

WITSIUS AND POSSESSION AS A CONDITION IN THE COVENANT

A recent series of editorials in the *Standard Bearer* by Rev. Kenneth Koole has enlisted the theology of the seventeenth-century Dutch theologian Herman Witsius in order to provide “wise-hearted” and “judicious” insights into the present controversy within the Protestant Reformed Churches.¹ These insights are drawn from Witsius’ 1696 book, *Conciliatory, or Irenical Animadversions, on the Controversies Agitated in Britain, under the Unhappy Names of Antinomians and Neonomians*.² As described in the *Standard Bearer* editorials, this book addresses certain points of controversy between Presbyterians and Congregationalists in England in the 1690s.

Conflicts with the Heidelberg Catechism and Synod 2018

The *Standard Bearer* editorials assert that antinomianism is a primary feature of our denomination’s current controversy. Therefore, the editorials produce and affirm quotes from sections of Witsius’ book wherein he defines and then addresses what he believes to be antinomian teachings. These editorials are revealing in that they plainly state a view of the relationship between good works, justification, assurance of justification, and salvation considered broadly—topics that Synod 2018 decisively adjudicated. Anyone who has carefully read the 2018 *Acts of Synod* and the Witsius editorials has likely noticed a distinct dissonance between synod’s decisions and Witsius’ theology as quoted and affirmed in these editorials. Indeed, an incisive summary of the conflicting theology of Witsius and Synod 2018 has already been provided in a series of blog posts.³ These blog posts also reveal to the reader an important bit of information that the *Standard Bearer* editorials failed to reveal: that Witsius in this book admits his disagreement with the Heidelberg Catechism’s theology on assurance in Lord’s Day 7. Thus these editorials, which aim to teach our denomination the proper

relationship between works and assurance, employ a theology that itself admits its disagreement with our confessional doctrine of assurance.⁴

Adding to this confusion, the *Standard Bearer* is currently publishing a series of articles by Prof. Brian Huizinga that directly contradicts Reverend Koole’s evaluation of the relationship between works and assurance of justification. The editorials teach that the following is antinomian theology: “preaching must not then teach or leave the impression that the life of uprightness has any vital value when it comes to peace of conscience, joy in Spirit, or assurance of forgiveness” (Koole, 126; emphasis added). The editorials additionally affirm that the “perspective of those of an antinomian bent” is properly described as teaching “that no justifying virtue may be attributed to our works of whatsoever kind” (Koole, 126). Reverend Koole further affirms Witsius’ statement, “Hence, I conclude, that sanctification and its effects, are by no means to be slighted, when we treat of assuring the soul as to its justification” (Koole, 151). While the editor spends a paragraph attempting to explain away this last statement by discriminating between good works as useful for assurance of justification rather than being useful as the basis of justification, in the end he positively affirms the statement. Together, through these statements and affirmations, Reverend Koole teaches us that it is antinomian doctrine to deny that our good works contribute to our assurance of justification.

Professor Huizinga, on the other hand, teaches the following: “In the matter of justification, all our good works are and must be excluded.” “Nevertheless, while the believer may find some assurance of the genuineness of his faith by beholding the good works that spring forth from his faith, he does not derive from those good works any confidence of his justification.”⁵

Again:

- 1 Kenneth Koole, “Herman Witsius: Still Relevant,” *Standard Bearer* 97, nos. 4–8 (November 15, 2020–January 15, 2021): 81–82. Page numbers for other quotations from this series of articles are given in text.
- 2 The electronic version of Thomas Bell’s 1807 English translation of this book is freely available at https://books.google.com/books/about/Conciliatory_Or_Irenical_Animadversions.html?id=Y64TAAAAYAAJ.
- 3 <https://notallpiousandeccelesiastical.wordpress.com>.
- 4 See Chapter IX of *Conciliatory, or Irenical Animadversions* for Witsius’ disagreement with the Heidelberg Catechism on assurance. See also pages 247–52 of this book, where the translator thought it necessary to write five pages of notes correcting Witsius’ doctrine of assurance.
- 5 Brian Huizinga, “As to Our Good Works (9): Relating Good Works and Justification (e),” *Standard Bearer* 97, no. 10 (February 15, 2021): 230–31. Page numbers for other quotations from this article are given in text.

The believer does not find in his good works the basis for his justification before God. From his good works the believer does not derive any confidence of his legal standing before God. He does not look to any of his good works for assurance that he is acceptable before God. (Huizinga, 231)

And again:

Nevertheless, as soon as that believer consciously thinks of his legal status before God, he does not turn to any of his good works in order to confirm his status or bolster his assurance that he is righteous. Especially when his conscience begins to trouble him again, and he starts smiting his breast again, turning to his good works will only intensify his growing concern. When the issue is *justification*, that is, when the issue is the sinner's legal status before the thrice Holy God, the sinner will not give to his good works any place or function but will renounce them. (Huizinga, 231)

According to Professor Huizinga, good works are renounced and have no place or function when it comes to justification and assurance of justification. According to the editor of the *Standard Bearer*, Professor Huizinga's theology is of an antinomian bent. One wonders when these two authors will address each other's conflicting theologies.

