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# CALVIN AND WITSIUS ON THE MOSAIC COVENANT

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When it comes to the Mosaic covenant, an ocean of ink has been spilled by theologians in their efforts to relate it both to Israel's immediate historical context and to the church's existence in the wake of the advent of Christ. Anthony Burgess (d. 1664), one of the Westminster divines, writes: "I do not find in any point of divinity, learned men so confused and perplexed (being like Abraham's ram, hung in a bush of briars and brambles by the head) as here."<sup>1</sup> Among the Westminster divines there were a number of views represented in the assembly: the Mosaic covenant was a covenant of works, a mixed covenant of works and grace, a subservient covenant to the covenant of grace, or simply the covenant of grace.<sup>2</sup> One can find a similar range of views represented in more recent literature in our own day.<sup>3</sup> In the limited amount of space

1. Anthony Burgess, *Vindicae Legis* (London, 1647), 229.

2. Samuel Bolton, *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom* (1645; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2001), 92–94.

3. See, e.g., Mark W. Karlberg, "Reformed Interpretation of the Mosaic Covenant," *Westminster Theological Journal* 43.1 (1981): 1–57; idem, *Covenant Theology in Reformed Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000), 17–58; D. Patrick Ramsey, "In Defense of Moses: A Confessional Critique of Kline and Karlberg," *Westminster Theological Journal* 66.2 (2004): 373–400;

here, it is not possible to set forth a complete case for the proper place of the Mosaic covenant. Nevertheless, it is certainly worthwhile to take a comparative historical-theological snapshot of two continental Reformed theologians on this challenging issue.

John Calvin (1509–64) is certainly a theologian who needs no introduction, as he is one who is familiar to most if not all serious students of the sixteenth-century Reformation. While Calvin's views were certainly not prescriptive for the Reformed tradition in his day, they were nevertheless influential both in continental and British Reformed theology. One particular continental Reformed theologian in whom Calvin's influence is found, especially on the nature and role of the Mosaic covenant, is Herman Witsius (1636–1708). Witsius is perhaps best known for his *Economy of the Covenants between God and Man* (1677), as well as his exposition of the Apostles' Creed (1681), though perhaps little else is known about the man. Witsius studied at the universities of Utrecht and Groningen. He served as a pastor for nearly twenty years before he was appointed as a professor of theology at the University of Franeker. He subsequently served as a professor at the University of Utrecht before finishing out his career at the University of Leiden, being forced out of teaching because of poor health before his death in 1708.<sup>4</sup> What makes a comparison of Calvin and Witsius worthwhile is not only that the former influenced the latter on his explanation of the Mosaic covenant, but also for other factors, particularly the later developments in early (ca. 1565–1640) and late orthodoxy (ca. 1640–1700) in the Reformed tradition.

Since the decades of dominance of Barthian theology in the twentieth century not only in international systematic theology but also in historical theology, a new wave of scholarship has reversed the common portrait of the relationship between Calvin and the subsequent Reformed tradition. The typical line of argumentation was that Calvin was a biblical humanist pastor-theologian whose scriptural insights were hijacked by a horde of scholastic academics interested in Aristotle more than the Bible and in presenting the teachings of Scripture in a rationalistic and logical rather than in a biblical manner. Recent scholarship, however, has demonstrated that the historical analysis coming out of the Barthian-influenced school was more interested in vindicating their monocov-

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Daniel P. Fuller, *Gospel and Law: Contrast or Continuum? The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980); Wayne G. Strickland, ed., *Five Views on Law and Gospel* (1993; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Ernest F. Kevan, *The Grace of Law* (1976; Morgan: Soli Deo Gloria, 1999).

4. Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 49.

enantal understanding of Scripture rather than doing accurate contextualized historical theology.<sup>5</sup>

In a comparative exploration of Calvin and Witsius on the Mosaic covenant, then, one will be able to see the continuity that exists between these two Reformed theologians despite coming from different periods. One will be able to see the influence Calvin yielded upon Witsius's understanding of the Mosaic covenant. At the same time, one will be able to see some differences between the two theologians. The differences do not amount to a distortion of Calvin's theology, never mind the fact that such a notion seems inherently fraught with unchecked assumptions. That is, at no time did any early or late orthodox Reformed theologian understand himself to be a Calvin clone restricted to reproducing Calvin's theology in his own. Rather, the differences lay in the emphasis that Witsius places upon the use and role of typology in his explanation of the Mosaic covenant.

There is a case to be made that, due to the greater attention to biblical theology in the late orthodox period, explanations of the Mosaic covenant were expressed less in the Aristotelian heuristic use of the terms "accidents" and "substance" and more in terms of the *historia salutis*, or redemptive history.<sup>6</sup> The bottom line, at least in terms of the previous Barthian character-

5. For analysis and bibliography see Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); idem, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

6. First, one should note that by the use of the term "biblical theology" the specific discipline as defined by the historical-critical school is not intended (see Johann P. Gabler, "An Oration of the Proper Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Specific Origins of Each," in *The Flowering of Old Testament Theology*, ed. Ben C. Ollenburger, Elmer A. Martens, and Gerhard F. Hasel [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992], 489–502; Geerhardus Vos, "The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980], 3–24, esp. 15). Rather, as Geerhardus Vos (1862–1949) has defined it, the term is here intended in its broader usage denoting the unfolding of special revelation (*Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* [1948; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1996], v). The biblical-theological hermeneutic versus the distinct discipline as it was defined by Gabler has a long pedigree in the history of interpretation and is not bound to the idea of severing biblical from dogmatic, or systematic, theology, but largely to one's commitment to understanding the Scriptures and its teachings in terms of the revelatory whole, both Old and New Testaments. Such a hermeneutic can be found in the church fathers and in the Reformers (see Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, "Story and Biblical Theology," in *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig Bartholomew et al. [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004], 153; cf. James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999], 351). Second, the use of the term *historia salutis* is not intended to imply that Reformed theologians of the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries employed it, as it is of recent origins (see Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John Richard de Witt [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975], 14; cf. Richard B. Gaffin, *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul's Soteriology* [1978; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987], 14). Rather, it is being used to describe the unfolding of redemptive history, something the Reformers materially acknowledge, though they formally do not use the term.

ization of the relationship between Calvin and the Calvinists, is that Witsius's theology is "more biblical" than Calvin's. It is preferable to say, however, that Calvin and Witsius have similar formulations but with different emphases in the ways in which they express their formulations. Therefore, one should first explore Calvin's understanding of the nature and place of the Mosaic covenant, and then move to the views of Witsius, so that one may compare and contrast the two continental Reformed theologians' views.

