

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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Email: jrob1517@aol.com

Website: <http://www.trinityfoundation.org/>

Telephone: 423.743.0199

Fax: 423.743.2005

The Binding of God

David J. Engelsma

The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology.

Peter A. Lillback. Baker and Paternoster, 2001, 331 pages.

Editor's note: David J. Engelsma, a minister in the Protestant Reformed Churches, is Professor of Dogmatics and Old Testament Studies at the Protestant Reformed Seminary in Grandville, Michigan. He is the author of numerous books, and his *Hypercalvinism and the Call of the Gospel* is the best on the subject. This (edited) essay is reprinted with permission from the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, November 2001.

Dr. Peter A. Lillback, who holds a B.A. from Cedarville (Ohio) College, a Th.M. from Dallas Theological Seminary, and a Ph.D. from Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia), is Senior Pastor of Proclamation Presbyterian Church in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania. He serves as Adjunct Professor of Historical Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary, Professor of Church History at Reformed Episcopal Seminary, both in Philadelphia, and is Executive Director of The Providence Forum. *The Binding of God* is a revised version of his 1985 Ph.D. dissertation of the same title approved by the faculty of Westminster Seminary.

This is an unconvincing treatment of a worthwhile subject: the doctrine of the covenant in John Calvin. It is a disturbing book: Calvin is made to teach the doctrine of justification by faith and works.

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This much can be said favorably. Lillback demonstrates that Calvin was a covenant theologian in the sense that the covenant was "an integral feature of Calvin's theology" (137). Also, as the title indicates, Lillback discovers that Calvin viewed the covenant as a bond. It is remarkable that of late Presbyterian and Reformed theologians are describing the covenant between God and His people in terms of fellowship, a bond, and a relationship of love. Little is heard of the covenant as contract, or agreement, or arrangement of promise and demand, which used to be the prevailing position. But the theologians do not explain why they have moved away from the notion of the covenant as contract to the conception of the covenant as bond of fellowship.

Lillback is determined to show that for Calvin the covenant is a conditional, breakable relation between God and every Israelite in the Old Testament and between God and every member of

the visible, instituted church in the New Testament. God makes His covenant with all alike. But the covenant is conditional. Whether it continues with a person, whether it will bestow its blessings upon this person, and whether it will bring the person to heavenly life and glory depend squarely upon certain works that the person himself must do. These works are faith and obedience. If the person with whom the covenant is made fails to fulfill the conditions, the covenant with him is broken, and he perishes.

If this was Calvin's doctrine, he overthrew in his covenant theology everything he taught in his doctrine of salvation.

Calvin taught a "bilateral, mutual, conditional, and breakable covenant" (175). In the theology of Calvin, "the covenant is mutual, conditional and potentially breakable" (264).

If this was, in fact, Calvin's doctrine, he overthrew in his covenant theology everything that he taught in his doctrine of salvation.

Calvin's soteriology was the Gospel of God's efficacious deliverance of totally depraved sinners by grace alone. Grace is particular, in Calvin's thought, inasmuch as it has its source in and is infallibly directed by election. And this election, accompanied by an equally eternal and sovereign reprobation, is unconditional.

A doctrine of a general, conditional, breakable covenant overthrows the Gospel of salvation by particular, unconditional, irresistible grace since the covenant concerns grace and the salvation that grace gives. The very name of the covenant is "covenant of grace." Even such an ardent advocate of a conditional, breakable covenant as Peter Lillback acknowledges that the covenant is grace—saving grace—to those with whom the covenant is made; that the blessings bestowed by the covenant are the blessings of righteousness, holiness, and eternal life; and that the realization of the covenant with a person means his salvation in time and eternity.

Why does Lillback not face the problem of the contradiction between Calvin's theology of gracious salvation grounded in and flowing from the decree of election and Calvin's alleged covenant doctrine of salvation by God's promise and by the sinner's own works? Why does Lillback not explain how a conditional covenant does not imply conditional

salvation as defended by Rome, Erasmus, and Pighius, but condemned by Calvin?

Lillback toys with the problem on the rare occasion. Having quoted Calvin on baptism, Lillback explains Calvin as teaching that God makes a conditional covenant with every person who is baptized. The fulfillment of the covenant in the salvation of the one who is baptized now depends both upon God's promise to the baptized person that He will give him eternal life and upon the baptized person's promise to God that he will obey Him. The covenant is established by the cooperation of a promising God and a promising sinner. "The mutual covenant promises divine benefits on the one hand, and human obedience on the other. Men cannot keep their part of the covenant due to sin. God's covenant of grace, however, enables man to meet the condition through the redemptive benefits bestowed" (247).

