

OpenTheo

Covenant Theology with John Fesko

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Life and Books and Everything - Clearly Reformed

In this wide-ranging discussion, Kevin sits down (actually, they were both standing up) with his RTS colleague, John Fesko, to talk about covenant theology. In addition to doing a deep dive on the covenant of redemption and the covenant of works, Kevin and John talk about life and ministry and writing more broadly. They finish their time by talking about a never-before-translated-into-English volume of Vos's lectures on natural theology. Want to know more about biblical theology, systematic theology, historical theology, exegetical theology? This episode has a little bit of something for everyone.

Timestamps:

Intro and Sponsor [0:00-1:34] Guest Intro: John Fesko [1:35-7:12] Pursuing Ministry or Academia? [7:13-15:44] Why Write 1,500+ Pages on Covenant Theology? [15:45-21:37] The Research and Writing Process [21:38-29:54] Is the Covenant of Redemption Biblical? [29:55-38:56] Is There More than One Divine Will? [38:57-44:15] Is the Covenant of Works Biblical? [44:16-55:29] Is Republication Biblical? [55:30-1:03:12] Geerhardus Vos' Natural Theology [1:03:13-1:13:37]

Transcript

[Music] Greetings and salutations. Good to have you back, our loyal listeners, or if you're disloyal, we're still glad to have you. Welcome to Life and Books and Everything.

I'm Kevin DeYoung, and glad to have you with us. And our special guest is John Fesko, who I'll give a chance to introduce himself. In just a moment, so glad to have him here and talk some theology and talk about some of his books, but I want to just say thanks again at the outset to Crossway for sponsoring Life and Books and Everything.

Crossway does so many great things. There's lots of great publishers out there, and we're I'm thankful that Crossway sponsors this program. What they do at the beginning of kind of a podcast season is they give me a list of books that they suggest I mention as they come out.

So I just looked at this 10 seconds ago, and it's a little awkward, but today I'm supposed to mention the biggest story Bible storybook by Kevin DeYoung and illustrated by Don Clark. So there you go. If you haven't seen that yet, you can check out the biggest story Bible storybook storybook Bible something or other 104 stories 52 from the Old Testament from the New Testament wonderful illustrations from Don Clark and maybe you can look at it for Easter, give it to somebody.

But Crossway did an amazing job on that book. All right, we have John Fesco John, thank you for being here on the program and I've read your books for many years and now as of the last couple of years I can say that we're colleagues at Reform Theological Seminary which I'm grateful for, though you're in Jackson. I'm in Charlotte.

So why don't you start by giving us a little bit about yourself, your family, your academic career, why you moved from California to Mississippi. Yeah, you know I have, when I was younger, I was in high school, and some I would my church had youth Sunday. And this is when I was in the Baptist Church and on youth Sunday.

There was a slot to sign up to do the sermon, and I told my parents I said I don't know why I just feel like I need to do that. And so my pastor was kind enough to help me, you know, do my first sermon and so I did that I preached that or maybe in our circles I would say I exhorted, you know, for, you know, when I was 16 and very soon thereafter people kept on saying to me yeah you think I think about going into the ministry and I thought no I don't want anything to do with that. Long story short fast forward, you know, Lord kind of had his hand on me and pulled me into the ministry and went to seminary and ended up in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and for the first roughly 10 years or so I was a pastor church planner and pastor that went really well and I was relatively, you know, I was content and I thought that's where I would be and even had built ins put into my house for my books.

And within months it's kind of like no time ago. And you know got called out to serve as a academic dean and professor of systematic theology at Westminster Seminary California and during that time as a pastor I had been an adjunct at RTS Atlanta. So I served as an adjunct for about 18 years at RTS Atlanta.

And then RTS contacted me and said, Hey, we'd love to have you come out to Jackson. Are you interested and we prayed about it and long story short made the move from Southern California to Jackson, Mississippi and we really love it. And that's a fantastic transition.

The church here's great the institution is great. Some of the really love my colleagues here, not only here at Jackson but obviously in the broader RTS institution and we've got I've been married to my wife for almost 20 years. We've got three children though they make the noise of six.

Sometimes I sometimes I tell my children, we'll be in the car and I'll say I'm pulling over if you guys don't quiet down and in either I'm walking home or you guys are one of the two. But we need some we need to quiet down. But yeah things have been going really well and the Lord has been very kind to us and so yeah we just we love it and I love teaching and preaching so it's just been a great transition here to RTS.

That's great. So you just go back a little bit your biography so you had. Did you have a PhD when you were pastoring already.

Yeah, I pushed all the way through I was I was single when I was in seminary which meant that I could spend a lot of time in the library and I did and I felt like the meter was running and I thought I better get this done as smartly as I can. And so I finished seminary went straight on to my PhD and I remember it was a very busy time but I was studying for licensure exams. No sorry ordination exams.

I took my ordination exam in October defended my dissertation in November and then was ordained in December of 1998. And so I was still single though so you know you can go home. You can do crazy things yeah yeah you can you can get a lot done that way.

It's like you know Paul says you can devote yourself into the Lord. And so yeah I did all of that and so I was a church planner with my PhD and that's why shortly thereafter RTS Atlanta called and said hey would you be interested in teaching and I said would I that would be that would be fantastic. So where are you from where did you grow up and did you grow up in the OPC.

No you know I was baptized in the PC us before the split back in 1970 and my parents just kind of at that point went wherever there was strong preaching. And so that took us to a number of different churches over the time and and it was it was when I was in seminary at a southwestern Baptist in Fort Worth Texas that I started listening to RC sprawl tapes. And I was listening to scroll I don't know anywhere between two to four hours a night I was a janitor at night in the library at seminary.

So I had my duster vacuum and I would run my ear earphones and and people thought that I maybe was listening to music in my walk man but it was RC sprawl tapes most of the time every once in a while. Yeah, that's right yeah and every once in a while yes it was Van Halen but you know it was listening to sprawl and you know before I knew it I thought I think I'm more reformed than I am Baptist and so ended up going into the OPC shortly after graduation and I was in the Presbyterian Church sister denomination of the PCA. Yeah, this is a we'll get to your books just a minute this a little bit of a niche question but I'm I know you get this with seminary students over your career and I get this too and maybe some who are listening but there's often the question especially you know really academically charged guys and they love the theology and they're really good students.