The Grounds for a Conditional Covenant

For those who still desire the Protestant Reformed Churches to maintain her doctrinal distinctives, there is more in these editorials about which to be concerned. Through these editorials an established system of conditional covenant theology has been introduced into our denomination. That is, although Reverend Koole fails to reveal it to the reader, he has taken the explicit line of reasoning that Witsius uses to establish a conditional covenant theology and then presents it to our denomination as the way to solve a supposed antinomian problem within our denomination. This line of reasoning is Witsius' distinction between a right to salvation and the possession of salvation. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that these editorials are at odds with the decisions of Synod 2018 and other *Standard Bearer* authors.

Witsius, in his *Conciliatory Animadversions* as well as in other works, uses the distinction between a right to salvation and the possession of salvation to lay the foundation for a condition in the covenant of grace. As we will see below, after developing his line of reasoning that

distinguishes the right to salvation from the possession of salvation, Witsius admits that this introduces a condition into the covenant, and he concludes that the covenant of grace is therefore rightly described as a "mutual agreement" between God and man.⁶ This is the line of reasoning that the *Standard Bearer* editorials would have us believe will solve the supposed antinomian problem within our denomination.

In his third Witsius editorial, Reverend Koole introduces this concept of distinguishing between the right to salvation and the possession of salvation by using Witsius to teach us that the following statement is antinomian:

That good works are of no profit to us, in order to *the possession* of salvation; so, that though they are acknowledged not to be *the cause of reigning*, they cannot be reckoned even the way to the kingdom: that whatever good we do, we do it *not for ourselves*, but for Christ: that nothing is to be done *that we may live*, but [only] *because we do live*. (Koole, 126; emphasis is in the original)

The subsequent editorial offers additional quotes from Witsius, which pronounce that good works are required for believers to "obtain the possession of the salvation purchased by Christ" and that by good works "we go to the possession (!) of the right obtained by Christ" (Koole, 150). The editor correctly explains that we are to understand the term "possession" as our experience of salvation. The editor teaches us that "men drift in the direction of an antinomianism" (Koole, 126) exactly because they do not distinguish between right and possession as Witsius does. Therefore, it is worth determining what Witsius means by this distinction.

Witsius on the Possession of Salvation

This distinction is first used by Witsius in *Conciliatory Animadversions* in chapter 14 on the covenant of grace. It is interesting that this chapter is omitted from the editorials. Indeed, it seems that the editorials interact with each chapter that addresses good works in the life of the believer *except* the chapter on the covenant of grace. This is a significant omission because it is in this chapter that Witsius develops his theology of the utility of good works in the Christian life. In this book Witsius approaches the utility of good works in the believer's life thus: In chapter 14 he introduces how good works are related to the covenant of grace; in chapter 15 he describes how antinomians depart from this system; and in chapter 16 he describes how to correct this antinomian departure. By omitting chapter 14 from the editorials, readers are shielded from

⁶ Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, trans. William Crookshank (1822; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 1:289. Page numbers for other quotations from this book are given in text.

the very context in which to understand believers' good works and their possession of salvation. The context is the covenant, and the context is conditional.

Chapter 14 of Witsius' book is titled "Concerning the Covenant of Grace." In this chapter Witsius makes bold claims about the *unconditional* nature of the covenant of grace. Yet with each statement regarding the unconditional nature of the covenant of grace, it becomes clear that Witsius specifically refers to the elect's *right to life* within the covenant of grace. Later in this chapter Witsius treats the *possession of life* within the covenant. When he addresses how the elect take possession of salvation in the covenant, Witsius teaches that sometimes scripture uses conditional language when describing the covenant. Witsius writes, "In fine, it cannot be denied, that scripture sometimes exhibits the form of the covenant of grace in a conditional style."⁷ Then he quotes Romans 10:8–9, John 13:17, and John 14:23. His conclusion from these texts is that

in this sense *some condition is to be admitted in the covenant of grace*; inasmuch as it signifies a duty according to the will of God, to be performed by man, in a manner agreeable to the nature of that covenant, before he enter upon the possession of consummate salvation. (Witsius, *Conciliatory Animadversions*, 149; emphasis added)

Therefore, according to Witsius, the covenant is divided into two parts: the right to salvation or life (unconditional) and the possession of salvation or life (conditional). We agree with the *Standard Bearer* editorials that possession means experience. Thus in chapter 14 Witsius introduces a covenant theology wherein our experience of salvation is conditional.