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But this doctrine of a conditional covenant depending both upon God's promising eternal life and upon the sinner's promising obedience is exposed as false by God's promise of the new covenant in *Jeremiah* 31:33: "But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel: After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people." The new covenant is established by the promising God alone. His promise includes, not only the eternal life of His covenant people, but also their obedience: "I will put my law in their inward parts." The obedience of the covenant people is not a condition upon which the covenant depends, but a gracious gift to the covenant people in the covenant mercy of God.

That God's covenant promise includes both divine benefits and human obedience is decisive against the doctrine of a conditional covenant. The doctrine of a conditional covenant makes man's godly activity, works, and obedience a condition that man must fulfill in order for the covenant to be established, maintained, or perfected. But *Jeremiah* 31:33 makes a man's godly activity, works, and

obedience part of the divine promise. A man's obedience to the law, that is, love for God and the neighbor, is God's gift to him by promise. Obedience to God is not a condition upon which the covenant depends, but a benefit of the covenant. Godliness of life and deed is not a work of the sinner alongside the work of God contributing to the establishment, maintenance, or perfection of the covenant, but a result of grace and salvation of the covenant. The covenant is a covenant of grace, not a covenant of grace-and-works. And since obedience is promised to all those with whom God makes His covenant, the covenant promise is obviously particular, not general. God did not promise obedience to every Israelite in the Old Testament. He does not promise obedience to every member of the visible, instituted church, or to every child of believing parents.

In Lillback's presentation of Calvin's doctrine of the covenant, the contradiction in Calvin's theology goes deeper still. Calvin's doctrine of the covenant is itself contradictory.

Lillback misrepresents Calvin. In the explanation by Calvin of the "vow of baptism" that Lillback has quoted, Calvin did not teach that God makes a conditional covenant with every person who is baptized. Rather, Calvin taught that "all believers ...promise him [the Lord] obedience." The possibility—and certainty!—both of their making and of their keeping the promise of obedience is the "forgiveness of sins and the spirit of sanctification." And these benefits are ours by divine promise. According to Calvin, our obedience is not a condition unto the covenant, but a "stipulation...included in the covenant of grace" (246). For Jeremiah and John Calvin, God's covenant of grace promises, and gives, elect sinners the Holy Spirit of sanctification, so that in gratitude these sanctified sinners freely promise to obey God. Rather than bargain with God with their obedience, believers thank God for their obedience.

For Lillback, however, God's covenant, bestowing "redemptive benefits" upon all with whom it is made, merely "enables man to meet the condition through the redemptive benefits bestowed" (247). Whether a particular person with whom God has established His covenant makes good use of this enabling and thus is saved depends

on the man himself, not on the promising and covenant-making God. How this doctrine of the covenant differs one whit from the Roman Catholic and Arminian teaching of a universal, saving, but resistible grace that depends for its efficacy on the will of man, Lillback does not tell us.

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On the very next page after Lillback has assured us that Calvin held a "bilateral, mutual, conditional, and breakable covenant," he quotes Calvin as teaching plainly that the covenant is unbreakable by virtue of God's making it "with us" in Christ.

Let us then set forth the covenant that he once established as eternal and never perishing. Its fulfillment, by which it is finally confirmed and ratified, is Christ. Who, then, dares to separate the Jews from Christ, since with them we hear, was made the covenant of the gospel, the sole foundation of which is Christ?... This is the new covenant that God in Christ has made with us, that he will remember our sins no more (176).

A few pages later, Lillback analyzes Calvin's doctrine of the covenant as teaching that "an indissoluble bond exists between Christ and the elect" (180).

In the chapter "Covenant, Predestination, and Hypocrisy in Calvin's Theology," Lillback makes an extraordinarily significant quotation from Calvin's commentary on *Jeremiah* 22:29-30: "We are taught that God is ever so consistent with himself, that his covenant, which he has made with Christ and with

all his members, never fails” (213). The quotation shows that Calvin held that the covenant is made with Christ as the head of the covenant and, therefore, with “his members,” that is, the elect; that the covenant “never fails,” that is, cannot be broken, in the sense of nullified, by those with whom it is made; and that this firm and lasting character of the covenant is due to God’s being “consistent with himself,” that is, His being the faithful, unchangeable God.

This is not surprising. When theologians play with the contradiction, “God saves men, but men also save themselves,” the false gospel of man’s saving himself always drives out the Gospel of salvation by grace alone.

Lillback himself is forced to acknowledge that Calvin taught an unconditional, unbreakable covenant “from God’s vantage point”: “The covenant from God’s vantage point is absolutely unconditional. God’s absolute goodness means that He cannot deny His promises to His people.” “Yet, in another sense,” Lillback quickly adds, “that is from man’s vantage point, the covenant is conditional” (169).