So what made you how did you make the decision okay I'm doing full time pastoral ministry and I'm sure you say you're still doing pastoral ministry, but to flip that and be pursue something more of an academic seminary career. How did you come to that decision because I see guys make that switch and I also see some guys doing seminary who after a while say man I just, this is good but I really got a preach every week and they move over full time to the church how did you think about that change. It was something at first that when I was in seminary I just was I thought I'm going to I want to teach and so I pursued that.

That's why I, you know I knew I needed to get a PhD but it's funny and that as I was studying for my PhD. I kept on reading whether it was Luther Calvin turrets and you know you name it. Most of the time these guys were full time pastors and professors.

And I thought okay Lord if if if you want me to be a pastor I'll be I'll go wherever you send me. And I was kind of basically at that point totally wide open and so when I was just about getting ready when I was in the process of finishing up my PhD, my home church asked me hey we're going to be planning a church across town would you be interested in in pursuing that. And I took that as you know providence pushing me in the direction of the pastor and so I said okay yeah.

And so I didn't apply anywhere else I didn't look anywhere else I just you know I prayed about that and pursued that. And so I thought at that point going forward all right Lord if this is where you're going to have me which is in you know full time church planning and then presumably pastoring them okay great. I'm not concerned and I was I was content.

And then it was about two years in that RTS Atlanta contacted me and said would you be interested in teaching and I thought oh hey I'd love to do that. And so I thought okay this is great this is the best of both worlds I get to I taught usually a course once a term and it ended up being at one point at the height it was 12 hours a year. So it was like you know a course in the spring of course in the summer course in the fall and of course in January.

And so I was I was very happy doing that and again I told myself all right Lord this is great I'm happy to do this and I thought that was going to be what I was going to do for the rest of my time until I was six feet under. And you know in all seriousness that's why I told my wife well I guess this is the house that will retire in up let's I want to put some built ins here so that I could kind of maximize my bookshelf space and the carpenter said where do you want bookshelf I said on every single flat surface in this room. And that's right.

You know so I thought long haul and I was blissfully content and and then a series of institutions and churches had contacted me and we're saying hey would you be interested and I kept on turning them down saying no I'm happy where I am and then finally one of my colleagues out at West West, West, West, West, West, West, Mr.

Seminary California contacted me and at first I thought no I'm content and when you add to that earthquakes fires. No thanks I'm happy here in Atlanta. I came back to it and I literally called my colleague to tell him no.

And by the time I got off the phone with him. You know I because I asked I said why do you think I should be pursuing this and he talked and we talked and got off the phone and I told my wife I said I think maybe we need to consider going out West and we need to pray about it and going into full time teaching and and my wife said it's funny that you should say that because I was very dismissive of it. I was at first but now I'm really I last couple of weeks I've been wondering if we need to do this, because when you add to it at the time, you know as anybody who goes out West knows it's really expensive and I thought, man, I don't know or expensive than Mississippi.

Imagine that yeah yeah and I told my wife I said you know but if that's where the Lord is calling us then we need to go even if that means we're going to live in an apartment. You know let's not worry about the details if that's where the Lord wants us then that's where we're going to go serve because I'd initially told the Lord, you know in prayer. So having in a small church out in the middle of nowhere that's fine too you know I yeah I'll just go wherever you want me to go.

And so I said we said okay so we prayed about it. And it was it was a bit scary at the time because two other institutions had contacted me and I'm more or less turned them down. And I might have said let's play our cards and let's throw out resumes in all three places.

But I thought no I really sense a call to this institution at this time so let's just put our put our put my application in there. And I thought, if this doesn't work out I might not be teaching anywhere and I thought but okay that's fine. And so we did it and long story short got got the job and so we said okay that the Lord's calling me to go out there.

And again in California I was content. I you know I didn't wasn't looking for anything and that's where RTS Jackson called. And it was one of those things I said okay let's pray about this again and maybe this is where the Lord would have us go and because we love Mississippi.

It's a fantastic place but it was nowhere on our radar. If you had put this on my life plan it would have nowhere appeared as far as I was you know yeah Mississippi no nowhere on the plan. And we visited and again prayed about it and so okay and so yeah but like as you noted as you noted.

You know since I've been here almost I've been preaching morning and evening at a church for the last two and a half years because the really local pastor has been. He was diagnosed and then was treated for and is recovering from brain cancer brain tumor. And so blessedly my time now is starting to wind down as as he's ramping up.

So yeah it's kind of like I got this bug where I feel like I want to be in the pulpit as much as possible. And you know with a foot in the church because right those are the folks that were training here to serve in the church. And if you get too far removed from the church you might actually forget who why and the ultimate reasons as to why you're doing this so that's kind of a quick nutshell so it's long story short I always tell guys pursue it as a call.

You know pray about it and ask for the Lord's leading so that you know maybe it's teaching maybe it's preaching but most of the time it needs it's going to probably be preaching because seminary positions are at a you know they're very few, very few and far between. So, right. Yeah.

No that's really good it makes a lot of sense and it's not that we're throwing out fleeces and expecting writing in the sky wrote a whole book about not doing that and yet we do we do see that. Sometimes I tell guys you know you do have to don't don't make yourself make decisions that you don't have to make yet. I mean you got an opportunity to serve this church is that a good opportunity can you serve there faithfully.

Yeah. Don't imagine scenarios that you don't have to decide because the Lord opens that door and gives you not every open door you have to walk through but you usually can't walk through them if they're all voltage shut. You just have to think about it as they come to you.

Yeah so many talk about. Yeah go ahead. I was just very quickly say so many people I had guys to say no I want to serve in a church of this particular size in this particular region of the country and nowhere else.

And I would say what about Jesus saying. Follow me. Where are we going.

No just follow me so I would say try to have an open mind as to where the Lord would have you serve and you never know where that might take you. That's great. So I want to talk about you are writing a lot of really high level stuff and in particular I want to talk about your work on covenant theology.

