

# COVENANT THEOLOGY IN THE THOUGHT OF JOHN CALVIN: FROM THE COVENANT OF WORKS TO THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

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## ABSTRACT

Covenant theology has always had a special place in the Reformed branch of theology. It is the ground for several other doctrines and also functions as a hermeneutical key to reading and interpreting the Scriptures. Although the great systematizations of this doctrine only appeared in the seventeenth-century and onward, it is possible to find it present in the thought of the early Reformers. This article investigates some of the main works of John Calvin in the attempt to organize his thought regarding this doctrine and aims to formulate what would be the view of the Genevan reformer on each dispensation of the divine covenant with man. The article analyses the following covenants: works, Noahic, and Abrahamic. Several articles have been published investigating Calvin's covenantal thought as a whole, in terms of the covenant of grace in general. It was not possible to find an academic contribution that would investigate each of the dispensations in Calvin's thought.

## KEYWORDS

John Calvin; Theology; Covenant; Works; Noahic; Abrahamic.

## INTRODUCTION

John Calvin certainly is one of the most influential theologians of the Reformation, if not *the* most influential. His commentaries on the Bible, his letters,

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and his *magnum opus*, the *Institutes*, are still read, researched, and analyzed by many today. His influence not only in theology, but in society and economy, is widely recognized. Regardless of one's love or hate for him, all ought to acknowledge the historical reality of this man's achievements.

When it comes to understanding Calvin's thought, many have tried to identify the central dogma, the structural principle of Calvin's theology. Several have been proposed, but there is still no positive consensus among scholars.<sup>1</sup> From the debate at least one certainty seems to have emerged and become an accepted position in scholarly circles: if there is a central dogma dominating Calvin's thought, most certainly it is not covenant theology. Everett H. Emerson explains that "Calvin himself, like many other Christian theologians, spoke of a divine covenant, but because the covenant is not a basic element for his system, he is not regarded as a covenant theologian."<sup>2</sup> However, as Emerson affirms, no one would deny that the doctrine of the covenant is present in all of Calvin's works from the *Institutes* to his commentaries. It may not be the center of his system, if he has a system at all, but as a fruit of his exegetical genius and of his *Sola Scriptura*, the covenant is found in crucial topics of Calvin's theology like creation, predestination, justification, sanctification, sacraments, and church discipline.

The goal of this article is to investigate Calvin's writings in search for the reformer's views on the divine covenants and to organize them in the generally accepted division of the doctrine: works and grace. Calvin's doctrine of the covenant of grace will be analyzed in terms of its five most accepted dispensations: Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and New Covenant. The article will systematize Calvin's thought in terms of the basic elements of a covenantal relationship: the existence of a covenant, its parties, characteristics,

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<sup>1</sup> The central dogma methodology is one of the most common approaches to the study of Calvin's thought. Cornelis Venema explains that the method consists of finding "the key to Calvin's theology in one dominant theme. A central idea or motif in Calvin's thought is regarded as the basis for its various sub-themes. Implicit in this approach is the conviction that Calvin was, in contrast to the other reformers and Luther in particular, the author of a theological system whose various aspects constitute an inter-related and inter-connected pattern of ideas." Cornelis P. Venema, *Accepted and Renewed in Christ: The Twofold Grace of God and the Interpretation of Calvin's Theology* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 14. While Luther dedicated more attention to the dogma of justification by faith, several theologians believe that the central theme in Calvin's theology is the doctrine of God, with special focus on God's sovereignty and predestination. For more on this subject, see Charles Partee, "Calvin's Central Dogma Again," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 18, n. 2 (July 1987): 191-200; Richard A. Muller, "Calvin and the 'Calvinists': Assessing Continuities and Discontinuities between the Reformation and Orthodoxy," *Calvin Theological Journal* 30, n. 2 (November 1995): 345-375; Richard A. Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition: On the Work of Christ and the Order of Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 13-50; François Wendel, *Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet, first Labyrinth Press edition (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 1995), 263-284.

<sup>2</sup> Everett H. Emerson, "Calvin and Covenant Theology," *Church History* 25, n. 2 (June 1956): 136.

promises, and threats. At the end, it will demonstrate that, although the Reformer himself did not produce a systematic approach to covenant theology, it is possible to formulate a “Calvinian” system through his theological writings.

## 1. COVENANT OF WORKS IN THE THOUGHT OF JOHN CALVIN

The presence of a covenant of works in Calvin’s theology has long been a debated issue. Donald J. Bruggink in a controversial article published in 1959 boldly affirmed that there was a complete absence of any intimation of a covenant of works made with Adam in Calvin’s writings.<sup>3</sup> Leonard Trinterud is another scholar who placed doubt concerning the presence of a covenant of works in Calvin’s thought, at least as expressed in later works on federal theology like those of Ursinus, Olevianus, and the English Puritans. Although acknowledging Calvin’s frequent use of the word “covenant” in his works, Trinterud affirms that Calvin’s meaning and interpretation of the covenant was very different from his successors.<sup>4</sup> For him, Calvin viewed the covenant as a gracious act of God in which the burden of fulfillment was placed upon God alone, while for later theologians the covenant meant a mutual compact dependent on man’s response in obedience.<sup>5</sup> If Trinterud is right, then there is really no space in Calvin’s theology for a covenant of works which, by definition, is dependent on man’s faithfulness to God’s terms of covenant in order to enjoy its benefits.