When, a few pages later, Lillback comes to summarize Calvin’s doctrine of the covenant, he describes it, exclusively, as a “bilateral, mutual, conditional, and breakable covenant” (175). Man’s “vantage point” has evidently won out. There is not even a word about “God’s vantage point.” This is not surprising. When theologians play with the contradiction, “God saves men, but men also save themselves,” the false gospel of man’s saving himself always drives out the Gospel of salvation by grace alone.¹

¹ The precedent for this was set more than 50 years ago. Herman Hoeksema, commenting on the assault the Westminster Seminary faculty was then making on Gordon Clark, wrote: “They [the Complainants, largely the Westminster Seminary faculty] first claimed that the Reformed doctrine of the Gospel honors the paradox, the contradiction: God wills to save all men; he wills to save only the elect. Must they, then, not preach that paradox, if they would proclaim the full Gospel, according to their own contention? Must they not do justice to that Gospel, and hide nothing of it, whether in ‘evangelistic’ work or in the ministry of the Word in the church? But no; here they tacitly admit that, for

Contributing to Lillback’s analysis of Calvin’s doctrine of the covenant is Lillback’s confusion of “mutual” with “conditional.” Because Calvin taught that the covenant is “mutual,” Lillback concludes that for Calvin the covenant is conditional. When Calvin taught that the covenant is mutual, he meant that the covenant makes demands upon God’s covenant people. In the covenant, they are called to love, fear, serve, and obey God. Their fulfilling this calling is their part in the covenant. It is necessary. God’s people are to love God, even as God loves His covenant people.

But mutuality is not the same as conditionality. The love of Israel/church for their God is due to His gracious covenant with them. They obey the Ten Commandments because He is Jehovah their God, who has brought them out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Their love is love in the covenant. Their love is gratitude for the mercies of the covenant. And their love is love that the covenant love of God for them works in them. He writes His law upon their hearts as He has promised.

In a conditional covenant, the love of the people merits the covenant, or obtains the covenant, or keeps the covenant in force. The conditional covenant with all its weight of blessing and salvation depends upon the love of the people. The conditional covenant does not depend only upon the love of God in Jesus Christ. In a conditional covenant, their love for God is motivated by a proud, or terrified, desire to earn the covenant, to obtain the covenant, or to keep the covenant in force.

evangelistic purposes, their paradoxical Gospel is not suitable. And so they propose to forget the one side of their paradox, and to present the Gospel only as a ‘universal and sincere offer of salvation.’ And that means that they intend to limit themselves to the proclamation that God sincerely seeks the salvation of all men. In practice, they intend to preach an Arminian gospel. They are afraid of their own paradox” (*The Clark-Van Til Controversy*, 67).

Theological double-talk has been characteristic of the Westminster faculty for decades—for example, the perspectivalism of Vern Poythress and former faculty member John Frame, and the theology of paradox taught by the mentor of all these men, Cornelius Van Til.

—Editor

Lillback's thesis that Calvin taught a conditional covenant cannot be established by a number of selected quotations from Calvin's writings, mostly his commentaries—quotations that can at least be matched by an equal number of quotations that teach the very opposite. The whole, massive theology of Calvin of God's salvation of elect sinners by sovereign grace and of God's establishment of His covenant in Christ as its head and foundation is against the theory of a conditional covenant. Calvin taught that the covenant is mutual. He did not teach that it is conditional.

What explains Lillback's reading of Calvin? And why is Lillback so obviously pleased with the notion of a general, bilateral, conditional, and breakable covenant that he thinks to find in Calvin? A general, bilateral, conditional, and breakable covenant, operating by a general, conditional, and impotent promise, is in flat contradiction of the teaching of the Westminster Standards. As a Presbyterian theologian, Dr. Lillback is bound by the doctrine of the Westminster Standards.

The *Westminster Larger Catechism* declares that "the covenant of grace was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in him with all the elect as his seed" (Q. and A. 31). In harmony with this teaching that God made the covenant of grace with Christ as the head of the covenant and therefore with the elect only, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* restricts the promise of the covenant to the elect. With explicit reference to the promise of the covenant of grace, by which the covenant is realized with the elect sinner personally and its salvation enjoyed, the *Confession* speaks of God's "promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto life his Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe" (7.3).

