

Christ's active obedience in federal theology

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Introduction

Some years ago I wrote an article for this journal on the active obedience of Christ. There I pointed out that the doctrine of Christ's active obedience has not received much direct attention in Reformed Theology¹. The issue of federal theology, on the other hand, has received a lot of attention, recently as well as in the past.² While these studies make mention of Christ's active obedience with reference to the so called Covenant of Works, they tend to take this doctrine as a given, and I could find no answer to the question as to where and when the doctrine of the active obedience of Christ was first linked to the covenant of works, as we find it in the Westminster tradition.³ Last year I was given the occasion to follow up on this question when I was kindly offered a fellowship at the Henry Meeter Center in Grand Rapids.

My preliminary conclusions, and here I must stress I still have much to read and follow up, is that the doctrine of the active obedience of Christ may first have been discussed under the rubric of a prelapsarian covenant by Theodore Beza. This theologian is often dismissed in studies on federal theology because he is alleged to have reintroduced a form of scholasticism that led to a doctrine of double predestination.⁴ Yet there are in Beza some insights overlooked by those who limit their studies of the covenant of

¹ The fullest literature I found on the subject of active obedience was written to oppose the doctrine. Included here are books by John Goodwin, *Imputatio Fidei, or, A Treatise of justification...* (London: Leonard Lichfeild, 1643) and William Hoare, *The Scripture Ground of Justification, or, An Inquiry into the Doctrine of Scripture Concerning the Active and Passive Obedience of Christ* (London: William Macintosh, 1867).

² An excellent listing of recent as well as older works on federal theology can be found in Peter Lillback, *The Binding of God, Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), pp. 13-28.

³ *Westminster Confession of Faith* 8:4, 5; 11:1; *Larger Catechism* 38, 39, 48, 97.

⁴ Even David Weir, who dismisses some of the charges against Beza, fails to grapple with his covenantal theology in *The Origin of Federal Theology in Sixteenth Century Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

works to the developments that began in the Rhine valley and came to maturity in Britain and the Netherlands.

Before I go on to defend this thesis I want to briefly define the doctrine of the active obedience of Christ, which was dealt with in my former article, and somewhat more fully the system of federal theology. Then we shall look at the history of federal theology and investigate how it was first linked to the doctrine of Christ's active obedience in the school of Geneva. Lastly I will briefly relate how the doctrines also came together in Britain, and show the differences between these approaches.

Definitions:

Christ's Active Obedience

The following definition of the doctrine of the active obedience comes from the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*:

Evangelical theologians ... have rightly discerned that both Christ's own right to minister as God's Messiah-Saviour and the salvation of those he came to save directly depend on his personal, perfect and perpetual obedience to God's holy law. To make this clear, theologians customarily distinguish between the passive and active obedience of Christ... By active obedience is meant Christ's full obedience to all the positive prescriptions of the law; by passive obedience is intended his willing, obedient bearing of all the sanctions imposed by the law that had accrued against his people because of their transgressions. By the former – i.e., his active obedience – he made available a righteousness before the law that is imputed or reckoned to those who trust in him. By the latter – i.e., his passive obedience – he took upon himself by legal imputation the penalty due to his people for their sin. His active and passive obedience, then, is the ground of God's justification of sinners, by which divine act they are pardoned (because their sins have been charged to Christ, who obediently bears the law's sanctions against sin) and accepted as righteous in God's sight (because Christ's active obedience is imputed to them).⁵

⁵ R.L. Reymond, "Obedience of Christ", in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), p. 850.

The author, Reymond, actually prefers and uses the terminology *penal* and *prescriptive* obedience. But we will use the terminology sanctioned by time.

Federal Theology

The concept of federal theology is much more difficult to define, because there are so many variant opinions as to what constitutes federal theology. Webster's Dictionary defines it as:

Federal Theology - the theological system which rests upon the beliefs (1) that before the Fall man was under a covenant of works by which God through Adam promised man eternal blessedness if he keeps the commandments and (2) that since the Fall man has been under a covenant of grace by which God by his grace promises the same blessings to all who believe in Christ – called also COVENANT THEOLOGY.⁶

In past and current debates it is clear that not all agree with this definition. This becomes especially obvious in the debates about when and where federal theology first came to expression. While the word “federal” comes from the Latin *foedus*, meaning “covenant” or “pact”, in some definitions it is not so much the covenant itself as the representation by Adam and Christ as the *federal* heads of the human race and the community of the elect that comes to the fore. In the references to federal theology we have come across there are at least six emphases that various authors stress in their understanding as to what constitutes federal theology. These are:

1. The recognition of two or more covenants

In the *Concise History of the Christian Tradition* federal or covenant theology is defined as “An exposition of the relationship between God and man in terms of covenants.”⁷ The article goes on to mention the possible recognition of two or three covenants.