And then at the end I want to get to this new book you did an introduction introduction is a bit euphemistic it's it's half the book to bosses natural theology. So let's just talk about covenant theology and tell us about this project because it's a really significant project projected three volumes. You've done two of them.

What inspired you to do this and is this just really micro targeted for uber reformed people. Why are you spending a good deal of your time and academic energy to write what will be well over a thousand, fifteen hundred pages on covenant theology. Yeah you know there's a statement that made a huge impression on me many years ago when I was reading by J. Gresham Maychin.

I think it's in his book what is faith if a memory serves me correctly but he said if anybody wants to make a long lasting contribution to the churches understanding of a doctrine they really have to ground themselves in the history of the doctrine. And so that really impressed upon me the need to say that anytime that I want to write something or teach something or even for that matter preach something I need to do my best to tap in and listen to the ongoing conversation in the church, because we're not the first ones to come to any of these topics. So as I was looking at covenant theology obviously you know with Presbyterians reform folks that we are.

That's that's a big part of our doctrine and so I was looking at these things and I thought well I want to write on this because I want to have a better understanding for myself. But at the same time let me do some historical legwork on this to make sure that I'm not going to be repeating any bad ideas. But at the same time I need to sit at the feet of some of these great minds of the church that we have so that I can learn from them and hopefully hone and sharpen my own, you know, formulations and expressions.

And as I looked at some of this stuff particularly say on the covenant of redemption. I kept on noticing wow, there are hardly any monographs any single volumes on this this one subject. And you know in the history of doctrine there may be like you know three or four over the last couple of centuries, you know three four hundred years.

And then I noticed the same thing about the covenant of works very little on in terms of a monographs on the covenant of works. And I worked at the history of these doctrines I thought, huh, there's also not a whole lot there too. I can't say this about all of my work, but I've tried to be to work in the gaps.

In other words, where there are lack or there's an absence of something okay let me see if I can contribute to that and and and help people that come behind me. And I can tell my wife, I may be one of the few and it may be crummy work but people will have to work through it anyway. I was the only one.

Yeah, you know what's easier to get the first place medal when there's one person running the race. That's right there you go you know so it's like okay great I'll take it. And so as the on the covenant of redemption, I am I wrote it and the originally the manuscript was about 600 pages and I was looking I thought how good grief.

This is going to be tough to find a publisher because publishers aren't keen necessarily on saying you know really huge books. Or at least for me they're not. And so I thought okay let me do the un-solomonic thing and chop this thing in half, and I will you know separate them so I did one on the history of the covenant of redemption and one of the doctrine.

And then the same kind of thing unfolded with the covenant of works you know more or less two books so one on history one on doctrine. And so that way I tell my students it's

in a real education for me just to study the history of these things and to learn about them. And so I hope that that that background informs the doctrinal side of the project and so God willing.

There's you know as you noted one more installment that I'll hopefully do in the covenant of grace whether that'll end up being one or two books time we'll have to see we'll have to wait and see. But yeah it's been in one sense thrilling I really enjoy it a lot and I hope it's useful to people in the church that they can kind of pick up these books and learn from the history and. And if they don't agree with all of my conclusions that's fine a big deal you know but so long as it kind of orient them to the discussion so that they know.

Okay here are the big issues here the questions and here's at least one solution maybe that might be what I've done is useful maybe not maybe people can build off of it or head off in different directions but it's an effort to kind of recapture hopefully the the covenants you know for for the church. Well it really is and I know you're being modest and that's a good thing to be but these are really impressive works and so I'm holding up the mentor, you know publish Adam and the covenant of works this is 491 pages including all the. The notes and the bibliography in the index at the back and then covenant of redemption is similar size before that and then covenant of grace is still forthcoming so I do want to ask some specific questions about these covenants because some people listening.

So I may this may be old hat or they may know nothing about some of these terms but before I do that just briefly say a little bit. How do you go about writing. You know a trilogy of books that are each four or 500 pages do you just have.

You know, you have books are you digitize things you have 15 books laid out and you take all your notes and then you put it into a chapter. Tell us about the actual research and writing how you went about it how long it takes to do a really serious academic monograph like each of these books are. Yeah, you know what I do is I do my best to try to start with the history of the doctrine I'm not saying that I always start at the very beginning.

But I'll start reading sometimes secondary sources like I'll start with a secondary source see like Andrew Woolsey's book on the covenant you know covenant theology I might start there. I'll start with some avenues of investigation. And then I start identifying primary sources and I'll start reading them.

Depending upon the age of the book. If it's an older book. I might be using PDFs if you go to PRDL.org which is the price Reformation Digital Library.

I don't know 40 50 60,000 titles and you know, a lot of them are in English, a lot of them are not Latin French German whatever but I'll identify those and I'll pull the sections that

I need and start reading marking them up. I'm going to be using notes and then I have, I don't know if I've got one here. I've got notebooks.

And one of them is here and you can see where I put the title of the book page number and a brief description as to what's going on in the source. And then, you know, I take and kind of make an individual index for myself. And so I'll, you know, note it that way and then based upon what I see.

I'll kind of make categories as to okay, I think I need a chapter on this. I'll need a chapter on this and I'll need a chapter on this. So like for example, in the mentor book.

I'm going to cross different names for the covenant of works. And eventually it struck me enough to say well, maybe I'll do a small chapter here on the different names for the covenant of works, just so that people can see the terminological variety. And then, you know, I think, you know, we may talk about this in a little bit but I had no plans on talking about the relationship between the covenant of works and the mosaic covenant, because I thought, I feel like I've treated that enough and you know I don't have much interest in it anymore.

It's fine. But I kept on running across that so many times as authors were talking about it. I finally got to the point where like, I think I need to do a chapter on this.

And at least try to survey the different views, and put it out there and say something about it because I think that if I don't say something about it, it may look as if I was not being responsible with what I find. Once I set up the these various historical chapters like say, how do people treat Leviticus 18 five. Right.

