

Geerhardus Vos and the Covenant of Works

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The question why Paul, after having up to vs. 43 (incl.) conducted his whole argument on the basis of a comparison between the body of sin and the body of the resurrection, substitutes from vs. 44 on for the body of sin the normal body of creation is an interesting one, though very difficult to answer. The answer should not be sought in the direction of ascribing to him the view that the creation-body and the body of sin are qualitatively identical, in other words that the evil predicates of φθορᾶ, ἀτιμία, ἀσθενεία enumerated in vs. 42 belong to the body in virtue of creation. Paul teaches too plainly elsewhere that these things came into the world through sin. The proper solution seems to be as follows: the Apostle was intent upon showing that in the plan of God from the outset provision was made for a higher kind of body (as pertaining to a higher state of existence generally). From the abnormal body of sin no inference could be drawn as to that effect. The abnormal and the eschatological are not so logically correlated that the one can be postulated from the other. But the world of creation and the world to come *are* thus correlated, the one pointing forward to the other; on the principle of typology the first Adam prefigures the last Adam, the psychical body the pneumatic body (cp. Rom. v. 14). The statement of vs 44b is not meant as an apodictic assertion, but as an argument: if there *exists* one kind of body, there *exists* the other kind also. This explains why the quotation (Gen. ii. 7), which relates proximately to the psychical state only, is yet treated by Paul as proving both, and as therefore warranting the subjoined proposition: “the last Adam became a life-giving Spirit.” The quotation proves this, because the “psychical” as such is typical of the pneumatic, the first creation of the second, the world that now is (if conceived without sin) of the aeon to come, This exegesis also disposes of the view that Paul meant to include vs. 45 in the quotation, the latter being taken from Gen. i, 27 (man’s creation in the image of God). On such a supposition Paul’s manner of handling the record would have to rest on the Philonic (and older) speculation of a two-fold creation, first of the ideal, then of the empirical man. According to this speculation the ideal man is created first, the empirical man afterwards, since Gen. i comes before Gen. ii. But Paul affirms the very opposite: not the pneumatic is first, the psychical is first. If there is reference at all in vs. 46 to this Philonic *philosophoumenon*, it must be by way of pointed correction. Paul would mean to substitute for the sequence of the idealistic philosophy the sequence of historic unfolding; the categories of his thought are Jewish, not Hellenic: he reasons in forms of time, not of space.

Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1979) 169n19)

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With the Nature of Man and The Destiny of Man the debate returns from these apologetic outposts to the heart of the Christian and Protestant position. The Romanist doctrine of *the dona supernaturalia* is shown to have two roots, one in the neo-Platonic idea of a mystical deification as the true destiny of man, the other in the Pelagian principle of the meritoriousness of good works. If man is to earn the *status gloriae* which is supernatural, he can do so only by employment of a principle likewise intrinsically supernatural, the *gratia infusa* or *gratia gratum faciens*. The Reformed dogma of the covenant of works differs from this in that according to it eternal life was not to be earned by Adam *ex condigno*, but *ex pacto* (p. 524), not by supernatural, but by natural means. Virtually Rome eliminates all grace, for there is no reason to call the *donum superadditum* grace, in any other sense than life, intellect, wisdom, power were grace to Adam. Christianity may, according to Rome, be in an incidental and subordinate way a soteriological scheme: primarily it aims not at *reparatio*, but at *elevatio naturæ* (p. 528).

Still, the Reformed theology has this in common with Rome as over against the Lutherans that it distinguishes between the original state of man in which he was placed by creation and the ideal destiny he was yet to obtain

through obedience. From the Reformed standpoint this is expressed in the conception of the *fædus operum*. Dr. Bavinck ably vindicates the federal character of all true religion.

Geerhardus Vos, “Review of *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek — Vol. Two*, by Dr. H. Bavinck, 1897,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), 492.

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Pre-Redemptive and Redemptive Special Revelation

In the foregoing it has been assumed for the sake of distinction that before the fall there existed a form of Special Revelation, transcending the natural knowledge of God. This is the point at which to explain its possibility, its necessity and its concrete purpose. Its subject matter will be afterwards discussed. The possibility and necessity flow from the nature of religion as such. Religion means personal intercourse between God and man. Hence it might be a priori expected that God would not be satisfied, and would not allow man to be satisfied with an acquaintance based on indirection, but would crown the process of religion with the establishment of face-to-face communion, as friend holds fellowship with friend.

The same conclusion may be drawn from the concrete purpose God had in view with this first form of supernaturalism. This is connected with the state in which man was created and the advance from this to a still higher estate. Man had been created perfectly good in a moral sense. And yet there was a sense in which he could be raised to a still higher level of perfection. On the surface this seems to involve a contradiction. It will be removed by closely marking the aspect in regard to which the advance was contemplated. The advance was meant to be from unconfirmed to confirmed goodness and blessedness; to the confirmed state in which these possessions could no longer be lost, a state in which man could no longer sin, and hence could no longer become subject to the consequences of sin. Man’s original state was a state of indefinite probation: he remained in possession of what he had, so long as he did not commit sin, but it was not a state in which the continuance of his religious and moral status could be guaranteed him. In order to assure this for him, he had to be subjected to an intensified, concentrated probation, in which, if he remained standing, the status of probation would be forever left behind. The provision of this new, higher prospect for man was an act of condescension and high favour. God was in no wise bound on the principle of justice to extend it to man, and we mean this denial not merely in the general sense in which we affirm that God owes nothing to man, but in the very specific sense that there was nothing in the nature of man nor of his creation, which by manner of implication could entitle man to such a favour from God. Had the original state of man involved any title to it, then the knowledge concerning it would probably have formed part of man’s original endowment. But this not being so, no innate knowledge of its possibility could be expected. Yet the nature of an intensified and concentrated probation required that man should be made acquainted with the fact of the probation and its terms. Hence the necessity of a Special Revelation providing for this.

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The Division of Redemptive Special Revelation ‘Berith’

This is what we call in dogmatic language ‘The Covenant of Grace,’ whilst the pre-redemptive Special Revelation is commonly given the name of ‘The Covenant of Works.’

Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 22–23).