⁶ Gove, Philip B. (ed.), *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged* (Springfield: C. & C. Merriam, 1969)

⁷ “Covenant Theology” in Douglas, J.D. et al. (eds), *The Concise History of the Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), p. 109.

2. The recognition of the federal headship of Adam

Allan Cairns begins his definition of federal theology:

All mankind are viewed in Scripture in relation to the two Adams. The first Adam was the natural head of the entire human race... The last Adam, the Lord Jesus Christ is, by the grace of God, placed at the head of his people.⁸

A similar definition is given in the *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* that states: "Federal theology suggests that as the first human Adam acted as the 'federal head' (from Latin *foedus*, 'covenant') or legal representative of the rest of humankind."⁹ The definition goes on to identify Christ as the second Adam who also stands in covenantal relationship to his people.

While the authors of these definitions may well think of the federal headship of Adam in terms of a covenant of works, we will come across several examples of theologians who recognised Adam's headship without placing this in a covenant context.

3. The recognition of a prelapsarian covenant

An example of this is found in the approach of W. Neuser, who writes:

J. B. Torrance correctly judges that covenant theology in actuality only begins with the separation of the natural covenant (*foedus naturale*) from the covenant of grace (*foedus gratiae*) and this beginning is found in Ursinus.¹⁰

Many others, too, regard this prelapsarian covenant, variously identified as the *Covenant of Works*, *Covenant of Life*, *Covenant of Creation* or *Covenant of Nature*, an essential element of federal theology. Thus Millard Erickson defines federal theology as the view that "held that Adam

⁸ Cairns, Allan, *Dictionary of Theological Terms*, (Belfast: Ambassador Productions, 1998), pp. 146, 147.

⁹ Grenz, S.J. et al. (eds), *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1999), pp. 50, 51.

¹⁰ In a review by Wilhelm Heinrich Neuser of Lyle D. Bierma's *German Calvinism in the Confessional Age: The Covenant Theology of Caspar Olevianus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), in *The Sixteenth Century Kourmal*, Vol. 29, No. 3, 1998: 803-04.

represented the human race in the covenant of works established by God.”¹¹ Donald McKim combines this definition with the one in #2 above, defining federal theology as “A form of Calvinism developed in the 17th century, that stressed ‘federal headship’ of Adam, who acted as a representative of all humanity in a covenant of works established by God.”¹²

4. The recognition of a covenant within the Trinity.

Some see it as a necessary ingredient of federal theology that it should recognise a third covenant, made within the Trinity, often referred to as the *Covenant of Redemption*. Thus Ralph Martin defines federal theology as “a distinctive theology with God’s covenant as its focal metaphor.” And he continues, “Federal theology teaches that the inmost nature of God, the Faithful One, is a covenant among the Creator, Christ and the Holy Spirit.”¹³ Not too different is one theological dictionary definition which states that “covenant” or “federal” theology “sees the relation of God to humankind as a compact which God established as a reflection of the relationship among the three persons of the Trinity.”¹⁴

5. Using covenants as an organising principle of theology

By this definition federal theology does not just refer to a doctrine, but a whole method of doing theology. An example of this approach comes from John Murray, who writes:

Covenant theology is, however, a distinguishing feature of the Reformed tradition because the idea of covenant came to be an organizing principle in terms of which the relations of God to men were construed.¹⁵

C.P. Wing similarly defines federal theology as “a method of stating doctrine truth, according to which all the doctrines of religion are arranged

¹¹ Erickson, Millard J., *Concise Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1986), p. 56.

¹² McKim, Donald K., *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville: Westminster Press, 1996), p. 103.

¹³ Ralph P. Martin, “Federal theology”, in Gentz, William H. (ed.), *The Dictionary of Bible and Religion*, Abingdon: Abingdon Press, 1986, p. 356.

¹⁴ “Covenant Theology”, in Elwell, Walter A., *The Concise Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), pp. 121, 122.