Then it's typically those chapters that then set up kind of later on in the later half of the book, the doctrinal questions that I'm going to try to interface with and listen to and then address. And as far as the time. You know, one of the chapters in that book on Adam and Grace and the covenant of works, I wrote that six, seven years ago.

And you know I just, you know, kind of, it's like I read a bunch of books, the iron was hot, I struck, I wrote it down so that I wouldn't forget anything and then just tucked it away. And then it was over the course of say, it's probably over the course of about three or four years, you know, working on it periodically, you know, you know, a couple of chapter chapter here chapter there. And then towards the end.

Say in the last 12 months before the book I turned it in, then it's like a fast downhill kind of race where once all the history is done and I kind of know where things are I sit down and maybe I'll write a chapter to two a month. And so it just starts coming out much, much faster. I tell my students, they don't realize this.

It's like research is probably 70% of the work. Writing, writing is maybe 10% editing is another 20%. You know, so you do 20 twice as much editing as you do writing.

And then four or five times as much if that's the right math, I'm terrible at math, you know, doing the research. It's the research and organizing the research. And I'll do, I don't think I have a notebook here.

Yeah, I don't have one here but what I'll do is in the middle process is I make a detailed outline for each chapter. And then I go through with my notebook and I'll say, okay, I'm going to plug in this book and this page number here this book page number here. And so that I have a roadmap so that when it's time to write, I just have my notebook.

And then I'll start writing. Okay, this book page 376 grab that book page 376 every once in a while. I'll do it in my head and I'll have a dozen or more books spread out all over my office.

You know, I try to avoid that because that is actually a slower process. Then if I have the roadmap with the outline. But it's like if you have a, if I have a good outline, a good battle plan, then the writing process that 10% can go very quickly.

And, and then I go for there. Yeah. And then it's off to friends and colleagues for feedback and then off to the publisher usually so yeah maybe three to four years for one of these.

Big books. And I love what you said about revising. I mean, it's often been said there.

There are no good writers just re writers. And, you know, I've heard CS Lewis, a couple other people maybe could just write and it would be pretty well. But most everyone else and this is something I'm sure you and I are always telling students.

Look, you need to revise this. And so, of course, everyone has to learn that when you're trying to get it in before midnight of the deadline. You don't have time to read through it again.

But I was reading, you know, I finished last year. I just loved Andrew Roberts big biography of Winston Churchill. Yeah, that's a great book.

Yeah, amazing writer and researcher. Now, of course, he's written all sorts of stuff about the 19th and 20th century and written books on Churchill before. So he wasn't coming to it.

A novice, but he said, amazingly, once he did his research, it took him 100 days to write the book. Yeah, yeah, 100 days to write a 900 page book and he, you know, he just get up at four and he'd write and he'd breakfast and he'd write. Now, that's pretty extraordinary, but it, but it is true what you said, John, that when you get the roadmap in your head, you know what this chapter is going to be this section is going to be this part is going to be, you have the sources, you have a good organization.

Then it's actually, well, it's all fun. It can all be fun, but then it's seeing the fruit of all of that work. And I think it's really important for anyone, whether you're students or in ministry or you just like to, you want to study, you want to make a contribution.

If you just sit down and say, okay, I have something really interesting to say about stuff. There may be a few people who are just, you know, Ross Douthit or something he's always just think, but he's also always reading stuff. And to really have something meaningful, you have to have a lot of research, the proverbial, you know, ice under the water and then you just get the tip of the iceberg when you get to write it.

So that resonates a lot. Let me talk about, let's, let's go to the covenant of redemption. So here's a simple definition, the pactum salutis, the just Latin for the same thing, active salvation covenant of redemption.

The eternal, this is just mine or I stole it from somebody I can't remember refers to the eternal agreement between the father and the son. Now there's some debate to what degree is it the father, son and Holy Spirit, but let's just say the father and the son to save a people that goes in Christ before the ages began. So the covenants we see worked out in scripture explicitly we see even references in the ancient Near East, but there's a covenant, a compact between father, son, Holy Spirit's involved also there's some disagreement on how that works, but a covenant whereby Christ is going to be the surety.

The father gives certain obligations for him to meet and upon meeting those obligations, he receives the covenant blessings and then those blessings can accrue to those who belong to Christ that's the covenant of redemption and you can feel free to tweak that definition but my question for you is I think when you deal with this at length in the book, but is this actually a biblical doctrine I think I read this was in 10 Dale bulletin which is a fine evangelical journal, 2018. He's writing about the covenant of redemption and he says the pectom quote lacks clear biblical support. It is little more than scholastic tinkering, which is a common objection from Bart from others even from some very fine reform theologians so not the 500 page but give us the brief pracy on why is okay it makes in some sense but isn't this just reform theologians with too much time on their hands is this really a biblical doctrine.

Yeah, you're right that's such a common objection and so one of the things I discovered in the history of the doctrine is that Theodore Beza, you know, reforms theologian late 16th century Calvin successor Geneva. He's editing his critical edition of the Greek New Testament and he's looking at Luke 29 or 22 29, where in the in the Latin it says and I appoint to you a kingdom as my father appointed to me a kingdom but he said and he notes this in the margin. And the word here, do you today me is not a point, but rather it says covenant.

I covenant to you a kingdom that my father has my father covenant to me a kingdom

and so, well more or less he because he's reading the original languages he's not looking at Latin he's looking at the Greek. So it's a little clearer than what the translation rendered it, and it poses the question okay we understand that Christ covenants a kingdom to us fair enough. But at what point in the ministry of Christ does the father covenant a kingdom to him.

You begin searching the gospels and there is no recorded events that you see the father covenanting a kingdom to him and so you, you begin fanning out into the rest of the scriptures and say for example in Hebrews chapter seven, where the author of Hebrew says that by a sworn oath, you know God appoints Jesus to be the surety of a better covenant. And this is all embedded with song one hundred and ten one or at least it rests upon a foundation of that where, you know, he says you're a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek and so you think, okay, again when did that event occur. It certainly doesn't occur or it's not recorded in the gospel accounts and so you say okay when and it's to such a degree that the Psalmist, if I can state it this way, is allowed to eavesdrop on a conversation in eternity between father and son where he's appointed as this covenant surety now to add a third layer.