### Calvin on the Mosaic Covenant

This section will survey Calvin's understanding of the Mosaic covenant by first exploring his understanding of Old Testament (OT) soteriology and then the place and function of the Mosaic covenant.

#### *Soteriology in the OT*

In any survey of Calvin's understanding of the law, it is important that one delineate his different uses of the term. In Calvin's *Institutes*, the term "law" can mean the "form of religion handed down by God through Moses" (2.7.1), which means the Mosaic covenant in its entirety as one finds it in the Pentateuch. For Calvin the term "law" can also refer to the moral law, that is, the Decalogue and Christ's summary of it (2.8). Lastly, the term can also refer to various civil, judicial, and ceremonial statutes (4.20.14–16).<sup>7</sup> When one explores Calvin's understanding of the function of the law, he must therefore carefully distinguish whether he has the moral law or the law as the Mosaic covenant in view.

Keeping these definitions in mind, then, we find that, for Calvin, salvation has always been the same in every age, by grace through faith in Christ, even for OT saints. Calvin writes, "The covenant made with all the patriarchs is so much like ours in substance and reality that the two are actually one and the same. Yet they differ in the mode of dispensation" (2.10.2).<sup>8</sup> Here is a programmatic, if not formulaic, construction for Calvin's understanding of soteriology in both the OT and New Testament (NT). Notice that the Abrahamic *foedus* is so much like ours in *substantia et re*, yet he states that the covenant differs only in the *administratio*. Elsewhere Calvin applies the term *spirituale foedus* (2.10.7) to the one single covenant that unites both OT and

7. See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., Library of Christian Classics 21–22 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 348 n. 1.

8. "Patrum omnium foedus adeo substantia et re ipsa nihil a nostro differet, ut unum prorsus atque idem sit: administratio tamen variat" (John Calvin, *Opera Selecta*, ed. Peter Barth and Wilhelm Niesel, 5 vols. [Munich, 1926–52]).

NT saints in salvation. What changes, therefore, in the transition from the OT to the NT is not the covenant, but rather the form or administration of the covenant (2.11.13).<sup>9</sup> Here then is what one may describe as Aristotelian language in the use of the distinction between substance and form, which was commonplace in the theology of Calvin's day.<sup>10</sup> One should ask, then, Why does Calvin employ these distinctions of form and substance, and what role do they play in his understanding of the function of the law and more specifically the function of the Mosaic covenant?

Calvin explains that the form of the *spirituale foedus* in the OT was necessarily wrapped in shadows and ceremonies which pointed to Christ, who is the foundation of salvation in every age, because the OT saints were the underage church requiring simple instruction (2.6.2; 2.11.4–5). Calvin states,

The same church existed among them, but as yet in its childhood. Therefore, keeping them under this tutelage, the Lord gave, not spiritual promises unadorned and open, but ones foreshadowed, in a measure, by earthly promises. When, therefore, he adopted Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their descendants into the hope of immortality, he promised them the Land of Canaan as an inheritance. It was not to be the final goal of their hopes, but was to exercise and confirm them, as they contemplated it, in hope of their true inheritance not yet manifested to them. And that they might not be deceived, a higher promise was given, attesting that the land was not God's supreme benefit. Thus Abraham is not allowed to sit by idly when he receives the promise of the land, but his mind is elevated to the Lord by a greater promise. (2.11.2)<sup>11</sup>

The spiritual promises, or the gospel of Christ, therefore were present in substance in the initial covenant made with the patriarchs, but the mode of administration was earthly and temporal. The earthly possession, however, was a mirror in which the patriarchs were able to see the future inheritance prepared for them in heaven (2.11.1). Seeing the nature of

9. "Quod externam formam et modum mutavit."

10. See Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), q.v. *substantia* and *forma*, 290–91, 123–24.

11. "Eadem inter illos ecclesia: sed cuius aetas adhuc puerilis erat. Sub hac ergo paedagogia illos continuit Dominus, ut spiritualis promissiones non ita nudas et apertas illis daret, sed terrenis quodammodo adumbrates. Abraham ergo, Isaac et Iacob, eorumque posteritatem quum in spem immortalitatis cooparet, terram Chanaan in haereditatem illis promisit: non in qua spes suas terminarent, sed cuius aspectu in spem verae illius, quae nondum apparebat, haereditatis se exercerent ac confirmarent. Ac ne hallucinari possent, dabatur superior promissio quae terram illam non supremum esse Dei beneficium testaretur. Sic Abraham in accepta terrae promissione torpere non sinitur: sed maiori promissione erigitur illius mens in Dominum."

God's administration of the gospel in the OT, specifically to the patriarchs, one can begin to understand how the Mosaic covenant will function in the *historia salutis*.