¹⁵ John Murray, “Covenant Theology”, in Hughes, Philip E. (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, vol 3 (Marshallton: NFCE, 1972), pp. 199-216.

under the heads of certain covenants God has made with men.”¹⁶ Similarly Peter Lillback writes that a covenant theologian uses “the covenant idea as an organising principle of his theology.” Lillback adds that federal theology includes the recognition of the covenants of works and of redemption.¹⁷

Similar definitions can be found with Geerhardus Vos, Lyle Bierma, and David Weir.¹⁸

6. In terms of a worldview

Van Harvey defines covenantal theology largely in terms of its political and social dimensions, and concludes, “Indeed, it constituted a most inclusive system of thought.”¹⁹ Somewhat along the same lines Ralph Martin begins his definition of federal theology by pointing out that it emerged from the federal political context of Switzerland, and goes on to say that it served the Swiss theologians with a blueprint for human order.²⁰

One further distinction need be noted here. Early last century Diemer put forward the argument that we need to differentiate between the true federal theologians, in the line of Calvin and Bullinger, and “humanistic federalists”, found in the line of Melancthon and the Herborn theologians. Diemer calls the latter “humanistic federalists” because they argue that God made a covenant with Adam subsequent to his creation.²¹ He likens their approach to scholasticism’s view that man was created in a natural state to which a supernatural element was added, the only difference being that here this addition is not a supernatural righteousness, but a covenant.

¹⁶ C.P. Wing, “Federal Theology”, in *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, ed. by John McClintock & James Strong, vol iii, pp. 515-520, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1876), p. 515.

¹⁷ Lillback, *op. cit.* p. 15.

¹⁸ Geerhardus Vos, “The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. R.B. Gaffin, trans. S. Voorwinde & W. VanGemeran (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1980); Lyle D., Bierma, “The Role of Covenant Theology in Early Reformed Theology”, *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 21 (1990) 453-462; Weir, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ Harvey, Van A., *A Handbook of Theological Terms* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), pp. 61, 62.

²⁰ Ralph P. Martin, *Op. cit.*

²¹ Diemer, M., *Het Scheppingsverbond met Adam: Het Verbond der Werken*, (Kampen: Kok, 1932), p. 8.

In contrast to this, Calvin and his followers saw Adam as created in covenant, by virtue of his being created in the image of God. Recognising the covenant of works as a supernatural addition subsequent to his creation in the image of God has prompted some humanistic federalists to base the covenant of **grace** in Adam's creation in the image of God. Diemer finds an example of this approach in Schrenk's *Gottesreich und Bund*.²²

A History of Covenant doctrine

The earliest writings on the covenant concern the question whether the New Testament should be seen as continuous or discontinuous with the Old Testament. In *The Epistles of Barnabas* the author warns Christians against telling Jews that: "Their covenant is ours also", because, he claims, the covenant with the Jews was broken when Moses broke the tables of the law. The real covenant people, he goes on to say, are Christians. The continuing covenant was established by Christ.²³

Justin Martyr and Tertullian are more concerned in upholding the essential unity of the old and new covenants in their dealings with the Jews. Tertullian's arguments are of note in view of what is to follow. He wrote:

He gave to all nations the selfsame law, which at definite and stated times He enjoined should be observed, when He willed, and through whom He willed, and as He willed. For in the beginning of the world He gave to Adam himself and Eve a law, that they were not to eat of the fruit of the tree planted in the midst of paradise; but that, if they did contrariwise, by death they were to die. Which law had continued enough for them, had it been kept. For in this law given to Adam we recognize in embryo all the precepts which afterwards sprouted forth when given through Moses; that is, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God from thy whole heart and out of thy whole soul; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself; ... the primordial law was given to Adam and Eve in paradise, as the womb of all the precepts of God ...

²² *Ibid.*, p. 36-40.

²³ *The Epistle of Barnabas* (trans. J.A. Kleist), chs. 4, 14. In Quasten, J. & Plumpe, J.C. (eds), *Ancient Christian Writers, the Works of the Fathers in Translation* (Westminster: The Newman Bookshop, 1947).

In short, before the Law of Moses, written in stone-tables, I contend that there was a law unwritten, which was habitually understood naturally, and by the fathers was habitually kept.²⁴

Irenaeus, arguing against Valentinianism and Gnosticism, also stresses the continuity in God's dealings with people in the Old and New Testaments. He argues that there is but one author and one end to both covenants. The same Christ made both covenants; he was the Word of God who spoke with Moses and Abraham.²⁵

Augustine raised the subject of covenant in relation to circumcision. In discussing the fact that the soul of the male child who is uncircumcised will perish (Gen. 17:14) he asks the question: How can a child be blamed and punished for breaking the covenant if his elders neglect to circumcise him? And he answers:

However, everyone - including even children - have broken God's covenant, not, indeed, in virtue of any personal action, but in virtue of mankind's common origin in that single ancestor in whom all have sinned. For, there are, as any one may learn by reading Scripture, many other covenants of God in addition to the two main Testaments, the Old and the New. The first of all covenants is, of course, that which was made with the first man: 'For in what day soever thou shalt eat of it, thou shalt die the death.' That is why we read in the book entitled Ecclesiasticus: 'All flesh grows old like a garment, for the covenant from the beginning is: Thou shalt die the death' ... From all this it follows that, in the sense in which they are sinners, they [children] are also accounted transgressors of that law which was made in the Garden of Eden... Whoever has not been regenerated, that soul shall be destroyed out of his people, because, when he and all mankind sinned in Adam, he broke God's covenant.²⁶

²⁴ Tertullian, *An Answer to the Jews*. In *Ancient Christian Writers, the Works of the Fathers in Translation*, chap. 2. Ed. by W.J. Burghardt (Westminster: The Newman Bookshop, 1947), vol. 3.