You know it's like I tell my students this and you probably tell them your similar kind of things is that lexicons are useful. But the most important lexicon that we can use is the Old Testament interpreting the new and the new interpreting the old. In other words, how does the Bible itself use all of these terms that we throw about.

And one of the most I think important terms in this discussion. And so the mind comes to us in Psalm 105 verses eight and following where the Psalmist says he remembers his covenant forever okay so he's talking about covenant. The word that he commanded for a thousand generations there's there's a synonymous parallelism that a covenant is the word that he commands.

And the covenant that he made without Abraham, his sworn promise to Isaac. So again another synonymous parallelism where it equates a covenant with a sworn promise a covenant with the word that he commands verse 10, which he confirmed to Jacob as a statute to Israel as an everlasting covenant so that his statutes are equivalent with his covenant his commands are equivalent with his covenant his sworn oath or promise is equivalent to a covenant. So all of that is to say is that Hebrew seven and Psalm 110 records this covenant between the father and the son and so I would say that that's some of the rock solid, you know, exegetical founding for understanding this and then when again when you study the history of the religion, you see that there are other passages that, that you know theologians bring to bear so like Psalm 40 when the sun is saying I'll do these things you have commanded me you know here's my obedience you have not desired sacrifice but obedience.

Or when he cries out in Psalm 22 my God my God, you know somebody like Herman

Vitzius says, well only somebody who is in covenant with God can cry out my God. But the psalmist cries this out is understandable but then Christ himself cries this out as he's suffering upon the cross. And then of course Zachariah chapter six, verses 13 and following now that is a complex passage.

But that's not the only passage when you see this covenant between Yahweh and the branch. Right, keep passage. Yeah, I mean that that I think it's it's not as some have said just glassy tinkering when you look closely at that passage that what Zachariah sees is a vision of Psalm 110.

And you know the Lord said to my Lord sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your foot store. So you put all of this together. And in the aggregate it I think it gives us this very clear picture of this covenant between father and son.

And as I argue, and that's another part of the discussion and Holy Spirit but we can set that part of the discussion off for another time. And you know just to give credit where credit is due I in I'm teaching covenant theology for the first time. And so I did you know you just get one lecture on covenant of redemption and read a number of things but read your book through very carefully and was very helped by it.

And yeah so thank you and all of those passages and of course, maybe the most the most obvious passages though they don't mention the word covenant is all of the language in John's gospel. Now what's the word, you know we need to describe John five the father has given the son works to accomplish or John six the father has given the son of people, or Jesus is the sent one 31 times in John he has a charge given from the father. The, you know John 10 the consecration, not at his baptism, but in eternity is I think some good point that you bring out and then of course the high priestly prayer and John 17 all of this back and forth between the work on earth, having this analog between the communion with the son before the world began and what I think we're right to see in fact I think we're compelled to see that one is the outworking of the other and the way that that the father and son go back and forth.

And so what we show us that this earthly expression of the work of salvation is the, the overflow the execution would be a better word of the agreement that the father and son and so when we say well what, what is the best biblical word and using these passages where it's used more explicitly be reads in the Old Testament. Yeah, it's a it's a covenant it's a compact between the father and the son, and at the end of the, really the theological section of the book you go through What does this mean for Trinity election imputation the order of salutis a lot of good theological payoff. We don't have time to get to into all of it but just here's another key objection so what would be your response and thankfully a lot of the, you know, almost all of the reformed dogmaticians, you know, anticipated this objection but one of the key objections is, okay, if there's a covenant, doesn't a covenant a compact between persons and they presume that there's a

differentiation of will how can the son covenant with the father or the spirit doesn't that mean that we're now dealing with three wills and at the Trinity is somehow divided because will is a is, you know, historically there's just one will so what's your answer to this perennially difficult theological problem that doesn't a covenant blow apart inseparable operations and the unified one will of the Trinity.

Yeah, as you said it is a common objection on the other hand, you know what one at least as a historical observation, the fact that John Owen in the 17th century, applied the covenant of redemption in his polemic against the Socinians who were against the doctrine of the Trinity. That should at least cool us off to say maybe the objection isn't as weighty as some might think especially if Owen is leading off with that and so that's one observation but more specifically, you know the way we, the way that Owen even goes forward and Bossier picks this up later on in his dogmatics, and in his writings is that yes there's one shared will among the triune God and that's of course because of their shared essence. So, in his own hand, we say that this you don't push unity at the expense of what are earlier medievalists would call relational opposition, so that all of a sudden you lose the son or you lose the spirit or you lose the father.

I, you know, when I talk about this I say, we don't say that the father was crucified. We don't say that the spirit was crucified we say that the son was crucified but somehow that observation doesn't splinter. We can also speak of unified will of the triune God so in that sense, at least classically speaking we can speak of inseparable operations but we can also speak of divine appropriations in other words there are aspects of the singular work of the triune God as it falls upon each individual of the Trinity, where they have their unique function in the economy to carry that out and so that way that's that way the son, the father can send the son, and the son can be sent and then conversely the father and the son can send the spirit and the spirit can be sent and how do we understand that when we say that the scriptures characterize that as a covenantal sending and you know and a covenantal going out.