### *The Place and Function of the Mosaic Covenant*

Given Calvin's explanation of soteriology in the OT, one has a framework in which to understand the place and function of the Mosaic covenant in his theology. Calvin explains that with the dispensation of the Mosaic covenant there are two separate covenants, the *foedus legale* and *foedus evangelicum*, the ministries of Moses and Christ (2.11.4). There is a sense in which Calvin sees these two covenants in an antithetical relationship to one another, as the law functions within the *foedus legale* only "to enjoin what is right, to forbid what is wicked; to promise a reward to the keepers of righteousness, and threaten transgressors with punishment" (2.11.7).<sup>12</sup> In other words, Calvin is not afraid to say that the Mosaic administration of the law sets forth a covenant governed by a works principle, namely, eternal life through obedience: "We cannot gainsay that the reward of eternal salvation awaits complete obedience to the law, as the Lord has promised" (2.7.3).<sup>13</sup> The problem, however, with this covenant of obedience is, because of man's sinfulness, "righteousness is taught in vain by the commandments until Christ confers it by free imputation and by the Spirit of regeneration" (2.7.2).<sup>14</sup> Calvin, therefore, sees the Mosaic covenant characterized by the promise of eternal life which can be obtained by Israel's obedience, yet because of her sin, Israel is unable to fulfil the requirements of the covenant—only Christ was able to do this.

In this sense, then, the *foedus legale* and *foedus evangelicum* are antithetical, in that they both extend the promise of salvation, the former through obedience and the latter through faith in Christ. This is not to say, though, that the Mosaic covenant as a *foedus legale* is totally absent of grace, mercy, or any reference to the gospel. Recall that Calvin believed that the *spirituale foedus* had a changing form or *administratio* as one crosses over from the OT to the NT. This is especially true as it pertains to the Mosaic covenant for three reasons. First, Calvin clearly states that OT Israel participated in the *spirituale foedus* (2.10.15). Second, because Israel was still the underage church, God dealt with them as children:

12. "Ut praecipiat quae recta sunt, scelera prohibeat, praemium edicat cultoribus iustitiae, poenam transgressoribus minetur."

13. "Nec refragari licet quin iustam Legis obedientiam maneat aeternae salutis remunerat, quemadmodum a domino promissa est."

14. "Nampriore quidem significat frustra doceri iustitiam praeceptis, donec eam Christus et gratuita imputatione et spiritu regenerationis conferat."

[Paul] also confesses that they were sons and heirs of God, but because of their youth they had to be under the charge of a tutor. It was fitting that, before the sun of righteousness had arisen, there should be no great and shining revelation, no clear understanding. The Lord, therefore, so meted out the light of his Word to them that they still saw it afar off and darkly. Hence Paul expresses this slenderness of understanding by the word “childhood.” It was the Lord’s will that this childhood be trained in the elements of this Word and in little external observances, as rules for children’s instruction, until Christ should shine forth, through whom the knowledge of believers was to mature. (2.11.5)<sup>15</sup>

Third, given Israel’s underage status and the need to deal with them in simple terms, the ceremonies of the law were “accidental properties of the covenant, or additions and appendages, and in common parlance, accessories of it” (2.11.4).<sup>16</sup> Once again we see Calvin explain the relationship between the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants in terms of form and substance.

Calvin uses the distinction between form and substance to explain that the Mosaic covenant, as to its substance, is part of the *spirituale foedus*, but as to its form, its *administratio* is a *foedus legale*. Calvin states, for example, that God “willed that, for the time during which he gave his covenant to the people of Israel in a veiled form, the grace of future and eternal happiness be signified and figured under earthly benefits, the gravity of spiritual death under physical punishment” (2.11.3). Where Calvin is quite pronounced in his usage of the form-substance distinction regarding the Mosaic covenant is in his commentary on Galatians. Calvin states concerning the nature of gospel in both testaments: “All this leads to the conclusion that the difference between us and the ancient fathers lies not in the substance but in accidents.”<sup>17</sup> Calvin can speak of the OT saints partaking of the *spirituale foedus* but also says that “their freedom was not yet revealed, but was hid-

15. “Illos quoque filios et haeredes Dei fuisse fatetur: sed qui propter pueritiam sub paedagogi custodia haberi essent. Conveniebat enim, sole iustitiae nondum exorto, nec tantum esse revelationis fulgorem, nec tantam intelligendi perspicaciam. Sic ergo verbi sui lucem illis Dominus dispensavit, ut eam minus adhuc et obscure cernerent. Ideo hanc intelligentiae tenuitatem pueritiae vocabulo Paulus notat, quam elementis huius mundi et externis observatiunculis, tanquam regulis puerilis disciplinae, voluit Dominus exerceri, donec effulgeret Christus: per quem fidelis populi cognitionem adolescere oportebat.”

16. “Hae vero tametsi foederis duntaxat accidentia erant, vel certe accessiones ac annexa, et (ut vulgus loquitur) accessoria.”

17. John Calvin, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians*, trans. T. H. L. Parker, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries II (1965; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 71; *Ioannis Calvinii Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, ed. G. Baum, E. Cunitz, E. Reuss (Brunswick: Schwetschke, 1892), 50:224: “His omnibus consentaneum est, discrimen inter nos et veteres patres non in substantia esse, sed in accidentibus.” *Calvini Opera* hereafter abbreviated as *CO*.

den under the coverings and the yoke of the law.”<sup>18</sup> Where one finds some of Calvin’s most crystalized statements on the function and place of the Mosaic covenant is in his sermons on Galatians.

In Calvin’s sermons on Galatians one finds the same characteristics as were set forth in the *Institutes* and his commentary on Galatians concerning the nature and function of the Mosaic covenant. Calvin emphasizes that the OT saints were saved by grace, not by works.<sup>19</sup> He also explains that what differentiates the OT from the NT saint is not the promise of the gospel, but “the diversity in the outward government,” or the outward administration of the gospel.<sup>20</sup> Calvin explains, “The law reigned and had its full scope as in respect of outward order before the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>21</sup> The outward order, of course, was marked by typology that found its telos in Christ: “It is said that the salvation is manifested unto us by the Gospel, yet was it also already before: and although there was a veil in the Temple, and other shadows, yet nevertheless the fathers had always an eye unto Jesus Christ, unto whom we be led at this day.”<sup>22</sup> So, Calvin once again delineates between the substance of the OT administration, which was the gospel of Christ, and the form, which was legal in nature.