In spite of the contrary positions, an unbiased look at Calvin’s writings seems to point to the presence of a mutual contract between God and Adam before the Fall, at least in seminal form. The first evidence clearly found in Calvin’s writings is that Adam’s relationship with God was conditioned by the Creator’s commands. The tree of life was to be a reminder of Adam’s source of life. “Man, as often as he tasted the fruit of that tree, should remember whence he received his life, in order that he might acknowledge that he lives not by his own power, but by the kindness of God alone.”<sup>6</sup> The tree of the knowledge of good and evil served as an instrument to test Adam’s obedience

<sup>3</sup> Peter A. Lillback, “Ursinus’ Development of the Covenant of Creation: a Debt to Melancthon or Calvin?,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 43, n. 2 (March 1981): 274.

<sup>4</sup> “For Calvin... the covenant of God is God’s promise to man, which obligates God to fulfill... In the covenant theory of the Rhineland and of the English reformers, the covenant is a conditional promise on God’s part, which has the effect of drawing out of man a responding promise of obedience, thus creating a mutual pact or treaty. The burden of fulfillment rests upon man, for he must first obey in order to bring God’s reciprocal obligation into force.” Leonard J. Trinterud, “The Origins of Puritanism,” *Church History* 20, n. 1 (March 1951): 45.

<sup>5</sup> Trinterud, “The Origins of Puritanism,” 56n27.

<sup>6</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, trans. John King, v. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2005), 117.

to God and to teach him subjection. “A law is imposed upon him in token of his subjection. . . . Therefore, the prohibition of one tree was a test of obedience.” Being successful in his test, Adam would enjoy a blessed state yet unknown to him. “His earthly life truly would have been temporal; yet he would have passed into heaven without death, and without injury.”<sup>7</sup> “Truly the first man would have passed to a better life, had he remained upright; but there would have been no separation of the soul from the body, no corruption, no kind of destruction, and, in short, no violent change.”<sup>8</sup> Calvin understands, therefore, that the relationship between God and Adam is a sort of probation based on man’s obedience.<sup>9</sup> This, in spite of the absence of the word “covenant”, is a fundamental element in the doctrine of the covenant of works.<sup>10</sup> Paul Helm rightly affirms: “Calvin teaches that the relation of Adam to his creator was that of a probationer.”<sup>11</sup>

It is important to note that, for Calvin, the condition imposed upon Adam was a legal arrangement. The reformer refers to the condition of Adam’s probation as “a law”. But it would be wrong to limit the definition of law in Calvin’s theology to the single command of abstinence of the forbidden fruit without considering Calvin’s writings as a whole. In his commentary of Leviticus 18:5, Calvin recognizes the salvific power of the Law of Moses (the moral law) although “salvation is not to be expected from the Law unless its precepts be in every respect complied with.”<sup>12</sup> After the Fall, the law continues to provide life to all those who can perfectly obey it.<sup>13</sup>

In other words, Calvin sees continuity between Eden and Sinai. In both circumstances life was promised and death was threatened under the same condition: perfect obedience to the Law. The Edenic single condition of perfect

<sup>7</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on Genesis*, 1:127.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:180.

<sup>9</sup> Calvin expressed the same view of a probationary relationship between God and Adam in his *Institutes*. There, one finds him affirming: “But the promise by which he was bidden to hope for eternal life, and, conversely, the terrible threat of death once he tasted of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, served to prove and exercise his faith.” Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, v. 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 245, II.1.4.

<sup>10</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 7, Section 2.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Helm, “Calvin and the Covenant: Unity and Continuity,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 55 (April 1983): 74.

<sup>12</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, trans. Charles William Bingham, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2005), 204.

<sup>13</sup> “. . . he [Moses] considers the Law as connected with promises and threatening. Whence it follows, that salvation can only be procured by it if its precepts be exactly fulfilled. Life is indeed promised in it, but only if whatever its commands be complied with; whilst, on the other hand, it denounces death against its transgressors, so that to have offended in the slightest point is enough to condemn and destroy a person; and thus it overwhelms all men with despair.” Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four last Books of Moses*, 2:200.

obedience is fully revealed at Sinai as the Decalogue.<sup>14</sup> The legal element is, therefore, present in the Adamic administration along with all the other elements that characterize a covenantal relationship. The covenant of works may not be clearly systematized and spelled out in Calvin's writings, but it is there in seed form.<sup>15</sup>

As mentioned above, several are the arguments against the idea that a pre-lapsarian covenant is present in Calvin.<sup>16</sup> One of the arguments used is that unlike the common interpretation covenant theologians give to Hosea 6:7, Calvin rejects the idea that this text speaks of a covenant with Adam.<sup>17</sup> In spite of its immediate appearance, it is necessary to interpret Calvin's statement in its local context. What Calvin rejects here is the attempt to translate the word אָדָם from the Hebrew text as "Adam" and to understand from this translation that Hosea is referring to the first man created, the father of humanity. In other words, Calvin refuses to use Hosea 6:7 as a reference to the covenant with Adam but he does not deny the doctrine of covenant itself. This, on the other hand, is extremely significant. As observed by Lillback, Calvin is used to expressing his disapproval of the illegitimate use of biblical passages in order to support dogmatic assertions.<sup>18</sup> In his commentary of Genesis 1:1, Calvin recognizes the plural form of אֱלֹהִים and even affirms that one might *infer* from it a plurality in the godhead. Nevertheless, he refuses to use this exegetical evidence as a proof for such an important doctrine and even condemns those who do so.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> The same line of thought and conclusion are present in the works of Lillback, "Ursinus' Development of the Covenant of Creation," 282-283, and Heinrich Hepp, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2008), 288-292.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Helms comes to the same conclusion when he affirms that "it is clear that Calvin presents all the elements of the later-developed covenant of nature, and that he denies nothing that the later, more elaborate doctrine affirms: the probation of the federal head Adam, by being given a divine command or law; the threat of punishment for disobedience and the promise of reward for obedience." Helm, "Calvin and the Covenant," 75.