And so, you know singular will but manifold in a threefold execution according to each person of the triune God so yeah we want to maintain the unity but not at the expense of the persons. That's right. And the phrase you use relations of opposition is an important phrase and of course it doesn't mean antagonism that's that we mean by opposition we just mean distinction that there are distinctions to be made in the three persons and I like what you said John, because yes it's an important theological question but to some degree it's not it's not unique you could you could not have any sort of covenant of redemption and you have the same sort of problems that you're not saying about the other that the father is unbegotten the son is eternally begotten and the spirit eternally proceeds from the father and son all of that are those relations of opposition so you're going to have the same kind of conundrum that the church and its theological tradition has labored so meticulously to find the right sort of language and just to put a summary on to what you said this is from a brockle the father and the son have the same aim and

objective but whereas the father wills to redeem by the agency of the son as surety the son wills to redeem by his own agency as surety there's just one expression of one will and yet the appropriations of it one is willing the son to be the surety and one is willing the son will be the surety so there are there are good theological explanations that don't blow apart the the oneness of the trinity yeah so let's our time is is going to quickly run out and I told you when I contacted you I wanted to talk about your books the covenant of works and we haven't talked about that yet but this came out last year and again it was very helpful in preparing my own lectures and reading this and several other things that you've done really yeoman's work and going through the history of it so give us a short user friendly definition what are we talking about when we refer to the covenant of works yeah we could say that it's the original agreement that God makes with Adam to bring about the consummation of the creation which he's supposed to secure by his obedience to God's commands and it's a blessing that is supposed to overflow to his to his offspring you know that's kind of a very quick thumbnail sketch of what the covenant of works is and so yeah yeah that's that's the basic definition I would say so again some some objections would be and this comes from a number of good reform voices in one way or another covenant of works just even the language of works they are kind of allergic to that isn't everything about God's relationship to man based on grace how can there be this initial covenant relationship that we we define in some sense as works or meritorious everything even that God would speak to us isn't it all gracious so what do we mean and don't we mean when we label it a covenant of works I think proponents of the doctrine historically have always noted and this is a important important feature is what we would say is the the fact that God is God and we are creatures and the way that the Westminster confession characterizes this in chapter seven is God's voluntary condescension now some condescension so underline that that's a good word yeah and some people want to characterize that as grace I you know that's not my preferred term I understand what they're saying I'm much much happier with voluntary condescension but it highlights the fact that we and God are not equals in this arrangement that God does not have to do things this way he is he is being benevolent when he you know presents this presents this to Adam but then the other observation I would make is this is that we have to remember that whenever we're talking about the covenant of works yes it's about anthropology it's also about eschatology in other words there was an end goal to the creation before sin ever entered the world but what all of this connects to is it connects to the man in the God man so that we're laying the found foundational and it's about the first words that he's supposed to come and complete this is why he's called the last Adam in first Corinthians 15:45 so when if if if we say works makes us uncomfortable well we can say one Adam didn't couldn't couldn't do it we want to make connection to the last Adams works because he comes and fulfills that broken covenant of works and so I think if we keep that that overall story of redemption and view that you know creation and redemption and that ties up the package together so that we can see ultimately that it's we're saying the talking about the man and the God man when we're talking about these things so let me piggyback on that again a number of people

reformed and not reform but including some very good reform voices object to either the language of it or they prefer to call it you know in an academic administration but not a covenant or they say this is sort of putting upon the text dogmatic categories when it's not explicitly there so let me just sketch out three biblical rationales and you can add to them or dig deeper on any of these but one justification for calling it a covenant of works is simply the biblical data in the opening chapters of Genesis that we have the the usual components of covenants we have promises we have penalties we have an obligation we have a federal representative do this in you'll live do this and you'll die so it looks and smells and quacks like a covenant duck and so it seems to be so you have that you have the classic proof text and maybe you want to talk about some of the debate with Hosea six like Adam they transgressed the covenant because you open up here yes we Bible that seems to be pretty slam dunk oh Adam also had a covenant and yet many people say and not so fast and then the third big argument which you were just hitting on is really 1 Corinthians 15 Romans 5 if in order for Christ to be the second Adam if we're going to if we're going to make this parallel that Paul does that he's a representative person who's accomplishing things and lives out his life as a representative for a broader people for that to work for Christ doesn't the same thing have to be true for the type in Adam so those are compelling arguments to me that I present to my students which double click on one or more of those and maybe start with the Hosea six seven is that a useful proof text for us and I say that you could pull that one out of the equation and not appeal to it and still appeal to many other passages of scripture and arrive at the same conclusion that being said I'll take as many as I can get which means I do think that Hosea six seven speaks to that what I say is look at the overall picture in that when you look at Genesis one and two you get a picture of God's son he's an image bearers sons are image bearers placed in a paradoxical environment given blessings and curses and then subsequently injected and exiled from the presence of God then you get at the end of the penituke the prospects and the penituke first five books of the Bible the prospects of God's son Israel Exodus 422 Israel is my first born son and then he is a Hosea 11 one out of Israel or out of Egypt I called my son you have Israel God's son placed in an Eden like or paradisaical like land a land flowing with milk and honey given promises giving curses and then the prospects of exile Adam and Israel are the bookends to the penituke this is an inclusio that anybody that's reading this and then goes back and reads this in Genesis they're going to be they're going to see themselves in the story in the sense of oh this is foreshadowing these later events that ultimately sets the stage for Jesus the faithful son who is obedient unlike Israel unlike Adam but when the when the prophet looks back upon it I think that's what he's doing is he's you know in technical terms inter canonical and he's reading back Israel he's reading back Adam and that's why he says they Israel like Adam broke the covenant and this is very the very language that Paul himself picks up and I point this out in my chapter on Romans five where in the ESV it says that Adam sinned Hamartia and then he transgressed which is parabasios or parabasas is the is the noun and you want to say well is it just rhetorical flair is he just you know do using synonyms and when you look at parabasas or parabasseo which we