When Calvin explains to his congregants the nature of the Mosaic covenant, he does not withdraw or modify the conceptual framework that he has established in his theological writings. Calvin explains, for example, that the Mosaic covenant is characterized by a works principle, that is, redemption by obedience, but at the same time because of man’s sinfulness it only shows man’s inability to merit eternal life by his obedience and therefore drives the sinner to Christ:

The law then is not transitory in respect of showing us what is good, for it must continue to the world’s end. But we must mark Saint Paul’s discourse: for he takes the law, as containing the promises and threatenings, and also the ceremonies. Then on the one side there is [this promise,] he that does these things shall live in them, as we have seen heretofore. And on the other side there is this threat, cursed is he that does not fulfil all that is contained

18. Calvin, *Galatians*, 76: “Quia scilicet libertas eorum nondum erat revelata, sed inclusa sub legis involucris et iugo” (CO 50:229).

19. John Calvin, *Sermons on Galatians* (1574; Audubon: Old Paths, 1995), 500; CO 50:569–70.

20. Calvin, *Sermons on Galatians*, 501: “Diversité au regime exterieur” (CO 50:571).

21. Calvin, *Sermons on Galatians*, 448: “La response à cela est que la Loy a bien eu son regne et sa vogue devant la venue de nostre Seigneur Iesus Christ quant à l’ordre exterieur” (CO 50:539).

22. Calvin, *Sermons on Galatians*, 516: “Mais quand il est dit que le salut qui nous est manifesté par l’Evangile estoit desia auparavant, combine qu’il y eust des ombrages, combine qu’il y eust le voile du temple: neantmoins que les Peres ont tousiours regardé à Iesus Christ, au quell nous sommes aujourd’huy conduits” (CO 50:580).

herein. Now the law (as we see) promises salvation to none but such as live purely and incorruptly: but all of us come short of that, and therefore the promise of the law is to no purpose.<sup>23</sup>

Here Calvin emphasizes a works principle in the Mosaic covenant, but he is clear regarding the role of this principle—it drives the sinner to Christ by showing him his inability to render perfect obedience to the law.<sup>24</sup>

### Summary

Calvin's understanding of the place and function of the Mosaic covenant can be summarized in the following manner: (1) salvation has always been by grace through faith in Christ; (2) all of God's people, whether in the OT or NT, participate in the same *spirituale foedus* which was begun with the patriarchs; (3) in the OT the *spirituale foedus* had a different outward administration than in the NT, which Calvin uses the form-substance distinction to explain; (4) the outward OT administration of the *spirituale foedus* is marked by shadows and types of Christ; (5) the Mosaic administration of the law is specifically a *foedus legale* in contrast to the *foedus evangelicum*, the respective ministries of Moses and Christ; and (6) the *foedus legale* is based upon a works principle but no one is able to fulfil its obligations except Christ. One finds these characteristics in Calvin's *Institutes* and in his commentary and sermons on Galatians. Keeping these summary points in mind, the investigation can now proceed to examine Witsius's understanding of the Mosaic covenant and then compare and contrast the views of the two continental theologians.

### Witsius on the Mosaic Covenant

In the theology of Witsius, there are many of the same themes and emphases that exist in Calvin's theology. These parallels exist, of course, given that both Calvin and Witsius are continental Reformed theologians. While such a broad comparison is accurate, the more that one delves into the details, he finds nuances or emphases that exist in the formulations of Witsius but to a lesser degree in Calvin. These differences can be attributed to

23. Calvin, *Sermons on Galatians*, p. 445: "La Loy donc entant qu'elle nous montre ce qui est bon, n'a pas esté temporelle: car elle doit durer iusques à la fin du monde. Mais il nous faut noter la dispute de saint Paul: car il prend la Loy d'autant qu'elle contient les promesses et les menaces, et puis les ceremonies. Il y a donc d'un costé, Qui fera as choses, il vivra en icelles: comme desia nous avons veu. Il y a la menace: Maudit sera celuy qui n'accomplira tout ce qui est ici contenu. Or la Loy (comme nous voyons) ne promet salut sinon à ceux qui aurons vescu purement et en toute integrité: nous defaillons tous, la promesse donc de la Loy est inutile" (CO 50:538).

24. See Calvin, *Sermons on Galatians*, 459–60; CO 50:546.

the progression and development of Reformed theology—the move from early formulation of the Reformation (1509–65) to that of codification and defense of those formulations in the period of high orthodoxy (ca. 1640–1700). Witsius uses Calvin’s formulations in his own understanding of the Mosaic covenant, but at the same time employs developments that occurred well after Calvin’s death. The similarity that exists between the two theologians is the insistence that salvation is and always has been by grace through faith in Christ. Like Calvin, Witsius maintains that since the fall God’s redemptive intentions have always been by grace.<sup>25</sup> Where the differences lie, however, are in Witsius’ employment of the theological construct of the covenant of works and the greater use of typology in explaining the nature of the Mosaic covenant.

### *The Refinement of Covenant Theology*

In the days following Calvin, Reformed theologians continued to refine the categories under which they placed various scriptural data. Calvin, for example, placed God’s gracious postfall dealings with man reaching back to the garden and extending to the eschaton under the theological rubric of a *spirituale foedus*, or spiritual covenant. Yet around the same time theologians such as Zacharias Ursinus (1534–83) employed a twofold bifurcation to describe the pre- and postfall relationship between God and his people. In Ursinus’s Larger Catechism (1561–62) he writes:

The law contains the natural covenant, established by God with humanity in creation, that is, it is known by humanity by nature, it requires our perfect obedience to God, and it promises eternal life to those who keep it and threatens eternal punishment to those who do not. The gospel, however, contains the covenant of grace, that is, although it exists, it is not known at all by nature; it shows us the fulfilment in Christ of the righteousness that the law requires and the restoration in us of that righteousness by Christ’s Spirit; and it promises eternal life freely because of Christ to those who believe him.<sup>26</sup>

Here the prefall relationship between God and man is placed under the theological rubric of a *natural covenant* and the postfall under the *covenant of grace*. While the precise date and source of the term “covenant of works”

25. Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man: Comprehending a Complete Body of Divinity*, trans. William Crookshank, 2 vols. (1822; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1990), 4.1–2; 2:108–40. In all subsequent references, the first set of numbers indicates book, chapter, and paragraph numbers, the second set the page numbers to this English translation.

