart of the new perspective's protest against the historic Protestant understanding of justification.

The recovery of the familial does, however, present a challenge in correlating the respective models of the law court and the family, but we must neither shirk this nor assume that the introduction of the familial threatens a throwback to Victorian liberalism. First because faithful

¹⁹ For more on how this defensiveness was forged and the impact of it, see Trumper, "An Historical Study of the Doctrine of Adoption in the Calvinistic Tradition" (*op. cit.*), chs. 6 and 7; *When History Teaches Us Nothing: The Recent Sonship Debate in Context*, first published 2008; 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 1–32.

exegesis will not allow for that, and, second, because we now know from the renaissance in Calvin studies and the ongoing recovery of adoption that the reformer sought to do justice to both the forensic and the familial. We must do so, too. After all, we are bound in our theology to reflect the familial tenor of the New Testament and have the example of WCF 11 (“of Justification”) and 12 (“of Adoption”) to encourage us. Both the Scriptures and the subordinate standards remind us that the gospel culminates not with the sinner’s acquittal from condemnation but with his or her reception into the family of God.

Fourth, the antithesis and the third use of the law. While we have agreed that law and grace can be depicted as an antithesis but also as a series (gospel-law-gospel), our salvation includes more than the benefits of justification and adoption, it also includes our sanctification. Thus, once more the moral law comes back into the picture, not now as that which highlights our need for God’s justifying grace, but as a guide to the Christian in living out his or her new life in Christ. Thus, we extend the series to gospel-law-gospel-law.

This may all be getting a little unwieldy, but the point helps us to guard against antinomianism as well as legalism. That said, the series gospel-law-gospel-law would leave us with the impression that the gospel begins with grace but ends in legality. Thus, to express the origin of the gospel in the grace of God and its culmination in glory we might want to settle in the series for gospel-law-gospel-law-gospel.

Now, as far as this is from the simple law-gospel antithesis, it does highlight the need to understand law and grace multiperspectively and not simply uniperspectively.²⁰ To be clear, I question not the validity of the antithesis when weighed uniperspectively, nor its order (gospel-law, as in Barth; or law in gospel, as in legalism; or gospel apart from law, as in antinomianism), but the unifocal attention to the antithesis at the

²⁰ Interestingly, discussions of law and gospel outside of the Murray-Kline debate have shown far less interest in the Edenic scenario. See, for example, John Colquhoun, *A Treatise on the Law and the Gospel* (ed. Don Kistler; New York: Wiley and Long, 1835; repr., Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1999), 3–25 excepted. The tendency of inferring as much theological data from the age of Adam as from the age of Christ has the effect, despite the progress of revelation (the lessons of Rom 5:12–21 and 1 Cor 15:21–22 notwithstanding), of flattening out of the contours of redemptive history. This happens when we assume that the biblical parallel between Adam and Christ produces equal quantities of theological data. This is so, although the dogmatic construal of the early chapters of Genesis implies that it is.

expense of the series. Although the antithesis is a warranted expression of the essential core of the gospel, clearly it does not cover its full ambit. Recognizing this, we may hope that the admirers of Murray and Kline, while going back and forth about how best to state law and grace, may, in a climate of less suspicion, feel freer to consider some of these other issues beyond strict justice and the meritorious obedience of Christ. After all, the gospel is not less than strict justice, but it is certainly a lot more than that. It is a matter also of the grace and love of God, displayed in the adoption of his own.

5. *The homiletical significance:*

The requirement that our Reformed orthodoxy be preachable.

It is important to share these caveats about the use of the law-gospel antithesis, for not only do they keep us centered on the gospel, but they remind us that the gospel must be proclaimed. The biblical reforms to confessional Presbyterianism are, then, not an exercise in theological fastidiousness but an aid to preaching the gospel winsomely. Likewise, the points made about the appropriation of the law-gospel antithesis, and the need to proclaim, as each text demands, not only law and grace (the antithesis) but also gospel-law-gospel-law-gospel (the series).

Consistent with this, we note that Jeon’s depiction of the debate cautions ministers of the Word against overloading theology with more extrabiblical terminology than is necessary. While our tradition needs to follow Kline’s example in investigating how the motifs of kingdom and covenant correlate, we are nevertheless to ensure that our theological schemes do not undermine the perspicuity of Scripture, breed confusion, and render preaching more difficult and theologically heavy than it needs to be.