translate as transgression I forget the exact percentage but it's something like 95 96 maybe 97% of the usage of that noun or that verb is in relation to violation of a covenant and I think that if we were dialed into the Septuagint the Greek translation of the Old Testament and we heard that that Adam parabasiōs or parabasseō he transgressed this covenant or that he transgressed and was held accountable to it we would hear transgression of a covenant and then we see the exact same language that we see in Hebrews or Hosea six seven parabasseō and I think that Paul is basically picking that up so when you have Paul and Hosea and then all of this other information it's all pointing in that direction and then we add the layer of rabbinic interpreters, patristic interpreters like Jerome translating it that way medieval interpreters Roman Catholic interpreters and then the reform folks finally get to the party in the 16th century and when we come to that conclusion too, it's not something that is quirky to us reform folks this is something that's testified to in the scriptures rabbinic literature patristic and medieval literature we're just agreeing with this long history of interpretation that says yeah and so that's why I say if we look at this holistically from the entirety of the canon I think we get a much clearer picture it's not just about one teeny tiny verse and do we translate Adam as man or as a proper noun Adam that's just looking at things I think way too That's a really important point because on and it's just it's not only point for this doctrine but it's important for how we do doctrine and how we understand the theology of the Bible I don't consider proof text a bad word I mean they're used in confessions and catechisms for a reason to help people see but we're not tied just to a proof text a word this is the whole warp and woof of scripture and how a lot of people are these are these are yes they're distinctively reformed and some of their emphases and expression but they're also Catholic lowercase c doctrines in that the basic ideas have been present throughout the church and that's that's always important to us that we're yes you know you and I are we teach a reform theological seminary we're glad to be reformed we believe the reform tradition is important and we're seeking to explain that but we don't want to be reformed just to say we want to ultimately be biblical right and we want to be true to the history and the catholicity of the church I notice you mentioned the word septuagint whenever anyone says septuagint Greg Lanier and Will Ross our colleagues they get like a coin in the office springs or something for those brothers whenever we say septuagint one more question about the covenant of works and then I want to talk just real briefly about the new boss book but one one area of interpretation we haven't talked about but maybe you and I come down a little bit differently but is the question of republic education so we don't have to go back and forth on that but it is important so tell us what is that debate about and in particular it's maybe it's died down now but it was there was a lot of discussion about it in the OPC so maybe you can talk to us about why that came up what's important about it what the the final sort of evaluation was in your own denominational context on the doctrine of republication >> Yeah I think that it's interesting in terms of the overall origin of the debate this is my own take is that I think it was something of a controversial subject for a little while and I attribute that to the fact that the larger part of the church had become unfamiliar with the particular of the

covenant of works this is not to say that you have to agree with a certain position but just to be surprised I think by the conversation I think was evidence of the fact that you know yeah this was that were unfamiliar with it and to you know kind of anecdotal evidence of that is there are so few books devoted exclusively to the topic of the covenant of works in the last say since the since the 17th century since the 16th century that were really unfamiliar with the particulars and as I mentioned earlier as in our discussion when you read about the covenant of works throughout multiple treatments of it so many theologians will relate the covenant of works to the mosaic covenant they will not often agree on how to do that and so after that I write there's like a dozen or more views that I kind of you know mention so it's one of the most diverse conversations within the reformed context and so there was a study committee that was set up in my denomination the Orthodox Presbyterian Church that studied it for a couple of years and produced a report that said well there's some views that are okay and then there are some views that are not okay and more or less they came to the conclusion that any view that does that denies that the mosaic covenant is an administration of the covenant of grace or a part of the covenant of grace is probably going to be problematic in some respect there's there's a lot of details to that you know that's but that's a very broad brushstroke so on the other hand if you say that so long as you're saying that's substantively speaking the mosaic covenant is a part of the covenant of grace because in a post fall world all of God's dealings with human beings to save them is through the covenant of grace then okay we may disagree as to how exactly you're going to relate the other elements of the mosaic covenant to the covenant of grace but in the main you're probably going to be on safe territory and you know one of the places that I point to where this issue appears say in the Westminster Confession is in chapter 19 where it says that those who are united to Christ do not have the moral law as a covenant of works thereby to be justified or condemned fine perfect but I always say what is the opposite of that if you are not in Christ and that means that and here's the weasel word in some sense right the moral law is a covenant of works to you because you are not in Christ which means therefore the moral law is there for you thereby either to be justified or to condemn you and to say that you could somehow fulfill the moral law but it's nevertheless it's the Everest the impossible Everest that you have to climb on your own if you don't have Christ to climb it for you and we know that in the end you will not be able to have that peak because of original sin and all of the actual sin that we carry that I think in a nutshell or in a thumbnail sketch is kind of that issue as a whole I think that's fair so the debate as you said republication is in what sense and again there's that squishy phrase that we use but in what sense might the mosaic covenant be a republication of the covenant of works and I like what you said the crucially we have to acknowledge the mosaic covenant is a species of the covenant of grace it comes God didn't say here's the 10 commandments obey them I'll check back in six months and if you're doing it all right I'll save you from Egypt no he saved them from Egypt and then gave them the law as a gracious response to his unilateral salvation so it's an expression of grace it has within its system atoning sacrifices or at least types of atoning sacrifices

so the question is to what degree and it comes back to we don't have time to go back to Leviticus 18 but how does Paul use that the principle of do this and live and I think most reform scholars agree again to some degree the mosaic covenant more than say the Abrahamic covenant the Abrahamic covenant has a works principle in it there is a foregrounding of law in a way that the other covenants don't so the question is can you call that a republication or not and then moving forward how do we understand the moral obligations for all of us because I think you're right in a sense all of us say this somewhat provocatively all of us must be found to have fulfilled the covenant of works just will we have fulfilled it with our surety or will because that's the only way to fulfill it is through Christ and his work alone or will we be found to have fallen short of it which is everyone outside of Christ and to that degree the covenant of works is is a really key doctrine and even though it may sound very heavy I think rightly understood you point this out.

It can be a source of great assurance for this reason it means that all of these legal requirements these obligations these stipulations they have been met but they've been met by another they've been met by Christ and so when you doubt your own have I done enough how is my faith you look to the surety you look to the covenant of redemption crisis fulfilled everything the father gave to him and then we experience it in the covenant of grace because that covenant of works has been finally fulfilled in Christ and so I'm really looking forward to another 500 pages when when is the third volume coming out. Oh goodness. I'm going to say three to five years but hopefully closer to the three mark rather than the five year mark I've got some other writing projects I have to you know attend to and kind of clear the deck so to speak I'm starting to peck away at it a like in something that will warm ligand Duncan's heart I'm reading Irenaeus against heresies and I'm looking for covenantal kind of stuff in there so so yeah the work has begun but it's just slow that's all well I said I would try to keep wouldn't keep you more than an hour I'm gonna borrow on your three or four minutes here no worries this could be a whole discussion in itself but it's a significant book I just read this natural theology I'm going to say that you've got this artist Voss and then you have as I said about half the book is an introduction somewhat to Voss but then also to the significance of this work.