26. Zacharias Ursinus, “The Larger Catechism,” q. 36, in Lyle D. Bierma et al., eds., *An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 168–69.

are debated, nevertheless by the late sixteenth century theologians were using the covenants of works and grace to describe the pre- and postfall relationship between God and man.<sup>27</sup> It is the development of this covenantal framework, a development of nomenclature rather than theological substance, that one finds in Witsius's explanation of the Mosaic covenant.

### *Witsius on the Relationship between the Two Covenants*

Witsius's understanding of the relationship between the covenant of works and grace is substantively similar to that of Ursinus.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, however, Witsius also explains that the covenant of grace may be further subdivided into two distinct economies, which he defines as the old and new testaments.<sup>29</sup> The two economies are similar in some respects, but in others they are quite different. In language quite similar to that of Calvin, Witsius explains that the substance of the covenant of grace in both the old and new economies is the same. What differs, however, is the *circumstantials* of each economy:

It is a matter of the greatest moment, that we learn distinctly to consider the covenant of grace, either as it is in its *substance* or essence, as they call it, or as it is in divers ways proposed by God, with respect to *circumstantials*, under different economies. If we view *the substance* of the covenant, it is but only *one*, nor is it possible it should be otherwise.<sup>30</sup>

27. One of the earliest uses of the terms "covenants of works and grace" comes from Amandus Polanus (1561–1610): "The eternal covenant is a covenant in which God promises men eternal life. And that is two fold, the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. The covenant of works is a bargain of God made with men concerning eternal life, to which is both a condition of perfect obedience adjoined, to be performed by man, and also a threatening of eternal death if he shall not perform perfect obedience (Gen. 2:17)." It is also of interest to note that Polanus believed that the covenant of works was repeated in the Mosaic covenant (*The Substance of Christian Religion Soundly Set Forth in Two Books* [London, 1595], 88). For the relevant literature regarding Ursinus and the development of the term "covenant of works" see Robert Letham, "The *Foedus Operum*: Some Factors Accounting for Its Development," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 14 (1983): 457–67; Peter A. Lillback, "Ursinus' Development of the Covenant of Creation: A Debt to Melancthon or Calvin?" *Westminster Theological Journal* 43 (1981): 247; cf. Dirk Visser, "The Covenant in Zacharias Ursinus," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 18 (1987): 531–44.

28. Witsius, *Economy*, 3.1.7; 1:284. For a full exposition of Witsius's understanding of the covenant of works, see Richard A. Muller, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 175–89; idem, "The Covenant of Works and the Stability of Divine Law in the Seventeenth-Century Reformed Orthodoxy," *Calvin Theological Journal* 22 (1994): 75–101.

29. Herman Witsius, *Sacred Dissertations on the Lord's Prayer*, trans. William Pringle (1839; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1990), diss. 9, 212: "Regnum Gratiae rursus considerari potest, vel uti olim fuit sub OECONOMIA TESTAMENTI VETERIS; vel uti nunc est sub TESTAMENTO NOVO" (Herman Witsius, *Exercitationes Sacrae in Symbolum quod Apostolorum Dicitur et in Orationem Dominicam* [Basel, 1739], 9.5).

30. Witsius, *Economy*, 3.2.1; 1:291: "Maximi res momenti est, ut Foedus Gratiae, vel ut est in *substantia* & essential, quam vocant, sua vel ut quoad *circumstantialia*, sub diversis Oeconomiiis,

Keeping this distinction between the substance and circumstances in mind, one finds Witsius emphasizing the legal nature of the Mosaic covenant as he explains its role in redemptive history.

While the covenant of grace is of the same substance throughout both the old and new economies, Witsius is nevertheless prepared to say that the Mosaic covenant is legal in nature because the Mosaic covenant was primarily an administration of the law with three aspects: the Decalogue was given to Israel, and as to its substance was one and the same with the law of nature; Israel received the law as the church, and as such, they received the ceremonial law, which pointed to the person and work of Christ; and Israel received the law as a peculiar people, as a theocracy, and therefore they received the political laws.<sup>31</sup> In this threefold understanding of the law one finds the historic division of the law: the moral, ceremonial, and civil. It is important to note, however, that the telic goal of the threefold law finds its fulfilment in the person and work of Christ. In other words, the law, especially the ceremonial and civil, finds its significance in typology. It is typology that plays a major part in Witsius's understanding of the Mosaic covenant.

### *The Mosaic Covenant and Typology*

Recall that Witsius believes that the covenant of grace is the same in substance in both the old and new economies. At the same time, however, Witsius can also argue that the Mosaic covenant is a repetition of the covenant of works.<sup>32</sup> This is not to say that Witsius believed that the covenant of works was republished so that Israel might attain their salvation by their obedience to the law.<sup>33</sup> On the contrary, Witsius believed that the Mosaic covenant was connected to both the *ordo* and *historia salutis* in different ways. Witsius argued along the same lines as Calvin that the Mosaic covenant vis-à-vis the *ordo salutis* functioned in such a way as to reveal sin and drive Israel to Christ: “And so their being thus brought to a remembrance of the covenant of works tended to promote the covenant of grace.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, the republication of the covenant of works served the pedagogical function of the law—that which drives the sinner

diversimode a Deo proponitur. Si ipsam Foederis *substantiam* spectemus non nisi unum illud unicumque est, neque vero, ut aliud sit, fieri ullo modo potest” (Herman Witsius, *De Oeconomia Foederum Dei cum Hominibus. Libri Quatuor* [Basel, 1739]).