<sup>16</sup> A good summary of the most popular arguments against a covenant of works in Calvin's theology is found in Lillback, "Ursinus' Development of the Covenant of Creation," 274-281.

<sup>17</sup> "Other explains the words thus, 'They have transgressed as Adam the covenant.'" But the word, Adam, we know, is taken indefinitely for men. This exposition is frigid and diluted, "They have transgressed as Adam the covenant;" that is, they have followed or imitated the example of their father Adam, who had immediately at the beginning transgressed God's commandment. I do not stop to refute this comment; for we see that it is in itself vapid." John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, trans. John Owen, v. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2005), 235.

<sup>18</sup> Lillback, "Ursinus' Development of the Covenant of Creation," 281.

<sup>19</sup> "They think that they have testimony against the Arians, to prove the Deity of the Son and of the Spirit, but in the meantime they involve themselves in the error of Sabellius, because Moses afterwards subjoins that the *Elohim* had spoken, and that the *Spirit of the Elohim* rested upon the waters. If we suppose three persons to be here denoted, there will be no distinction between them. For it will follow, both that the Son is begotten by himself, and that the Spirit is not of the Father, but of himself. For me it is sufficient that the plural number expresses those powers which God exercised in creating the world." Calvin, *Commentaries on Genesis*, 1:71-72.

Another argument against a covenant of works in Calvin is drawn from his understanding of the imputation of Adam's sin. Some would argue that a pre-lapsarian covenant demands a *representative* view of the imputation of the original sin. The representative position affirms that Adam was chosen (appointed) by God as humanity's federal head and it is this appointment that makes every man responsible for Adam's transgression. This perspective was developed by later Reformed theologians.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, it is affirmed that Calvin, influenced by Augustine and Anselm, was a *realist*. Calvin believed, it is affirmed, that because Adam is the source of all the human race, in Adam's "loins" all mankind also sinned, coming into existence in an already fallen state.<sup>21</sup>

It is indeed true that Calvin held the realistic position. This is verified in a statement found in the *Institutes*.<sup>22</sup> But it is false to affirm that Calvin held to this particular position alone. Texts that point to a representative view are also found in Calvin.<sup>23</sup> The attempt to identify Calvin in one of the two schools concerning the nature of the imputation of Adam's sin is, at least, inconclusive. And regardless of Calvin's position on this issue, Reformed theologians have already agreed that the doctrine of the covenant of works is compatible with either view.<sup>24</sup> The simple fact that Calvin adheres to one of them is an actual indication that a pre-lapsarian covenant is present in Calvin's thought.

The presence of the covenant of works in Calvin's theology seems very clear. It is correct to affirm that the theologian of Geneva did not produce a systematic treatise on the subject compared to the works of famous covenant theologians like Ursinus, Olevianus, Musculus, Perkins, Ball, and the Westminster divines. Actually, the contrary is what seems to be true. The theologians of the post-Reformation, "drinking" from Calvin and others, elaborated a more sophisticated system in order to explain a biblical dogma. Regardless of how

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<sup>20</sup> Helm, "Calvin and the Covenant," 72.

<sup>21</sup> According to Lillback it was the great southern Presbyterian James H. Thornwell who held to this position. Lillback, "Ursinus' Development of the Covenant of Creation," 278n99.

<sup>22</sup> "Adam, by sinning, not only took upon himself misfortune and ruin but also plunged our nature into like destruction. This was not due to the guilt of himself alone, which would not pertain to us at all, but was because he infected all his posterity with that corruption in to which he had fallen." Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:249.

<sup>23</sup> "...the beginning of corruption in Adam was such that it was conveyed in a perpetual stream from the ancestors into their descendants. For the contagion does not take its origins from the substance of the flesh or soul, but because it had been so ordained that the first man should at one and the same time have and love, both for himself and for his descendants, the gifts that God had bestowed upon him." Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:250.

<sup>24</sup> Shedd, another Presbyterian theologian, affirmed: "Since the idea of representation by Adam is incompatible with that of specific existence in Adam, the choice must be made between representative union and natural union. A combination of the two views is illogical. But the doctrine of the covenant of works is consistent with either theory of the Adamic connection." William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1980), II, 39-40.

and whom later theologians are indebted to for their theology of a covenant of works, it seems clear that this doctrine is already present in Calvin in seminal form. Lillback concludes: “The arguments affirming that Calvin taught a covenant of works in an inchoative sense appear conclusive.”<sup>25</sup>

## 2. THE BEGINNING OF THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE COVENANT OF GRACE AND THE NOAHIC COVENANT

For Calvin, all true believers after the Fall are under the covenant of grace. In the two most important chapters in the *Institutes* regarding Calvin’s views on the doctrine of the covenant, chapters 10 and 11 of Book II, the reformer affirms that to Adam was given the first promise of salvation.<sup>26</sup> Calvin was referring to the text of Genesis 3:15, which later became known among covenant theologians as the *protoeuangelion*.<sup>27</sup> This certainly explains why Calvin frequently uses the following sequence of persons when dealing with redemption in its revelation, accomplishment and application: “Adam, Noah, Abraham.” In his argument in the commentary on the book of Genesis, Calvin affirms that the covenant between God and his people dates back long before Moses. Those whom he would free had already been informed through their fathers about the covenantal relation between Yahweh and Israel and this was a knowledge “entirely uncontroverted among them.”<sup>28</sup> For Calvin, salvation after the Fall begins to be revealed to Adam and progressively passes on to other patriarchs until its full consummation in Christ.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Lillback, “Ursinus’ Development of the Covenant of Creation,” 288.