So tell us about this work was this like you know Indiana Jones someone found it buried in a scriptorium somewhere why have we not had this work before and what's the significance of Voss of all people writing his lecture notes copied by a student but Voss writing on natural theology tell us about this work just came out in a matter of weeks ago from RHB yeah it was this is I think one bin if I can be grammatically imprecise one of the funnest projects I've ever worked on in that I was talking with a friend and he had talked to somebody and he said yeah you know this guy was talking to said that somewhere in a school in the Midwest that he had uncovered lectures by Voss on natural theology and I was like wait a minute hang on did you just say natural theology really

okay and I said okay interesting and so I started doing some nosing around and I emailed Richard Mueller and was mentioning is like oh yeah those are it the archives at Calvin Seminary and I was like you don't say so I was either gonna Mueller knew that they were there yeah he said there's a box of Voss papers up there itself like you know good grief okay what you know so I then had one of my friends and his wife he's a pastor in Kalamazoo Michigan I said hey would you do me a favor I'll buy you dinner the next time I'm up there which it's been several years I owe them dinner but the next time you're in Grand Rapids would you mind stopping by the archives at Calvin and photographing this manuscript I can give you all the information I've talked with the librarian oh yeah sure no problem so they photographed it for me and sent me the photographs and I'm thinking about doing a blog post on my blog so I can put up some of these pictures the manuscript is just a beautiful handwritten you know script but it's in Dutch I was like oh goodness and so I started talking with another colleague in the Netherlands Herman Zelderheis he connected me with a student who transcribed them for me and I was talking with Richard Mueller hey do you know anybody who'd be you know interested in translating this I'm really curious because there's only so much that Google Translate can do for you right because you can get a peek at that kind of what's going on and so long story short he got me connected with the Dutch Reform Translation Society and he pitched it to them as a project they said yes and they said would you write the introduction I said oh I'd love to do that and do the editing so Albert Hooches he did the translation got me the translation and so then I started doing the you know the critical apparatus for every time Vos mentions an author or a book or whatever I did the bibliographic work and footnoted it and then for the sake of the integrity of the text I decided I wouldn't put any of my own historical analysis in the footnotes I just more or less the Vos text is the clean Vos text just with the critical apparatus but then I thought okay in the introduction I'll write some of my you know analysis there and I initially told Dr. Mueller I'm going to try to keep the intro to 25 pages if I had been able to see his response I think he would have laughed but he said well don't limit yourself and just write it and see what happens and so I forget what it was in word it may have been 65, 70 pages in word because what I wanted to do and what I felt like I needed to do is so few folks in the reformed tradition right now know the history of natural theology as it pertains to the natural to the reformed tradition right some reformed folks have said natural theology has no place in reformed theology and then there are other opinions and so I thought okay I need to set the context overall then I need to talk about Vos I also need to kind of explain that Vos isn't Superman I think a lot of people present him as Copernicus you know he's invented all of these things and I said no no Vos is using other people's material and that's fine that's that's legitimate that's what we all do and so I was able to discover connections between him and one of his colleagues Francis Patton and some of his lectures on theism and then kind of put Vos within that old Princeton you know trajectory of you know Machian and Francis Patton and then of course later on Cornelius until I'm and then kind of paint that picture and then show that more or less I think Vos stands in the broader reformed tradition in the positive use of

natural theology within the scope of supernatural or special revelation so it's not just this bald rationalism but rather it's a scripturally informed faith based if you will use of natural theology and the significance of this is that you know Vos the biblical theologian is also Vos the systematic theologian and that these two disciplines biblical and systematic theology are not antithetical to one another but they're the right and the left hand so to speak they get they go hand in hand and you know one of the images that you can use for this is Vos the biblical theologian and warfield the system and the other one of the most important things that I think is the way that we should do is to go and walk together on the campus of Princeton seminary and so I say that's the way that we should do our doctrine biblical and systematic theology hand in hand Well this is a really fascinating book in your introduction really is helpful I had to keep reminding myself of Roman numerals because it's LXX is how long it is so 70 pages but it really helps to show that connection as you said with Patton's lectures and the larger discussion and reformed theology So I'll just give the last word to Vos here because I just wrote key next to it in my copy here this is question nine how then do you understand revelation in contrast with nature he says not in the wide sense of everything that God has revealed to us about himself since that would include nature itself and that's an important distinction because going all the way back to Junius there again there is a sense in which natural theology is itself it's a theology of revelation anything we know about God is only because God has revealed it to himself that's important this isn't bald rationalism I set aside so even natural theology is revelatory but he says in that wide sense but he goes on but rather in the narrower sense as God's special intervention whereby he in a direct way and through special means gives people a knowledge of himself that they cannot obtain So that's the narrower definition we often think of reason versus revelation so at the beginning Vos says how do you define natural theology as a theology that is a teaching concerning God that takes its content and method from nature So I'm not in a you're very clear to point out not in a decarte sort of way I'm going to empty my head of everything else and I'm just going to think my way up to God that was that that's never the way that reform natural theology or even I'd say just the whole history of the church that's not the way Aquinas used his five ways or understood natural theology right it is a way to find some common places it has an apologetic aim I'm not meant to build the Christian faith from reason upward but you said at the very end of your introduction that you think there is something there's definitely something of a revival of this there's a number of good books I've even talked about some of them on this podcast It's probably going to take a generation to sort of put this back in in a healthy way into the bloodstream of reform theology so thank you for doing your part not only in this book with other books to try to do this I don't know read vos he's great he's he's such a he's such a insightful writer and study the covenants there they're beautiful manifestations of God's love to us and so I think the more we plunge into the depths the more that we can begin to at least kind of sound out the depth of the riches of the knowledge and the risk of God so yeah press on and plunge into the word of God Well keep doing the good work that you're doing John look forward to being in the same place with you sometimes some

RTS retreat when we're doing Trust Trust Falls or whatever we do with those and sounds good Yeah so thank you and God bless you on your work and until next time all of our listeners glorify God and join forever and read a good book Thank you for watching this video and I'll see you on your work and until next time all of our listeners glorify God and join forever and read a good book

(dramatic music)

[buzzing]