31. Witsius, *Economy*, 4.4.1–2; 2:162–63.

32. *Ibid.*, 4.4.48; 2:183.

33. *Ibid.*, 4.4.49; 2:183.

34. *Ibid.*, 4.4.49; 2:183–84: “Atque ita ea ipsa commemoratio foederis operum inserviit promotioni foederis gratiae.”

to Christ. To support his understanding of this function of the Mosaic covenant as the republished covenant of works, Witsius sought the support and argumentation of Calvin from his commentary on Romans 10:4.<sup>35</sup> Citing Calvin, Witsius argued that it was only “crass Israelites” who misunderstood the purpose of the Sinai covenant, thinking that they could secure their salvation by their obedience rather than through the work of Christ.<sup>36</sup>

The Mosaic covenant vis-à-vis the *historia salutis*, on the other hand, had a different aim. Witsius argued that the Mosaic covenant was a national covenant between God and Israel. The Mosaic covenant was an agreement whereby Israel promised to God a sincere obedience to all of the commands of the covenant, especially the Decalogue, and God in return would bless Israel with reward, both temporal and eternal.<sup>37</sup> Given that Witsius argued that there were eternal rewards annexed to the Mosaic covenant, we see that, like Calvin before him, Witsius believed that God set forth a legal covenant before the nation of Israel, one by which they could earn their salvation through their obedience. Given man’s sinfulness, however, the Mosaic covenant as the republished covenant of works only revealed Israel’s sinfulness. At the same time the Mosaic covenant had temporal rewards annexed, namely, the hope of securing Israel’s presence in the Promised Land through their obedience.

In terms of Witsius’s understanding of typology, this means that he understood Israel’s existence in the Promised Land as harkening back to Adam’s probation in the garden, but also looking forward to the person and work of Christ, the Last Adam. OT people, places, and events such as the land of Canaan, the exodus from Egypt, the Red Sea crossing, the manna from heaven, water from the rock, the fall of Jericho, the conquest of Canaan, the exile and exodus from Babylon all pointed to greater NT people, events, and places, especially to the person and work of Christ:

But these very things certainly cease not, according to the sentiments of very learned men, to be all of them types of the greatest things to the Christian church. The city of Jerusalem itself, the very temple with its whole pomp of ceremonies, though no longer in being, any more than Adam and the deluge, yet ought also to be considered by us Christians as types of the heavenly city

35. Cf. John Calvin, *Romans and Thessalonians*, trans. Ross Mackenzie, ed. David Torrance and T. F. Torrance, Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 221–22; CO 49:196.

36. Witsius, *Economy*, 4.4.52; 2:184–85: “Crassos Israëlitas mentem Dei perperam intellexisse, foedere Dei turpiter abusos esse.”

37. *Ibid.*, 4.4.54; 2:186.

and temple not made with hands. In a word, the whole of the Mosaic law, though abrogated as to any obligation of observance, ceases not to exhibit to us, for our instruction, a type of spiritual things.<sup>38</sup>

Given this typological thrust of the Mosaic covenant, Witsius is prepared to say that the Sinai covenant is therefore neither exclusively of the covenant of works nor of grace. Rather, it is a national covenant of “sincere piety” that presupposes both covenants.<sup>39</sup> This covenant of sincere piety in terms of the land inheritance did not require perfect obedience, but sincere obedience, which for the godly Israelite was the fruit of his faith.<sup>40</sup> The purpose of this national covenant was not so that Israel would earn the land through their obedience, but rather so that as a nation they would foreshadow the person and work of Christ.

### *Summary*

The Mosaic covenant is unique in redemptive history, as it combines elements of the covenants of both works and grace. The republication of the covenant of works drives the sinner to Christ in its connection with the *ordo salutis*, and in terms of the *historia salutis* it is a typological sketch that has Israel foreshadowing the person and work of Christ. With this understanding, Witsius calls the Decalogue an “instrument of the covenant.” Witsius writes:

As an *instrument of the covenant* they point out the way to eternal salvation; or contain the condition of enjoying that salvation: and that both under the covenant of grace and works. But with this difference; that under the covenant of works, this condition is required to be performed by man himself; under the covenant of grace it is proposed, as already performed, or to be performed by a mediator.<sup>41</sup>

38. Ibid., 3.3.4–5; 1:307–8: “At eadem omnia, certe ex Doctissimorum Virorum hypothesibus, non desinunt Ecclesiae Christianae rerum maximarum typi esse. Ipsa civitas Hierosolymitana, ipsum templum cum omni cerimoniarum choragio, licet in rerum natura amplius non existent, aequae ac Adamus ac Diluvium, a nobis tamen Christianis quoque uti typi civitatis coelestis, & templi sine manibus facti, considerari debent. Tota denique Lex Mosaica, quamvis quoad observationis obligationem abrogate sit, non desinit quoad doctrinam nobis exhibere typum rerum spiritualium.”

39. Ibid., 4.4.54; 2:186: “foedus sinceræ pietatis.”

40. Ibid., 4.4.45–46; 2:182.

41. Ibid., 4.4.57; 2:187: “Qua *instrumentum foederis* viam monstrant ad aeternam salutem; sive continent conditionem potiundae beatitudinis. Idque tam sub foedere gratiae, quam sub foedere operum. Verum hoc discrimine: quod sub foedere operum exigatur haec conditio praestanda ab ipso homine: sub foedere gratiae proponatur, ut praestanda vel praestita per Mediatorem.”

Given these data, we can move forward and summarize the similarities and differences that exist between Witsius's and Calvin's understanding of the Mosaic covenant.

### Calvin and Witsius Compared

Thus far the investigation has explored Calvin's and Witsius's understanding of the Mosaic covenant and has revealed some parallels in their understandings, particularly in the areas of soteriology in the OT and NT, the employment of the substance-accident distinction, and the legal nature of the Mosaic covenant, that is, it embodies a works principle. The distinct differences between Calvin and Witsius are primarily in their nomenclature and the emphasis given to typology. The different emphases seem to emerge in terms of Calvin's and Witsius's respective understandings of the works principle.