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The Westminster Standards teach a particular, unilateral, unconditional, and sure covenant of grace with Christ as the head of the covenant and with the elect as His members. God establishes, maintains, and perfects this covenant by a particular, unconditional, and efficacious promise. This is the teaching of the Westminster Standards inasmuch as the Westminster Assembly was determined to

confess salvation by sovereign, particular grace as a system of doctrine. The covenant concerns the salvation that is in Jesus Christ, nothing less. A general, bilateral, conditional, and breakable covenant is a covenant that depends upon man. And if the covenant depends upon man, so does its salvation depend upon man.

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Lillback is determined to find a conditional covenant in Calvin because Lillback is afraid of election. He sees election as a threat to the covenant and its life.

He wants to keep election at bay like some dangerous beast. Election must not be allowed to determine the covenant, with whom God establishes the covenant, how the covenant is established and maintained, who receive its blessings, and the godly life of the covenant people:

Calvin's use of the covenant was not hampered [*sic*] because of his belief in the doctrines of sovereign election and reprobation. Even in his discussion of these ideas, he was able to give the covenant significance for time and space. The hypocrite is not told that he is non-elect, rather he is reminded of his duty to obey the covenant upon which his hope of participation in the covenantal blessings is contingent. Further, Calvin did not let the pressures of his theological system cause him to identify the covenant and election. This would have seemingly closed the door on many intricate questions. Yet, Calvin believed the Scriptures required the distinction between the covenant and secret election. The result is a covenant that exists in this world, and not one that only corresponds to secret election. Calvin thus achieved a meeting of the decree and the flow of the history of salvation in his doctrine of the covenant (229-230).

For Lillback to project his fear of predestination upon Calvin is foolishness on the face of it. As the world knows, Calvin did not share Lillback's fear of

God's election. This exposes Lillback's entire project.

Apart from Calvin's doctrine of the covenant, Lillback and the others who are contending today for a conditional covenant that is "unhampered" by God's election must answer this question: Who or what then does determine and control the covenant? If it is not the will of God that determines the establishment and maintenance of the covenant, the members of the covenant, the blessings and salvation bestowed by the covenant, and the faith and obedience of the covenant people, whose will does determine these things? And when this controlling will is discovered, will we say that the covenant is now "hampered" by this will? Or will we say that, since the covenant is determined by another will than the will of God, the covenant is liberated?

Lillback acknowledges that the doctrine of a conditional covenant implies the doctrine of justification by faith and works.

It is of extraordinary significance that Lillback acknowledges that the doctrine of a conditional covenant implies the doctrine of justification by faith and works. The works in this case are the works produced by faith. Lillback contends that Calvin taught a doctrine of justification by faith and works as an aspect of his doctrine of a conditional covenant.

John Calvin taught the heresy of justification by faith and works!

In a brief historical study of the Reformers' doctrine of the covenant, Lillback contrasts Luther's doctrine of justification with that of the Reformed. Luther cut off every reference to the law and works of the law in the matter of justification. But, asserts Lillback, "the Reformed hermeneutic discussed works in the context of justification because the covenant had two parts" (125). This is ominous.

Lillback returns to the alleged difference between Luther and the Reformed over the place of good works. In a section of the book headed "Calvin's Disagreement with Luther Regarding God's Acceptance of the Believer's Good Works" (185-193), Lillback grievously misrepresents Luther as teaching "the Christian to be ignorant of the law" (186). The truth is that Luther taught Christians to be ignorant of the law in the matter of their

justification. By no means did Luther deny the necessity of good works of obedience to the law as evidence of saving faith. Even worse than the misrepresentation of Luther is Lillback's as yet somewhat obscure suggestion that Calvin taught a justification that included the believer's own good works.

Luther's understanding of justification by faith alone had no room for inherent righteousness, while Calvin's view required it as an inseparable but subordinate righteousness.... Calvin is insistent that works have a proper place in the discussion of justification by faith alone.... The law had no place in Luther's discussion of justification. But in Calvin's mind, the believer's obedience was an "inseparable accident" to the justification doctrine (192-193).

In this way, Lillback carefully lays the groundwork for an unambiguous, if cautious, declar-

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ation that Calvin taught justification by faith and faith's works. The declaration is important enough to warrant the long quotation.