²⁵ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Vol. I, Book IV, Ch. IX. In *Ancient Christian Writers*, no. 55.

²⁶ Augustine, *The City of God*, Book XVI, chapter 27. In *The Father of the Church, a new translation*, trans. G.G. Walsh and Grace Monahan (Washington: The Catholic University Press, 1952).

Here we should also note the way Augustine treats the consequences of Adam's breaking of this covenant:

This just punishment involves many consequences. Man who was destined to become spiritual even in his flesh, if only he had kept the commandment, became, instead, fleshly even in his soul.²⁷

We shall return to the question whether Augustine was correct in the presumption that obedience would have given Adam eternal life in the sense of immortality (*non posse mori*).

The covenant came under discussion once again in the time of the Reformation. It is generally agreed that Zwingli initiated further development in covenantal theology when, in answer to the Anabaptists, he argued that in N.T. times children should be baptised even as boys received the sign of circumcision in O.T. times, because the two testaments represented the same eternal covenant of grace. But whereas Zwingli speaks of the Christ/Adam parallel in some detail with respect to original sin, there is no hint of Adam having broken a covenant, or of Christ's righteousness consisting of more than his passive obedience.²⁸ In fact, in his defence before the emperor, Zwingli argues that there was not even a law in paradise, and that therefore original sin was not so much "a misdeed contrary to the law" as a "condition" or "disease".²⁹

Bullinger appears to have closely collaborated with Zwingli, providing him with materials from the fathers in support of the unity of the covenants.³⁰ Even more than Zwingli he stressed the unity of the covenant by bringing the Old and New forms together. This led him to place more emphasis on the bilateral aspects of the covenant,³¹ although in principle he continues to insist that this covenant is unconditional, because it is God who meets all

²⁷ *Ibid.*, ch. 15.

²⁸ Ulrich Zwingli, *De Peccato Originali Declaratio* (1526), available in English translation in William J. Hinke (ed.), *On Providence and Other Essays* (Durham NC: The Labyrinth Press, 1922), pp. 1-32.

²⁹ *Ad Carolum Romanorum, Imperato* (1530), translated as "An Account of the Faith of Huldreich Zwingli" in *On Providence and Other Essays*, p. 40.

³⁰ So Stoute, who refers to a letter of Bullinger to Heinrich Simler. See Douglas A. Stoute, "The Origins and Early Development of the Reformed Idea of the Covenant", doctoral thesis submitted to King's College, Cambridge, 1979.

³¹ *The Decades of Heinrich Bullinger: Fifty Sermons Divided into Five Decades Containing the Chief and Principle Points of Christian Religion* (1587 English Translation), III . 6.

the requirements.³² The fact that this is not entirely consistent leads Diemer to argue that references to conditions in a covenant with Adam must therefore refer to another, prelapsarian, covenant.³³ But others, like Stoute, do not follow him on that.³⁴

It does not appear that Calvin added much to the development of covenantal theology over and above what his predecessors brought forward. Like them, he recognises only one eternal covenant of grace. Historically this covenant is traced back to Abraham, as recorded in Genesis 17. But theologically it began with Adam, because God began his church with Adam, and the church is simply another name for the covenant people of God.³⁵

Where many theologians do see a difference in Calvin's approach is in the greater emphasis he places on the gracious nature of the covenant. Some, including Leonard Trinterud, Wayne Baker, Charles McCoy and Joseph McLelland, argue that Calvin teaches a unilateral, unconditional covenant, and contrast this with the bilateral, conditional covenant formula of the Rhinelanders.³⁶

Others have gone so far as to suggest that Calvin's approach initiates a purer Reformed theology, distinct from that of the Rhineland and later British theologians, who were influenced by Melancthon's idea of natural law. This thesis was put forward by Paul Althaus, Gottlob Schrenk and Karl Barth. They held that in Calvin's covenant theology there is no room for a covenant of works.³⁷

Others, again, have followed Perry Miller in arguing that the covenant has no significant role at all in Calvin's theology. Miller himself argues that the real covenant theology arose among the New England Puritans.³⁸

These theories have been opposed by Weir, Lillback, Bierma and Poole,³⁹ who argue that Calvin stands in one line with Zwingli, Bullinger and others

³² *Decades*, IV. 1.