For Calvin, the works principle is primarily aimed at the individual and the *ordo salutis*. The promise of eternal life for perfect obedience offered by the law is merely hypothetical.<sup>42</sup> In other words, it seems a fair conclusion to say that Israel's possession of the land was by grace through faith, the same manner by which they obtained eternal life. For Witsius, however, while the Mosaic covenant carries the same function that Calvin sees in terms of the pedagogical use of the law, at the same time there is also an added dimension brought about by typology. It is for this reason that Witsius calls the Mosaic covenant a *national* covenant, one that requires sincere, not perfect, obedience. In contrast to Calvin, Witsius therefore relates the Mosaic covenant to both the *ordo* and *historia salutis*. Calvin's use of typology sees the Promised Land merely as a foreshadow of heaven, whereas Witsius sees the Promised Land both in terms of the Promised Land and also in terms of the foreshadow of Christ's obedience, that which secures eternal life. It is particularly this difference in the use of typology between the two theologians that is of interest and deserves attention.

First, as observed above, with the march of time the Reformed tradition saw the refinement of its covenant theology, particularly in the development of the terms of the covenants of works and grace. Despite the attempts of those who see a substantive difference between Reformation and post-Reformation theology on this point, there is no difference.<sup>43</sup> This is a difference in nomenclature, not theological substance.

42. See, e.g., John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses*, Calvin Translation Society 3 (1854; Grand Rapids: Baker, n.d.), 202–5; CO 25:7.

43. See, e.g., Muller, *After Calvin*, 63–104, and relevant bibliography refuting the Calvin vs. the Calvinists thesis. Muller explains that Calvin virtually identified natural law with Mosaic law and

Second, concerning typology, there are some differences between Calvin and Witsius, though, again, this difference is not substantive but instead one of emphasis. It is without question that there is a greater use and employment of typology in the theology of Witsius. In fact, Witsius devotes an entire chapter to the subject of OT types, something that is unparalleled in Calvin.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, one sees Witsius's greater emphasis upon the *historia salutis* in the title of his work, "The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man." This is not to say, however, that Calvin did not use and employ typology in his explanation of his understanding of the Mosaic covenant. In fact, Witsius saw his own understanding and explication of the nature and place of typology as grounded in the theology of Calvin. Witsius writes:

According to us and Paul, the Old Testament denotes the testament [or covenant] of grace, under that dispensation, which subsisted before the coming of Christ in the flesh, and was proposed formerly to the fathers under the veil of certain types, pointing out some imperfections of that state, and consequently that they were to be abolished in their appointed time; or as Calvin has very well expressed it (*Institutes* 2.11.4): "the Old Testament was a doctrine involved in a shadowy and ineffectual observation of ceremonies, and was therefore temporary, because a thing in suspense, till established on a firm and substantial bottom."<sup>45</sup>

Here in this statement we see that both Calvin and Witsius recognize the role and place of typology in explaining the function of the Mosaic covenant. It is fair to say, however, that Witsius places greater emphasis upon typology, at least in terms of the amount of space he gives the subject, than does Calvin.

It seems that both Calvin and Witsius are comfortable using the Aristotelian substance-accident distinction to explain the relationship of the

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that he also recognized that the Mosaic law was covenantally administered. Given these two points, though Calvin did not speak of the creation in terms of a *foedus naturale* or a *foedus operum*, he certainly assumed that Adam's state in the garden was governed by law (see Muller, *After Calvin*, 182; cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.1; 4.20.16; idem, *Commentary on Genesis*, Calvin Translation Society [Grand Rapids: Baker, n.d.], Gen. 2:16, 125–26; Susan E. Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory: Nature and the Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin* [1991; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995], 22–28, 77–79, 87–90).

44. Witsius, *Economy*, 4.6; 2:188–230.

45. *Ibid.*, 3.3.2; 1:307: "Sed Vetus Testamentum nobis, & Paulo, notat Testamentum Gratiae sub illa dispensatione, quae ante Christi in carnem adventum obtinuit, quaeque sub typorum quorundam, imperfectionem aliquam illius status connotantium, & consequenter suo tempore abolendorum, involucris, Patribus quondam proponebatur, vel, uti *Calvinus* noster id optime expresiit. *Instit. Lib. II Cap. 11 Sect. IV. Vetus Testamentum fuit, quod umbratili et inefficaci ceremoniarum observatione involutum tradebatur: ideoque temporarium fuit, quia in suspenso erat, donec firma et substantiali confirmatione subniteretur.*"

Mosaic covenant to the rest of God's redemptive purposes, whether in the *spirituale foedus* for Calvin or the covenant of grace for Witsius. When it comes, however, to explaining the function of the Mosaic covenant, Witsius seems to place greater emphasis upon the role of the Mosaic covenant vis-à-vis the *historia salutis*, especially as it relates to the work of Christ. Calvin, on the other hand, has a greater interest in the function of the Mosaic covenant vis-à-vis the *ordo salutis*. What accounts for this greater emphasis?

There are no airtight solutions to the question of why Witsius places a greater emphasis upon typology in his explication of the Mosaic covenant, but there are some general indicators that surrender some clues. First, Richard Muller notes that there were different exegetical tendencies during the Reformation. He explains that Calvin had a tendency to deemphasize christological readings of the OT, whereas by contrast, other Reformers such as Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499–1562) employed a more typological approach to the OT, which was carried forward by post-Reformation exegetes such as Johannes Cocceius (1603–69). Muller notes that exegetes such as Cocceius employed a highly typological and prophetic reading of the OT.<sup>46</sup> It is especially the theology of Cocceius that is of interest for this study.