What is particularly important to remember at this point is that Calvin's development of the idea of the acceptance of men's works by God was expressed in terms of the covenant. The works were not seen as meritorious, but rather, God has promised to reward works with spiritual gifts, and this promise of the law is realized by the gracious gifts of the covenant. God in covenant has liberally forgiven the sin in men's works, and actually enabled those works by His Spirit. This idea he readily admits is the common doctrine of the Schoolmen, except they developed their idea of the covenant of acceptance in terms of merit, instead of justification righteousness and its subordinate righteousness of the Holy Spirit. Here one sees Calvin as the historical bridge between the medieval Schoolmen's covenant doctrine and that of the later Calvinistic federal theologians. Calvin simply excises the medieval doctrine of

merit from the covenant of acceptance and replaces it with the Reformation's justification by faith alone. Consequently, Calvin occupies a middle ground between the Schoolmen and Luther on the issue of the acceptance of good works in relationship to justification. Luther and Calvin are in full agreement against the Scholastics regarding the issue of the unique instrumentality of faith and the non-meritorious character of all of human standing before God. On the other hand, Calvin, in agreement with the Schoolmen and contrary to Luther, accepts the fact that God can by covenant receive the works of man. Calvin's doctrine of the acceptance of men's works by God is therefore an intermediate position between Luther and the medieval tradition (308).

The declaration that Calvin taught a doctrine of justification by faith and works is false. Calvin damned this doctrine as heartily as did Luther.

Calvin never taught justification by faith and works. But Lillback desires to find this doctrine in Calvin. The reason is that Lillback, though he is a Presbyterian and a professor at Westminster and Reformed Episcopal Seminaries, himself holds this heretical doctrine.

Calvin fully agreed with Luther that justification is by faith alone, apart from any work or righteousness of the justified sinner. Always the one who is justified appears as the "ungodly" (*Romans* 4:5). Calvin regarded the truth of justification by faith alone as the "cornerstone of the Gospel." The doctrine that Lillback attributes to Calvin is exactly the teaching that Calvin exposed as the heresy of Roman Catholicism.

But a great part of mankind imagine that righteousness is composed of faith and works. Let us also, to begin with, show that faith righteousness so differs from works righteousness that when one is established the other has to be overthrown.... Farewell, then, to the dream of those who think up a righteousness flowing together out of faith and works. The Sophists [Roman Catholic theologians — DJE], who make game and sport in their corrupting of

Scripture and their empty caviling, think they have a subtle evasion. For they explain "works" as meaning those which men not yet reborn do only according to the letter by the effort of their own free will, apart from Christ's grace. But they deny that these refer to spiritual works. For, according to them, man is justified by both faith and works provided they are not his own works but the gifts of Christ and the fruits of regeneration. For they say that Paul so spoke for no other reason than to convince the Jews, who were relying upon their own strength, that they were foolish to arrogate righteousness to themselves, since the Spirit of Christ alone bestows it upon us not through any effort arising from our own nature. Still they do not observe that in the contrast between the righteousness of the law and of the Gospel, which Paul elsewhere introduces, all works are excluded, whatever title may grace them [*Galatians* 3:11-12].... Moreover, we shall see afterward, in its proper place, that the benefits of Christ—sanctification and righteousness—are different. From this it follows that not even spiritual works come into account when the power of justifying is ascribed to faith (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.11.13-14; Battles edition).

There is no doctrine of justification that is "an intermediate position between Luther and the medieval tradition." There are two positions on justification, and two only. Either one is justified by faith alone in Christ's righteousness, which righteousness consists of the obedience of Christ in His earthly ministry of living and dying in the stead of His elect church, or one vainly attempts to be justified by faith and works with a righteousness that is a mongrel-mix of the obedience of Christ and one's own obedience.

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Presbyterian and a professor at Westminster and Reformed Episcopal Seminaries, himself holds this heretical doctrine. And he holds it as part-and-parcel of his doctrine of a conditional, breakable covenant.

Lillback's theology of a covenant of grace-and-works accompanied by a doctrine of justification by faith-and-faith's-works is not an isolated phenomenon in Reformed churches. It is part of a widespread movement now surfacing in reputedly conservative Reformed and Presbyterian churches. The movement is advanced by prominent Reformed and Presbyterian theologians. The movement intends to introduce justification by faith and works on the wings of a doctrine of a conditional, breakable covenant of grace and works, or it intends to establish the doctrine of a conditional, breakable covenant of grace and works even though this means the introduction of the doctrine of justification by faith and works. Whatever the primary intention, whether a conditional covenant or justification by faith and works, the movement promotes these doctrines as related teachings.

The scholarship of *The Binding of God* is flawed. The doctrine is heretical. Nevertheless, it is an important work because it makes two things plain: (1) a conditional covenant of grace and works implies justification by faith and works; and (2) the apostasy at the highest levels of reputedly conservative Presbyterianism.

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New: Book on Tape

The Trinity Foundation has just released its first book read aloud on tape, Gordon Clark's *What Do Presbyterians Believe?* The reading is professionally done, and the sound quality is very good. The book is complete (except for Scripture citations in the footnotes) and available on 9 cassette tapes. The price is \$45 plus \$5 shipping and handling.