<sup>26</sup> For an excellent summary on the importance of these two chapters in the understanding of Calvin’s covenantal thought see Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:428n1.

<sup>27</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:446. It is important to note that while Calvin interprets Genesis 3:15 as pointing to the salvation of sinners, he rejects the association of the word “seed” with the Lord Jesus Christ. Such interpretation for Calvin is a violent distortion. His reasons are two: one exegetical and another historical. He identifies the term as a collective noun and simply cannot understand how it can be applied to one man only as such. Moreover, throughout human history as revealed in Scripture Calvin sees that victory over Satan (who used the serpent to tempt Adam and Eve) is promised to elect humankind. Calvin concludes: “I explain, therefore, the seed to mean the posterity of the woman generally. But since experience teaches that not all sons of Adam by far, arise as conquerors of the devil, we must necessarily come to one head, that we may find to whom the victory belongs.” Calvin, *Commentaries on Genesis*, 1:170. In his sermon on this text Calvin uses Genesis 3:15 as an encouragement to Christians in their battle against Satan. After explaining from the pulpit the same opinion present in his commentary, he affirms: “Now, since we have the natural meaning of this passage, let us think seriously about taking advantage of it. In the first place, as I have already said, let us be thoroughly convinced that we must fight against Satan if we want to serve God and be considered among the number of his children.” John Calvin, *Sermons on Genesis 1:1 - 11:4. Forty-nine Sermons Delivered in Geneva between 4 September 1559 and 23 January 1560*, trans Rob Roy McGregor (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2009), 289.

<sup>28</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on Genesis*, 1:59, 65-66.

<sup>29</sup> For the occurrences of the expression see Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:70, 434. It also appears in Book 4, viii, 5 as he deals with the Church and its possession of divine revelation. For Calvin, Adam and Noah were also to be regarded as patriarchs just like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Calvin sees Yahweh's promise of preservation and deliverance to Noah as the Noahic covenant. The promise is a strengthener to Noah's faith, who certainly needed it to face the difficult construction of the ark and the many terrors which were ahead of him, although he was a man of incomparable faith.<sup>30</sup> The covenant, therefore, is above all a means for Noah to live by faith. It is an instrument to entice Noah's trust in the word of God and to help him "discriminate between life and death."<sup>31</sup> The Noahic covenant is in general terms a promise of preservation directed to Noah alone.<sup>32</sup>

Calvin uses certain terms in ways different from how they came to be used in more careful and elaborated views of the covenant. When talking about the preservation of Noah's family and of the animals, Calvin calls it a "condition annexed" to the covenant to encourage Noah in reference to the "replenishing of the new world."<sup>33</sup> It is clear by Calvin's own interpretation that this condition is not to be fulfilled by Noah but by Yahweh. In seventeenth-century thought, the condition of the covenant is that part of the divine agreement must be performed by man, not by God.<sup>34</sup> In light of the later use of the term, what Calvin means here is an annex to the covenant's divine promise of life. Another

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<sup>30</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on Genesis*, 1:258, 296.

<sup>31</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on Genesis*, 1:259. Calvin does not identify the threats of the covenant. But since the promise of the covenant should assist Noah's faith to obedience, it seems reasonable to conclude that for Calvin the threat of the covenant would be to drawn with the rest of the disobedient human race. Similar to the Adamic Covenant, which promised life upon obedience and death upon disobedience, so does the Noahic covenant. The clear difference in Calvin's thought is that the obedience of Noah to the covenant is only by faith and the object of faith is the promise of the covenant itself. Calvin will later call this covenant "the covenant of life." Calvin, *Commentaries on Genesis*, 1:310.

<sup>32</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on Genesis*, 1:259. "For there is an understood antithesis, that the whole world being rejected, the Lord would establish a peculiar covenant with Noah *alone*." Emphasis mine.

<sup>33</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on Genesis*, 1:259.

<sup>34</sup> Zacharias Ursinus in regard to the covenant teaches that "this agreement, or reconciliation, is called a Covenant, because God promises to us certain blessings, and demands from us in return our obedience, employing also certain solemn ceremonies for the confirmation thereof." For Ursinus, covenant promises derive from God and covenant conditions are for men. The conditions of a covenant are its *substance* and they are repentance and faith. This element is what leads Ursinus to the conclusion that "there is but one covenant." See Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans G. W. Williard (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed Pub. Co., 1985), 97-100. In a similar fashion Thomas Watson, preaching on question 12 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism which affirms that God, after creating man, entered into a covenant of life with him upon *condition* of perfect obedience, affirms that "the form of the first covenant in innocence was working; 'Do this and live.' Working was the ground and condition of man's justification." Thomas Watson, *Body of Divinity: Contained in Sermons upon the Assembly's Catechism*, ed. George Rogers (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), 90. Preaching on question 20 of the same catechism, this time on the covenant of grace, he explains that "it is a covenant of grace, because it is a royal charter, all made up of terms of grace; that 'God will cast our sins behind his back;' that 'he will love us freely;' Hos 14:4; that he will give us a will to accept the mercy of the covenant, *and strength to perform the conditions of the covenant*. Ezek 36:67. All this is pure grace." Watson, *Body of Divinity*, 107.