³³ Diemer, *op. cit.*, pp. 12, 13.

³⁴ Stoute, *op. cit.*, pp. 139-142.

³⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), X. 10. 1.

³⁶ For a more detailed discussion see Lillback, pp. 18, 19.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 17, 18.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 13, 14.

who went on to develop covenant theology. Here they agree with earlier scholars such as Geerhardus Vos, John Murray, and Andrew Woolsey,⁴⁰ who had demonstrated that the covenant plays an important part in Calvin's theology. But all these men also agree that the covenant never became an organising principle in Calvin's theology.

The question remains, however, to what extent Calvin conformed to other covenant theologians, and prepared the way for later developments. Of particular interest to us is the question: Can we find in Calvin's writings a hint of a possible further covenant with Adam? This is much disputed. Some point to Calvin's statement that there ever only was the one covenant to deny this possibility.⁴¹ But Calvin said this in the context of identifying the Old and New Testaments as representing one and the same covenant in different dispensations. Here he was not addressing the question whether there might also have been a prelapsarian covenant with Adam. Others point to Calvin's rejection of the interpretation of Hosea 6:7 as referring to a covenant with Adam. But this is not the same as condemning the idea of a covenant as such.

Diemer argues that the very passage where Calvin rejects the interpretation of Hosea 6:7 in terms of a covenant of works shows he accepts the existence of such a covenant.⁴² Diemer also points to Calvin's teaching on the fall, where he recognises Adam's representative headship over the human race. Here Calvin rejects traducianism, "For the human race has not naturally derived corruption through its descent from Adam; but the result is rather to be traced to the appointment of God."⁴³ For Diemer this appointment of God could only refer to the what others call the covenant of

³⁹ Weir, Lillback and Bierma, *opera cit.*; N.J. Poole, *The History of the Covenant Concept from the Bible to Johannes Cloppenburg*, San Francisco: Mellon Research University Press, 1992.

⁴⁰ Vos, *op. cit.*; John Murray, "Covenant Theology" in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, ed. P.E. Hughes; Andrew A. Woolsey, "Unity and Continuity in Covenantal Thought: A Study in the Reformed Tradition to the Westminster Assembly," Doctoral thesis submitted to the University of Glasgow, 1988.

⁴¹ In commenting on Jeremiah Calvin said: 'God has never made any other covenant than that which he made formerly with Abraham, and at length confirmed by the hand of Moses.' *Commentary on Jeremiah* 31:31-32.

⁴² Diemer, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

⁴³ John Calvin, *The First Book Of Moses called Genesis*, trans. John King, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 3:6.

works.⁴⁴ However, when the citation is read in context this interpretation is doubtful.

It could also be argued that such a covenant, if not mentioned directly, can be inferred from other teachings. For example, in one place Calvin taught that the tree of life in paradise was a sign and sacrament⁴⁵, and in another that sacraments are signs and seals of a covenant.⁴⁶ But Calvin himself never brings these two claims together. While there are other hints of this nature, there is never an explicit recognition of a separate prelapsarian covenant. Adam's test by way of the tree of knowledge of good and evil is not explained in covenantal terms. Calvin simply states: "Adam was denied the tree of knowledge of good and evil to test his obedience and prove that he was willingly under God's command."⁴⁷

If Calvin did not clearly explain Adam's sin in terms of the breaking of a covenant of works, he does appear to portray Christ's role as fulfilling the demands of the law by means of his active as well as his passive obedience. With reference to Gal. 2:21, he writes:

For we hence infer, that it is from Christ we must seek what the Law would confer on anyone who fulfilled it; or, which is the same thing, that by the grace of Christ we obtain what God promised in the Law to our works: "If a man do, he shall live in them" (Lev. xviii. 5) ... For if the observance of the Law is righteousness, who can deny that Christ, by taking this burden upon himself, and reconciling us to God, as if we were the observers of the Law, merited favour for us. Of the same nature is what he afterwards says to the Galatians: "God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law" (Gal. iv. 4,5). For to what end that subjection, unless he obtained justification for us by undertaking to perform what we were unable to pay? Hence that imputation of righteousness without works, of which Paul treats (Rom. iv. 5), the righteousness found in Christ alone being accepted as if it were ours.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Diemer, *loc. cit.*

⁴⁵ Most commentators agree that this is the import of Calvin's observation that the tree of life was "a symbol and memorial of life". See editors footnote in John Calvin, *Genesis*, p. 116.