Cocceius was highly influential during the period of high orthodoxy, and at times his influence is noticeable upon Witsius's thought.<sup>47</sup> For example, in Witsius's chapter dedicated to typology he explains the typological connection between the goats of expiation (Lev. 16) and the sacrifice of Christ. In the points of similarity between type and antitype, Witsius acknowledges that he learned of these connections from both Francis Turretin (1623–87) and Cocceius. Witsius quotes Cocceius's commentary on Hebrews at length to explain how the protoevangelium says that Christ was to be delivered into the hands of the devil (Gen. 3:15), and that the slaying of the first sacrificial goat was a type of Christ's death, whereas the sending of the second goat into the wilderness was a type of handing Christ over to the devil. Witsius cites Cocceius to prove that the two goats are types of "the twofold delivering up of Christ."<sup>48</sup> Given Cocceius's influence, though Turretin also influenced Witsius on these points, one may say that Witsius had a greater interest in typology, which impacted his theological understanding of the

46. Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *Holy Scripture: The Cognitive Foundation of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 449, 470–71.

47. See, e.g., Frederic W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation* (1961; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 385.

48. Witsius, *Economy*, 4.6.73; 2:228–29: "Habemus itaque figuram duplicis traditionis, qua Christus traditus est."

nature, role, and place of the Mosaic covenant.<sup>49</sup> In other words, it is fair to say that Witsius used a redemptive-historical hermeneutic, whereas Calvin used a hermeneutic that placed more emphasis upon grammatical-historical interpretation. Despite these differences, if one may borrow some of Calvin and Witsius's terminology, there are no substantive differences between the two theologians' understanding of the Mosaic covenant, rather only different accidental emphases.

### Conclusion

In this comparative analysis of Calvin and Witsius there are great similarities between the two continental Reformed theologians, both of whom agreed that salvation has always been by grace through faith in Christ. They both acknowledge that God made a covenant with his people, and this covenant was marked by grace and not a works principle. The Mosaic covenant occupies a unique place for both theologians. Both agree that the Mosaic covenant brings forward legal demands and truly offers eternal life, but because of man's sinfulness the legal demands drive the sinner to Christ. The manner in which Calvin and Witsius express the legal demands of the Mosaic covenant is the same; however, the latter gives greater attention and emphasis to typology than does the former. These conclusions, however, are in no way unique, even as they are variously expressed by Calvin and Witsius.

In Reformed confessions such as the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), one finds these same substantive points in the explication of the func-

49. It should be noted that Cocceius and another scholastic theologian of the period, Gisbert Voetius (1589–1676), were engaged in a significant debate that has been often characterized as the biblical-theological Cocceian school against the systematic-theological Voetian school. According to some, the former was more interested in biblical categories whereas the latter in speculative and arcane scholastic theology (see J. I. Packer, "Introduction," § 5, in Witsius, *Economy*, vol. 1; Farrar, *History*, 385; Charles McCoy, "Johannes Cocceius: Federal Theologian," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 16 [1963]: 352–70). Two things should be noted regarding this debate. First, it has been demonstrated that Cocceius was a scholastic theologian (see Willem van Asselt, "Cocceius Anti-Scholasticus?" in *Reformation and Scholasticism: An Ecumenical Enterprise*, ed. Willem van Asselt and Eef Dekker [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001], 227–52; cf. idem, *The Federal Theology of Johannes Cocceius (1603–69)*, trans. Raymond A. Blacketer [Leiden: Brill, 2001], 139–92). Second, there were significant doctrinal issues that divided Cocceius and Voetius and their respective followers, such as Cocceius's at times fanciful interpretation of Scripture, his rejection of the abiding nature of the fourth commandment, his peculiar understanding of the abrogations of the covenants, and that many of his followers embraced a Cartesian epistemology (see Farrar, *History*, 385, nn. 1, 8; Willem van Asselt, "The Doctrine of the Abrogations in the Federal Theology of Johannes Cocceius (1603–69)," *Calvin Theological Journal* 29 [1994]: 101–16; idem, *Federal Theology*, 81–94; Ernst Bizer, "Reformed Orthodoxy of Cartesianism," *Journal for Theology and Church* 2 [1965]: 20–82). The debate, therefore, cannot be reduced to biblical versus systematic theology, but revolved around these many issues. Those involved on both sides employed the scholastic method as well as both biblical and systematic theology in their theological formulations.

tion and place of the Mosaic covenant. The divines, for example, employ the covenants of works and grace to define man's pre- and postfall relationship to God (7.2).<sup>50</sup> The covenant of grace, however, "was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel" (7.5). "Under the law," the divines explain, the covenant "was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all foreshadowing Christ to come" (7.5). So here, as in Calvin and Witsius, there is an emphasis upon typology, as well as an implicit biblical-theological hermeneutic concerning the interpretation of and relationship between the OT and NT. At the same time, however, the divines employ the Aristotelian substance-accident distinction. Under the gospel, when Christ, the substance of the OT, was exhibited, it was done with greater fullness, simplicity, and outward glory. The divines write: "There are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations" (7.6).

One also finds the same legal characterization of the Mosaic covenant even in terms of the republication of the covenant of works, with the Westminster Confession bearing similarities to both Calvin and Witsius.<sup>51</sup> The divines write that "God gave to Adam a law, as a covenant of works" (19.1) and that "this law, after his fall, continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness, and, as such, was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai" (19.2). While space does not permit a full-blown exposition of these points, it is nevertheless useful to see that Calvin's and even Witsius's formulations were certainly in the mainstream of Reformation and post-Reformation thought. So, then, whether in Calvin's more grammatical-historical or Witsius's more redemptive-historical hermeneutic, one finds that both were making essentially the same point with different emphases: the Mosaic covenant is unique in that it is legal in nature, demonstrating vis-à-vis the *ordo salutis* man's inability to fulfil the demands of the law, which drives man to Christ, and in terms of the *historia salutis*, painting a typological portrait of Christ's person and work.

50. *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646; Glasgow: Presbyterian Publications, 1995).

51. Contra Ramsey, "In Defense of Moses," 394–96.