instance of different terminology is when Calvin calls Noah “the stipulator of the covenant.”<sup>35</sup> He uses this term to describe Noah as the subject with whom the covenant is being made and that his sons are incorporated to the agreement by association. Although the word can be used in reference to one who accepts a deal without requiring any kind of guarantee, in later developments of the doctrine of the covenant the word was used mainly in reference to Yahweh’s role of setting up the details of the agreement.<sup>36</sup>

The parties of the Noahic Covenant, for Calvin, are God and Noah. As already noted, Noah’s family and the animals are part of God’s promise (or, using Calvin’s terminology, condition) to Noah in order to encourage him to present obedience and future hope. This is why this covenant results in both human and cosmic preservation.<sup>37</sup> But Calvin observes that the entrance of Noah’s family into the covenant has a “subordinated place.” Noah’s sons and their wives are “joined with their father” and are “associated with him.”<sup>38</sup> It seems that Calvin considers Noah as the federal head of his family, like Adam, and his posterity, both near and far, participate with him in the covenant. Calvin uses this conclusion in order to refute the Anabaptists, who reject infant baptism

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<sup>35</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on Genesis*, 1:297.

<sup>36</sup> One of the first Reformed creeds to give attention to the doctrine of the covenant was the Erlauthaler Confession of 1562. It expresses in concise but precise form what was understood by a divine covenant. According to Peter De Jong, in it “God the Father is recognized as ‘stipulator et promissor.’ However, since in all covenant there are two parts, so too in the new covenant of God with man there are obligations which must be met. Recognizing and elaborating upon this the confession states: ‘In nove foedere Deus stipulator est, Christus autem factor obligator nostro nomine.’” Peter Y. De Jong, *The Covenant Idea in New England Theology, 1620-1847* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1945), 30. In this sense, stipulator means the one who begins the arrangement and set its requirements. In the seventeenth-century, Johannes Cocceius seems to be the one who, using Roman law terminology, applies the term stipulator only to God meaning “the initiator, the one who lays down the conditions of the agreement.” And to man he applies the term astipulator, who consents to the conditions laid down by the stipulator. Charles S. McCoy, “The Covenant Theology of Johannes Cocceius” (PhD diss., Yale University, 1957), 157-194. See particularly 169n2. Calvin uses to term in reference to God in his commentary to the prophecy of Malachi. There he explains the divine covenant in terms of the marriage covenant. He affirms that “God is as it were the *stipulator*, who by his authority joins the man to the woman, and sanctions the alliance.” John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, trans. John Owen, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2005), 553. It seems that here Calvin acknowledges God’s role as one who officially unites and bonds a couple in their marital vows. The notion of an initiator and one who dictates obligations seems to be absent here. In his excellent historical study of covenant theology, Andrew Woolsey explains that there was in Calvin’s covenantal thought the idea of “mutual stipulations.” But, used in this sense, the word means condition instead of initiation. Andrew A. Woolsey, *Unity and Continuity in Covenantal Thought: a Study in the Reformed Tradition to the Westminster Assembly* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 306-317.

<sup>37</sup> “In other words, the world today does not survive apart from the power of that covenant God placed between men and himself...he wants to preserve us and all living creatures because of his infinite goodness even though we deserve to be exterminated.” Calvin, *Sermons on Genesis 1 to 11*, 752.

<sup>38</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on Genesis*, 1:297.

on the basis that “they are destitute of present faith.” Applying the implications of the nature of the Noahic Covenant, Calvin concludes that God’s promise to Noah and his thousand generations is legitimate; in this case, however, parents do not function as mediators but as teachers who pass on the words of the covenant to those after them and incite them to believe those words.<sup>39</sup> Ultimately, again, salvation is by faith.

Similar to the covenant of works that had the tree of life as its sacrament, the arch over the clouds becomes the sacrament of the Noahic Covenant. By sacrament Calvin means a “mark [in which] God placed his sign and seal on.”<sup>40</sup> The rainbow, he explains, has always existed, but at the moment that God impressed upon it his Word, it became a sign of his promise to all those who believe. Such belief is not the automatic product of the sight of the sacrament, or the rational association of the phenomenon with its divine meaning. It is the fruit of the power of the Holy Spirit working in the believer through the sacrament.<sup>41</sup> Every time the bow shows up in the sky the believer should be encouraged in his faith in God as the preserver and provider of life. It seems that here resides for Calvin the redemptive aspect of the Noahic Covenant. It is not simply a promise of preservation of material life, but of *life*. He explains that when the rainbow appears it is always in a circumstance of rain and it should bring fear and dread to the believer’s heart. But since God’s Word of promise is now impressed upon it, when it appears, even in a circumstance of threat, it awakens in the believer the assurance of salvation. The Word engraved in the sacrament encourages and boosts the Christian’s faith in God’s provision of salvation. In the New Covenant, this provision is clearly and totally revealed in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, which points to God’s life in Christ’s death.<sup>42</sup> Thus, the covenant with Noah is not simply a generic covenant of preservation; it is principally a covenant that promises life, life eternal, life abundant. The source of this life will be revealed progressively in the subsequent covenants.

### 3. ABRAHAMIC COVENANT IN THE THOUGHT OF JOHN CALVIN

For Calvin, the Abrahamic covenant is the formal establishment of the covenant of grace. In Abraham, the gathering of a particular people begins to whom salvation will be granted. Abraham did not conquer or merit this great

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<sup>39</sup> “...When God promised salvation to a thousand generations, the fathers were not intermediate parties between God and their children, whose office it is to deliver to their children (so to speak) from hand to hand, the promise received from God.” Calvin, *Commentaries on Genesis*, 1:297-298.