⁴⁶ His classic definition was: "A sacrament is a seal by which God's covenant, or promise, is sealed." *Institutes* IV.19.2, cf. IV.16.1-6.

⁴⁷ *Institutes*, II. 1. 4; cf. IV. 10. 15.

⁴⁸ *Institutes*, II, xvii, 5.

Clearly what the law would confer, namely life, is a reward for (active) obedience to the law, and not a reward for meeting the punishment for breaking the law (passive obedience).

A statement in one of his sermons on Deuteronomy also appears to meet our definition of the active obedience of Christ:

And in the foresaid text which I alleged out of Galatians [Gal. 3:13], Saint Paul treats of two things. He says that because we cannot attain to righteousness, but by fulfilling the law in all points, and by being discharged before God: it behoved our Lord Jesus Christ to be subject to the law, to the intent that his obedience might now be imputed unto us, and God accept thereof as though we brought the like obedience of our own.⁴⁹

Calvin recognised that: “The law of God, which we call the moral law is nothing else than a testimony of **natural law** and of that conscience which God has engraved upon the minds of men.”⁵⁰ This law was already operative in the Garden of Eden, and for this reason it can be said that Christ kept the law that Adam failed to keep. But that Christ did not simply come to do what Adam failed to do by way of active obedience is implied by the fact that for Calvin the righteousness of the law is a lower kind of righteousness than the righteousness Christ provides.

This concept of a lower and higher righteousness is brought out particularly in his sermons on Job, especially the 88th one in the series (1554). Here he divides righteousness into two sorts, “the one is that which he has declared to us by his law”, the other is the “infinite rightfulness” of God himself, “a perfecter [more perfect] righteousness than the righteousness of the law.”⁵¹ He goes on to say that if God had chosen to use his own righteousness to judge Adam he could not have failed to be condemned. But God was content to accept the righteousness which he commanded “as though it

⁴⁹ John Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy*, Ch. 21, facsimile of John Harrison’s edition of 1583, trans. Arthur Golding (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth), p. 763. The present author has modernised the language.

⁵⁰ *Institutes*, IV, 20, 8

⁵¹ *Sermons of Maister John Calvin upon the Booke of Job*, trans. A. Golding (London, 1854), the 88th sermon, p. 413

were thoroughly perfect, notwithstanding that it be somewhat qualified to the state of man, I mean of man before he was corrupted of sin.”⁵²

For Calvin the righteousness Christ provides far exceeds anything Adam could have attained if he had remained obedient to God. This raises the question whether Christ did more than what Adam could have done, had he remained obedient. Would Adam’s righteousness, had he maintained it, have given him eternal life in the sense of immortality (*non posse mori*)? Despite the fact that Christ provided us with a more perfect righteousness than we could have attained in Adam, it would appear that Calvin thinks Adam could have attained immortality. Commenting on the Tree of Life Calvin maintains that if Adam had maintained his righteousness “His earthly life would have been temporal; yet he would have passed into heaven without death, and without injury.”⁵³ This conclusion raises a number of questions, including: What would have been the state of Adam’s offspring? Is heaven indeed our final destination (the book of Revelation speaks of a new earth where God will live in the midst of us)? What did Christ’s greater righteousness attain for us?

On this point we think Beza gives a more complete and consistent picture.

Bringing Christ’s active obedience and federal theology together

The first one who may have linked the concepts of Christ’s active obedience to that of a covenant of works appears to have been Theodore Beza. In an early publication, *Confession de la foy chrestienne* (1557), Beza clearly speaks of Christ’s active obedience as one of the reasons why Christ took on human nature:

Secondly (b) man is bound to accomplish and fulfil all the righteousness which God requires of him for to be glorified: then there must be a man for to accomplish perfectly all righteousness to please God.⁵⁴

⁵² *Ibid.* I was alerted to these passages by Woolsey’s dissertation, pp. 343ff. He cites various other passages in Calvin’s sermons on Job that indicate man had the law written on his heart before it was received at Sinai.

⁵³ *Commentary on Genesis*, 2:16, 17.

⁵⁴ Beza, Theodore, *A Briefe and Piththie Sum of the Christian Faith ...* Trans. Robert Fills (London: William How, 1572), iii.19.