Given that Jeon critiques New Testament scholar Moises Silva for not fully elaborating Kline’s system (p. 250), we may ask how many pastors could do so for their congregations, all the more so when we bear in mind the impression created by Kline’s avid followers that every nuance of his view of covenant and kingdom is a non-negotiable of theological (specifically, Reformed) orthodoxy. Whether witting or not (we presume not), Kline has created something of a tribal theology, the claims of which are overdone, and the complexities of which not only pose a challenge to preaching, but query thereby the legitimacy of his method and attitude. The quip of James Denney (1856–1917), Scottish theologian and preacher, is very *apropos*: “I don’t care anything for a theology that doesn’t help a man to preach.” In quoting Denney, I don’t mean to say by

this that we should be careless about the issues of the Murray-Kline debate, but that we should be concerned that what we believe is actually preachable. I seek not the eradication of the mysteries of Christianity from our preaching (e.g., the Trinity, incarnation, person of Christ, and so forth)—doctrines held by the universal church, and proclaimed as articles of faith—but matters which struggle to gain consensus even amid traditions of theology which count them distinctive. While some of us might feel that the necessity of preaching the Edenic scenario as a covenant of works falls into that camp, the idea of the Mosaic covenant being a reapplication of the covenant of works, certainly does, in my view.

6. *The apologetic significance:*

The reform of our methodology to render palatable our theology.

In expounding the Scriptures, we not only positively proclaim the gospel (in a Reformed [and reforming!] fashion), but we also have the opportunity to defend what we believe the Bible teaches. Our chosen apologetic will, however, determine for more Christians than we realize the credibility of Reformed orthodoxy.

While repetition is a valuable tool for embedding in minds and hearts such truths as God's covenant and his justifying grace and is bringing many into biblical Protestantism and the Reformed tradition in particular, we have lost too many along the way via our unwillingness or inability to hear and to answer effectively the challenges posed our Protestant and Reformed orthodoxy. Just as Kline has critiqued Murray theologially for what is chiefly a methodological variance, so critics of Reformed orthodoxy (whether the erstwhile Reformed or the neo-orthodox) are, in some cases, dismissing its theology out of conviction that a heavily logicized and systematized understanding of the covenant motif has been imposed on Scripture. Not getting the feel of Scripture emanating from discussions of Reformed orthodoxy they deduce, erroneously, that its theology cannot be biblical. We need, then, to bring into harmony the methodology and theology of covenant theology.

Of course, it would be naive to think that the reform of our methodology would bring numbers flocking back to confessional Presbyterianism (in particular). When people leave the tradition they do so for a variety of reasons—rejection of a high view of God's sovereignty, definitive atonement, the role of the moral law in Christian living, attraction to the new perspective on Paul, and so forth—but I do believe that the reform of our methodology and the balancing of the juridical and relational and

individual and communal aspects of divine revelation offers our tradition, when criticized, an opportunity to demonstrate the humility the doctrines of grace instill, and that to be reformed is to be *reforming* according to the Word of God, and can slow down the seepage from the Reformed tradition. For that to occur, we need to recover the biblical, thoughtful, and creative orthodoxy that helped shape the Reformation and post-Reformation eras. Instead, then, of merely regurgitating the method and theology of the reformers and Puritans, we would do better to communicate for our day the theology of Reformed orthodoxy in such a way that our methodology and sense of proportion no longer gets in the way of its acceptance. In other words, we need to do for our age what the reformers and Puritans did for theirs.

III. Conclusion

All in all, then, Jeon's study of the Murray-Kline debate is thorough, even-handed, and useful. In my view, he succeeds in reducing its tension, demonstrating the shared commitment of the two theologians to the law-gospel antithesis despite their differences over a covenant of works. The former takes us to the heart of the gospel, the latter, although formulated centuries ago, has not been considered, until perhaps of late the *sine qua non* of federal theology. While federal theology requires commitment to the historicity of our first parents and the probationary test they faced, one can read the events of Eden faithfully without depending on the rubric of a covenant of works (p. 329). Neither the Scriptures nor the most sensitive exegetes of the Reformed tradition, require us, in my view, to regard the construct of a "covenant of works" to be the regulating principle of federal theology. It was the probationary test set our first parents rather than a specific covenant that was foundational to all that transpired.

Jeon is to be thanked, then, for promoting more light and for turning down the heat, and for stimulating many additional thoughts about the health and future of confessional Presbyterianism. There is much work yet to be done in responding constructively to some of the kernels of truth influencing the neo-orthodox aversion to Reformed orthodoxy and in reforming our Reformed orthodoxy according to God's Word. It seems to me that the best defense of it (and of federal theology in particular) is an exegetically and methodologically driven renewal of its shape and feel. The aim, to be clear, is not to sell the family silver, but to polish it. Or, to change the metaphor, not to walk a new path, but to walk the old path with a fresher pair of shoes. There will always be those who will reject

the Reformed faith, but it is our responsibility to ensure that they do not reject it on account of its most loyal adherents.

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