<sup>40</sup> Calvin, *Sermons on Genesis 1 to 11*, 760.

<sup>41</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on Genesis*, 1:298-299.

<sup>42</sup> Calvin, *Sermons on Genesis 1 to 11*, 760-761.

privilege in any sort of way; it is the fruit only of God's grace, an element which characterizes the covenantal dealing in all its administrations.<sup>43</sup>

In his commentaries on Genesis 17, Calvin thoroughly elaborates on some characteristics of this dispensation. He identifies in this chapter the presence of a summary of the divine covenant. Concerning the content of Abraham's vision, he writes: "Now that word summarily contains this declaration, that God enters into covenant with Abram: it then unfolds the nature of the covenant itself, and finally puts to it the seal, with the accompanying attestations."<sup>44</sup>

The first element of the nature of the covenant clearly observed in Calvin's teaching is its *mutuality*. In paraphrasing God's words to Abraham, he writes: "See how kindly I indulge thee: for I do not require integrity from thee simply on account of my authority, which I might justly do; but whereas I owe thee nothing, I condescend graciously to engage in a mutual covenant."<sup>45</sup> Peter Lillback explains that "mutuality acknowledges that both parties of the covenant have responsibilities."<sup>46</sup> God, in Genesis 17, obligates himself to bless Abraham by means of promises. Those promises are, nevertheless, gratuitous, not depending on Abraham's merit, character, or efforts. In this sense of God's grace, the covenant is unilateral; it is the fruit only of God's condescension. But, as a contract, the covenant also establishes obligations for Abraham. God demands from him devotion, servitude, and commitment to the righteousness of God. In Calvin's words, the patriarch's responsibility in the covenant was that "Abraham should be upright."<sup>47</sup>

A second element Calvin identifies in the Abrahamic covenant is that of *conditionality*. Lillback explains that "conditionality outlines the responsibilities that each as party has toward the other."<sup>48</sup> Commenting on the words "walk before me" in Genesis 17:1, Calvin affirms Abraham's responsibility:

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<sup>43</sup> "He (God) designs to open his sacred mouth, that he may show to one, deceived by Satan's wiles, the way of salvation. And it is wonderful, that a man, miserable and lost, should have the preference given to him, over so many holy worshippers of God, that the covenant of life should be placed in his possession; that the Church should be revived in him, and he himself constituted the father of all the faithful. But this is done designedly, in order that the manifestation of the grace of God might become the more conspicuous in his person." Calvin, *Commentaries on Genesis*, 1:343.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:442.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:444.

<sup>46</sup> Peter A. Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 169.

<sup>47</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on Genesis*, 1:444. For a complete exposition of Calvin's understanding of the mutuality of the Abrahamic covenant, read in full his comments on verses 1 and 2 of his commentary on Genesis 17. For several other places in Calvin's writings where the concept of mutuality is developed, see Lillback, *The Binding of God*, 166-168.

<sup>48</sup> Lillback, *The Binding of God*, 169.

“In making the covenant, God stipulates for obedience, on the part of his servant.”<sup>49</sup> The reformer obviously recognizes that the first patriarch would receive the blessings of the covenant upon his faithfulness in keeping its conditions. In the *Institutes*, Calvin explains the exclusion of Ishmael and Esau from the Abrahamic covenant due to their disobedience to the terms of the pact. He affirms: “By their own defect and guilt, I admit, Ishmael, Esau, and the like were cut off from adoption. For the condition had been laid down that they should faithfully keep God’s covenant, which they faithlessly violated.”<sup>50</sup> It is important to note that the idea of condition in the covenant of grace has not always been accepted in the reformed camp. Anthony Hoekema explains that the theologian Herman Hoeksema and the historian Perry Miller insisted in the absence of this concept in Reformed and Puritan theology. Hoekema confirms, nonetheless, the presence of this element in Calvin’s thought and explains:

Calvin insists that man has conditions to keep in the covenant of grace; but holds that we can only keep these conditions through God’s strength, and that keeping these conditions involves no merits on our part, since our works are always imperfect.<sup>51</sup>

The existence of a conditional element in the Abrahamic covenant demands an explanation of Calvin’s view of justification in this particular dispensation. Calvin elaborates on Abraham’s faith and justification in his comments on Genesis 15. In his explanation of the expression “and he believed in the Lord”, Calvin affirms that righteousness is imputed to Abraham apart from his personal justice.<sup>52</sup> But why is righteousness imputed to Abram? Because of his faith, Calvin explains. He affirms that “the righteousness of the most perfect characters perpetually consists in faith; since Abram, with all the excellency of his virtues, after his daily and ever remarkable service of God, was, nevertheless, justified by faith.” At this point, Calvin associates becoming righteous with justification, and describes it in terms of adoption and reconciliation.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on Genesis*, 1:443.

<sup>50</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:929.

<sup>51</sup> Anthony A. Hoekema, “Calvin’s Doctrine of the Covenant of Grace,” *Reformed Review* 15, n. 4 (May 1962): 9.

<sup>52</sup> “Just as we understand that they to whom iniquity is imputed are guilty before God; so those to whom he imputes righteousness are approved by him as just persons; wherefore Abram was received into the number and rank of just persons, by the imputation of righteousness... Therefore, they foolishly trifle who apply this term to his character as an honest man; as if it meant that Abram was personally held to be a just and righteous man.” Calvin, *Commentaries on Genesis*, 1:405-406.