Beza also recognised that man is required to keep the law “under a changeable condition”, that is, with two potential outcomes, because in the law:

... [God] declares to us the obedience and perfect righteousness, which we owe to his majesty and to our neighbours, under a changeable condition, that is to say, either of life eternal (so that we have perfectly fulfilled the whole law, without breaking one point) or else death eternal, for lack of the entire fulfilling and accomplishing the contents of every parcel of the commandments.⁵⁵

However, this “changeable condition” is not here related to the conditions of a covenant. The first mention of a covenant (of law) comes in a later book, entitled *Quaestionum et responsionum Christianarum libellus* (1570, enlarged 1576). Here he first states that “... having become under the law He [Christ] completed all righteousness, and suffered the penalties owed for our sins; both of which the apostle knew by the name of obedience” (Ans. 113).⁵⁶ This is then further explained in questions and answers that follow:

Q128 Therefore, you say that we are justified before God, that is, held to be and declared righteous, because the obedience of Christ is imputed to us, which consists of two distinct parts, the satisfaction for our sins, and the full observance of all legal righteousness.

A128 That is correct.

Then, after discussing the question of the merit of good works he adds:

Q163 But if the wages of eternal life is not owed from the worthiness of the works themselves, still it is at least due from the covenant.

A163 What covenant do you mean?

Q164 The covenant of the law: Do this, and you will live, and if you want to enter life, keep the commandments.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* iii.22.

⁵⁶ Beza, Theodore, *A Little Book of Christian Questions and Responses*, 1570, Trans. Kirk M. Summers (Allison Park: Pickwick Publications, 1986), p. 43. In the margin he lists Gal. 4:4, Matt. 3:15 and Rom. 5:19 as supporting texts.

A164 This covenant is understood in terms of the threatening which is set against the promise. Moreover, it holds, by the testimony of the apostle himself, he who does not remain in all things which are written in the book of the law, so that he keeps them, is cursed. Now the law requires perfect love. But no one besides Christ alone fully keeps the law. Therefore, life is owed to Christ alone by the covenant; moreover, to us, whom He is given by mere grace, life is given from the same by mere grace.⁵⁷

That we must think of the “covenant of the law” as a prelapsarian institution is clear from Answer 129:

... Adam was created holy, good, and pure, and would also have become righteous, if he kept the law given by condition.

In a later book written by their students, but edited by Beza and his colleague Anthonie Faius (De La Faye),⁵⁸ the covenant of the law is more directly linked to Adam as the representative head of humankind. Here the concept of *federal headship* (though not the term) is introduced by means of the creationist understanding of the origin of the human soul:

Now, although the soul which is not taken from Adam, but immediately created by God, may seem to be void of this infection [of sin]: and that it seems not meet, that the sins of the fathers should be punished in the children, yet seeing Adam is considered, not only as some particular man: but as the beginning whence all mankind did issue, in whom also were all the gifts, that were bestowed upon the whole offspring, he by his sin lost them, both to himself, and unto all men that proceed from him: who are now in that only respect, that they are and do resemble the image of Adam, hateful unto God.(xxiii, 5)⁵⁹

In this book we also find a sharpened understanding of the need for Christ. It recognises that Christ did not merely correct and complete what Adam failed to do. While it is true that Adam could have lived if he had kept the

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁵⁸ Theodore Beza and Anthonie Faius, *Thesis Theologia in schola Genevensi*, 1586.

⁵⁹ Theodore Beza and Anthonie Faius., *Propositions and Principles of Divinitie propovnded and disputed in the Universitie of Geneva by certaine students of Divinitie there under M. Theod. Beza and M. Anthonie Faius, Professors of Divinitie*, trans. John Penry (Geneva?, 1595), p. 72.

law (xxii, 2), this would not have met God's goal for man. The book explains this as follows:

1 God would not have the felicity of man to consist, in that first estate in which he was created, (for then had his felicity been earthly, and in some sort, subject unto change) but he placed it in a more firm and more excellent estate, whereby he might have a heavenly life, and such, as from the which, he would in no wise fall.

2 Now, that man might be brought unto that perfect estate, he fell by his own fault; yet not without the providence of God, and so was made subject unto the death, both of his soul and body: to the end, that being delivered from sin and death, he might pass into a better life, and so might become a most certain president of the justice an mercy of God.

3 Our restoring again, consists in that, that we should be freed from sin and death, and also from all the effects of both, and should be preferred unto the dignity of that righteousness and that immortal life, which is far more excellent and permanent. (xxiv, 2-4)⁶⁰

We note here the supralapsarian motif introduced in point 2 above, Adam's fall into sin took place that man might attain a higher goal than would have come about by way of Adam's obedience. Presumably the life Adam would have through obedience to God's law would never have been more than a continued existence (*posse non mori*), based on an ongoing righteousness, whereas the righteousness and life Christ gives is "more excellent and permanent."