<sup>53</sup> “Therefore, we do not say that Abram was justified because he laid hold of a single word, respecting the offspring to be brought forth, but because he embraced God as his Father. And truly faith

And in what did Abraham had faith? In the fulfillment of the words of the covenant, Calvin affirms. God bound himself by promise to bless Abraham and all the nations by means of a seed which would come from him. The object of Abraham's faith is in the promise of the covenant. This seed does not represent Abram descendance as a whole, but that particular blessed seed in which reconciliation would be achieved.<sup>54</sup> Veninga rightly summarizes the subject of justification and faith affirming that

[...] the import of this discussion is that God freely called Abraham and offered to him and his posterity eternal salvation; Abraham was justified because he believed the Father, not because of personal merit. The clue to Abraham's spiritual success is that he believed in the promise, and from this belief he gained courage for a life of obedience.<sup>55</sup>

The association of the Abrahamic covenant with circumcision and participation in the covenant is inevitable. In his comments on Genesis 17:7, Calvin insists that God's covenant with Abraham is not only immediately with him alone but also includes his natural descendants. "There is no doubt," Calvin affirms, "that the Lord distinguishes the race of Abraham from the rest of the world." By the expression "race of Abraham", Calvin means those who are biologically related to Abraham: "Nothing is more certain, that God made his covenant with those sons of Abraham who were naturally to be born of him."<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, Abraham's descendants are not to be differentiated from the Church; in fact, Israel is the Old Testament Church in the body of a nation separated from all others.

In the beginning, antecedently to this covenant, the condition of the whole world was one and the same. But as soon as it was said, "I will be a God to thee and to thy seed after thee," the Church was separated from other nations; just as in the creation of the world, the light emerged out of the darkness.<sup>57</sup>

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does not justify us for any other reason, than that it reconciles us unto God; and that it does so, not by its own merit; but because we receive the face offered to us in the promises, and have no doubt of eternal life, being fully persuaded that we are loved by God as sons." Calvin, *Commentaries on Genesis*, 1:407.

<sup>54</sup> "It seems, however, to be absurd, that Abram should be justified by believing that his seed would be as numerous as the stars of heaven; for this could be nothing but a particular faith, which would but no means suffice for the complete righteousness of man. Besides, what could an earthly and temporal promise avail for eternal salvation? I answer, first, the believing of which Moses speaks, is not to be restricted to a single clause of the promise here referred to, but embraces the whole; secondly, Abram did not form his estimate of the promised seed from this oracle alone, but also from others, where a special benediction is added. Whence we infer that he did not expect some common or undefined seed, but that in which the world was to be blessed." Calvin, *Commentaries on Genesis*, 1:406.

<sup>55</sup> James Frank Veninga, "Covenant Theology and Ethics in the Thought of John Calvin and John Preston" (PhD diss., Houston, TX: Rice University, 1980), 49.

<sup>56</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on Genesis*, 1:447-448.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:448.

However, being a natural descendent from Abraham did not guarantee one's participation in the promise of covenant. Calvin affirms that "...not all who are from Abraham are to be esteemed legitimate children; because they are not the children of the promise, but only of the flesh."<sup>58</sup> Calvin, therefore, creates a dichotomy between promise and covenant in such a way that one may be participant of the covenant but not of its promises. To participate in the covenant alone is to be recipient only of its words, but to be participant of the promises is to share the inner effects of the covenant.

For there, the promise is not taken generally for the outward word, by which God conferred his favor as well upon the reprobate as upon the elect; but must be restricted to that efficacious calling, which he inwardly seals by his Spirit.<sup>59</sup>

This dichotomy between participation in the covenant and participation in the promises provides the setting for Calvin to elaborate a concept of election in the Abrahamic covenant. He speaks of a "twofold class of sons" present in the Church. The first refers to the whole group of people who are identified as the Church. They are publicly recognized as members of the covenant and are accounted as children of God. The second class refers to those whom "the promise of the covenant is ratified by faith." This dichotomy Calvin attributes to the "fountain of gratuitous election, whence also faith itself springs."<sup>60</sup> Hoekema's explanation of this dichotomy in Calvin is most enlightening:

You could say that covenant membership is here pictured as a circle wider than particular election, but narrower than mankind as a whole. Covenant membership thus by no means guarantees one's salvation; one like Esau and Saul may be lost despite one's covenant membership... The covenant of grace, therefore, is here pictured, not as identical with particular election, but as a visible image of it... Calvin distinguished between two types of election: election in the wider sense, illustrated in the choice of Abraham's seed to be his people, and therefore equivalent to the adoption of individuals into his covenant of grace; and election in the narrower sense, which means predestination to eternal life.<sup>61</sup>

One last aspect of the Abrahamic covenant present in Calvin's writings deserves attention: the sacrament of circumcision and its meaning. Calvin affirms circumcision to be the inscription of the covenant in Abraham's

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 1:448-449.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 1:449.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 1:449.

<sup>61</sup> Hoekema, "Calvin's Doctrine of the Covenant of Grace," 7.

body in order that, through that register, the patriarch's new status would be remembered.<sup>62</sup> In the mind of Calvin, the memorial aspect of circumcision is associated with the fact that it is called "the covenant of God." Calvin explains that the association of the word of God (present here in the covenant concept) and the symbol is what makes it a sacrament. "A sacrament is nothing else that a visible word, or sculpture and image of that grace of God which the word more fully illustrates."<sup>63</sup> Calvin, then, moves on to place upon the sacrament a particular function as a result of this relationship between word, sacrament, and faith: "It follows that the proposed end and use of sacraments is to help, promote and confirm faith."<sup>64</sup> Calvin emphasizes this amazing role of the sacrament without destroying the power and authority of the word. Both must be present. He affirms: "And although we must maintain the distinction between the word and the sign; yet let us know, that as soon as the sign itself meets our eyes, the word ought to sound in our ears."<sup>65</sup>

Concerning the significance of the sacrament, Calvin recognizes the necessity of an analogy between the thing signified and the sign. Due to this recognition, he initially expresses amazement for the choice of such unusual sign. His amazement, however, does not hinder the great theologian to find an answer to the meaning for circumcision. He attributes to it two significances: the declaration of the corruption of the human race and the confirmation that such tragic state would be reverted by one belonging to the descendancy of Abraham.<sup>66</sup> In other words, the sign represents both removal of uncleanness and redemption. Such reasoning opens the doors for Calvin's later association of circumcision and baptism.

Concerning the participants of the covenant, Calvin affirms the participation of both genders, male and female, in it, in spite of the administration of the sign being restricted only to males. He attributes the participation of women into the covenant to the necessity that both sexes have of its blessed

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<sup>62</sup> "As formerly, covenants were not only committed to public records, but were also wont to be engraven in brass, or sculptured on stones, in order that the memory of them might be more fully recorded, and more highly celebrated; so in the present instance, God inscribes his covenant in the flesh of Abraham. For circumcision was a solemn memorial of that adoption, by which the family of Abraham had been elected to be the peculiar people of God." Calvin, *Commentaries on Genesis*, 1:451.

<sup>63</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on Genesis*, 1:451. Calvin affirms the same even more emphatically: "By the figure metonymy, the name of covenant is transferred to circumcision, which is so conjoined with the word, that it could not be separated from it." Calvin, *Commentaries on Genesis*, 1:453.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:452.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> "Moreover, it is probable that the Lord commanded circumcision for two reasons: first, to show that whatever is born of man is polluted; then, that salvation would proceed from the blessed seed of Abraham." Calvin, *Commentaries on Genesis*, 1:453-454.

promise.<sup>67</sup> The administration of the sign of the covenant in babies does not guarantee their salvation. Calvin makes a strong case against the false belief that those infants who die before the opportunity of being baptized are doomed to perdition. The sign, according to Calvin, shall not overpower the promise of God.<sup>68</sup> However, the reformer raises a strong case against those who willingly hinder their children from receiving the sign of the sacrament. Calvin affirms it to be a demonstration of ingratitude and contempt for the grace of God. The willful rejection of the sign God himself established as part of his covenant must be avoided at all costs on the threat of one's suffering God's divine punishment.<sup>69</sup> In the *Institutes*, Calvin emphasizes five different practical aspects of the Abrahamic covenant regarding membership in it and the spiritual profit of its members from it. They are, according to Peter Lillback: (1) this covenant is the means by which God separates believers and non-believers in the world; (2) it is where Israel, the natural descendants of Abraham, finds salvation; (3) this covenant continues to be valid until today; (4) Christ is center of this dispensation; (5) justification and sanctification are its two great benefits.<sup>70</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Although Calvin was not concerned to leave behind him a systematic approach to the doctrine of the divine covenants, it is clear that not only was his mind immersed in this precious doctrine but that a careful, logical, and systematic approach to his writings enables one to extract and organize, in systematic form, his thoughts. Calvin was not too far from the other scholars after him who developed dogmatics having the covenant as their central structural principle. Such a harmony between Calvin and later theologians demonstrates what takes place when the *Sola Scriptura* is taken seriously: harmony in the midst of diversity. In spite of diverging in non-essentials like specific terminology, the theologians of the reformation and post-reformation periods believed in general in the same dogmas. The Church does well in keeping and studying their teachings.

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<sup>67</sup> "For the covenant of God was graven on the bodies of the males, with this condition annexed, that the females also should as their associates be partakers of the same sign" Calvin, *Commentaries on Genesis*, 1:453.

<sup>68</sup> "To consign to destruction those infants whom a sudden death has not allowed to be presented for baptism, before any neglect of parents could intervene, is a cruelty originating in superstition. But that the promise belongs to such children, is nothing the least doubtful. For what can be more absurd than that the symbol, which is added for the sake of confirming the promise, should really enervate its force?" Calvin, *Commentaries on Genesis*, 1:458.

<sup>69</sup> "But because it is not in the power of man to sever what God has joined together; no one could despise or neglect the sign, without both rejecting the word itself, and depriving himself of the benefit therein offered. And therefore the Lord punished bare neglect with such severity." Calvin, *Commentaries on Genesis*, 1:457-458.

<sup>70</sup> Lillback, *The Binding of God*, 145-146.



## **RESUMO**

A teologia do pacto sempre teve um lugar de destaque no ramo reformado. Ela serve de base para várias outras doutrinas e também se constitui em uma chave hermenêutica para ler e compreender as Escrituras. Apesar de as grandes sistematizações dessa doutrina terem aparecido somente a partir do século 17, é possível encontrá-la presente no pensamento dos primeiros reformadores. Este artigo visa investigar algumas das principais obras de João Calvino na tentativa de organizar o seu pensamento no que diz respeito a essa doutrina e de construir o que seria a visão do reformador de Genebra sobre cada uma das dispensações do pacto divino com o homem. Neste primeiro artigo são analisados os seguintes pactos: das obras, noaico e abraâmico. Vários artigos já foram publicados analisando o pensamento pactual de Calvino como um todo, em termos do pacto da graça de maneira geral. Entretanto, não foi encontrada nenhuma contribuição acadêmica que investigasse cada pacto sucessivamente no pensamento de Calvino.

## **PALAVRAS-CHAVE**

João Calvino; Teologia; Pacto; Obras; Noaico; Abraâmico.