The "more excellent" righteousness received in Christ reminds us of what Calvin, in his commentary on Job, called a "superior righteousness" (see above). This is the righteousness Christians have by virtue of their union with Christ. It not only means the removal of guilt, but "the regeneration of a new life, which is opposed unto the corruption of nature, and by which, Sanctification is so begun in this life, as it shall be fully perfected in the next" (xxiv 4).⁶¹ The effect of our union with Christ is therefore twofold:

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

The outward effects, in as much as they do peculiarly apply Christ and his benefits unto those that believe, are therefore the most excellent, and of greatest account. And they are, both the full remission of all sins, as well original as actual, by the blood of Christ: and also the bestowing upon us, of all righteousness fulfilled by him, together with the most full restoring and repairing of our nature in the flesh of Christ. All which, are freely by faith in Christ, imputed unto us who take hold both of him and his gifts. (xxviii, 12)⁶²

Conclusion:

We have in these works of Beza and his students a version of Federal theology that recognises:

1. That justification includes the imputation of Christ's active obedience.
2. The recognition that by his obedience Christ meets the demands of a covenant of law which had its beginnings in Paradise.

This is a formulation that we do not find in the Rhineland or Britain until some years later. While a covenant distinct from the covenant of grace had long been recognised, variously called a covenant of nature, of law, or of works, both in postlapsarian and prelapsarian forms, and whereas the active obedience of Christ had been taught for a number of years, the two seem not to have been brought together in Britain until the beginning of the seventeenth century.

We also note that Beza's approach includes a number of features that appear to come straight out of the teaching of Calvin. These include:

1. The close link between justification and sanctification. The imputation of Christ's righteousness not only affects our legal status before God, but also our moral life.
2. The recognition that the righteousness of Christ far surpassed anything that Adam or any of his descendants could have attained.
3. The emphasis on grace, in that Christ fulfils all the conditions, and more.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 86

But what is most noticeable in the formulation of Beza and his followers is that the Christ did something for us by way of his active obedience that Adam never could have done. I think this recognition, despite its supralapsarian overtones, deserves further investigation.

Postscript.

Chapter 28 of the *Propositions and Principles* cited above was written by an English student of Beza, one “Hilar(i)us Fantrat of Geurnzie.”⁶³ This alerts us to the tremendous influence of the French speaking institutions in Switzerland, like Geneva and Lausanne. Not only did English students go there to study, but many French graduates from these institutions moved to Britain after the Bartholomew’s Day massacre of the Huguenots. These refugees were very influential in the establishment of Calvinism in Britain, as the following citation shows us:

During 1567 and 1568 the persecutions in France and Holland drove thousands of Protestants, mostly Presbyterians, to England. ... Only in Jersey and Guernsey, whither large numbers of Huguenots had fled after the St Bartholomew massacre, was Presbyterianism fully permitted. Cartwright and Edmund Snape were ministers there; and from 1576 to 1625 a completely appointed Presbyterian Church existed, under the rule of synods, and authorized by the governor.⁶⁴

The influence of French speaking Calvinists has been largely ignored in the studies of federal theology mentioned in this paper. These tend more to concentrate on influences from the Rhineland. Consequently they picture the linking of Christ’s active obedience to the covenant of works as occurring at a later date. McGifford, for example, first observes this in a work of Nichols dating to 1596,⁶⁵ twenty years after the publication of Beza’s enlarged *Libellus*.

Another example of this approach can be found in a study by Isbell Sherman. He traces the development of federal theology through Wolfgang Musculus, Peter Martyr, Peter Vermigli, Stephen Szegedi, Zacharius Ursinus, Kasper Olevian, Johannes Piscator, Dudley Fenner, Thomas Cartwright, William Perkins, Robert Howie, Robert Rollock, and Francis

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 86. The longer form of this name is given in the 1591 edition of Robert Waldegrave.

⁶⁴ <http://42.1911encyclopedia.org/P/PR/PRESBYTERIANISM.htm>

⁶⁵ Michael McGiffert, “From Moses to Adam: The Making of the Covenant of Works,” in *The Sixteenth Century Journal* XIX, 2 (1988), p. 139.

Gomarus. It is only then that he turns to Lausanne, to consider the English translation of the works of William Bucanus.⁶⁶

Here we should note that Thomas Cartwright is mentioned in the citation above as one of those who worked with the French refugees at Guernsey. It is not impossible that there he may have met the very “Hilar(i)us Fantrat of Geurnzie” who contributed to Beza’s book.

We conclude that it is not possible to construct an accurate picture of the development of federal theology without including the contributions of French speaking Switzerland. While the British may have provided much of the terminology that became associated with federal theology, some of the crucial concepts first appear in the theology of Theodore Beza.

⁶⁶ Isbell R. Sherman, *The Origin of the Concept of the Covenant of Works*, Master’s thesis, Westminster Seminary, 1976.