Later in this chapter Witsius posits that the type of condition associated with the possession of salvation is that of a consequent condition (Witsius, *Conciliatory Animadversions*, 150). It is worth evaluating this assertion. The idea of a consequent condition is that of a "state of being" derived from some antecedent condition. For example, when someone is ill, we might ask about his "condition." In this example "condition" is a state of being that results from the antecedent condition of a pathogen entering the ill individual. With care, a consequent condition may be described by the phrase *in the way of*. However, Witsius demonstrates in this book and his other works that he really does not mean consequent condition when he describes the utility of good works in the possession of salvation. In the quote above Witsius teaches that good works must come *before* the possession

of salvation. That is, our good works are required *before* we experience salvation. If a condition comes before an effect, it is no longer a consequent condition. That Witsius really does not mean a consequent condition is also demonstrated by the phrase *in order to*, quoted in the third editorial when it introduces us to the idea of possession of salvation. The very purpose of the phrase *in order to* is to denote instrumentality. Witsius (and the *Standard Bearer* editorials) teach us that it is antinomian to deny that good works are of no profit "in order to the possession of salvation" (Koole, 126). By this, they teach us that it is antinomian to deny that good works are instrumental in the experience of salvation.

That this is Witsius' theology is plain from his other writings. Witsius' most famous work, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, was written in Latin approximately twenty years prior to *Conciliatory Animadversions*. In *Conciliatory Animadversions* Witsius borrows heavily from *Economy of the Covenants*, and therefore the theology of these two works is in agreement. In his section on the covenant of grace in *Economy of the Covenants*, Witsius is at pains to explain that no conditions may be admitted into the covenant of grace with respect to the right to salvation. For example, he writes, "A condition of a covenant, properly so called, is *that action, which, being performed, gives a man a right to the reward*" (Witsius, *Economy*, 1:284; emphasis is in the original).

Yet in this book too, real conditions come into the covenant of grace when the experience of salvation is explained.

But the law, adapted to the covenant of grace, and according to it, inscribed on the heart of the elect, enjoins to receive all those things which are proposed in the Gospel, with an unfeigned faith, and frame our lives suitably to that grace and glory which are promised. *When God, therefore, in the covenant of grace, promises faith, repentance, and consequently eternal life, to an elect sinner, then the law, whose obligation can never be dissolved, and which extends to every duty, binds the man to assent to that truth, highly prize, ardently desire, seek, and lay hold on those promised blessings. Moreover, since the admirable providence of God has ranged the promises in such order, as that faith and repentance go before, and salvation follows after, man is bound, by the same law, to approve of, and be in love with this divine appointment, and assure himself of salvation only according to it. But when a man accepts the promises of the covenant, in the order they are proposed, he does, by that acceptance, bind himself*

⁷ Witsius, *Conciliatory Animadversions*, 149. Page numbers for other quotations from this book are given in text.

to the duties contained in the foregoing promises, before he can assure himself of the fulfilment of the latter. And in this manner the covenant becomes mutual. God proposes his promises in the Gospel in a certain order. The man, in consequence of the law, as subservient to the covenant of grace, is bound to receive the promises in that order. While faith does this, the believer at the same time, binds himself to the exercise of a new life, before ever he can presume to entertain a hope of life eternal. And in this manner it becomes a mutual agreement. (Witsius, *Economy*, 1:288–89; emphasis is in the original)

And immediately following:

For when life is promised to him that doeth anything, we are not directly to understand a condition, properly so called as the cause of claiming a reward. God is pleased only to point out the way we are to take, not to the right, but to the possession of life. He proposes faith, as the instrument, by which we lay hold on the Lord Jesus, and on his grace and glory: good works, as the evidences of our faith, and of our union with Christ, and as the way to the possession of life. (Witsius, *Economy*, 1:289)

In these paragraphs Witsius is teaching us how good works according to the law function within the covenant of grace. According to Witsius, it is by good works of the law that we lay hold on the promised blessings of the covenant. And it is by good works of the law that the believer assures himself of covenantal salvation. Witsius' inevitable conclusion from his teaching here is that the covenant is a mutual agreement between God and man.

Using the law as an instrument whereby the church obtains a relationship with God is typical for Witsius in his covenant theology. In book four of *Economy of the Covenants*, he treats at length how the decalogue functioned within God's covenant with Israel, whom Witsius describes as "the Church of the Old Testament" (Witsius, *Economy*, 2:162). In the context of this covenant with the church, Witsius teaches how God used the law:

We are not to think, that God, by these words, required Israel to perform perfect obedience in all parts and degrees, as the condition of the covenant...Here, therefore, he requires a sincere, though not, in every respect, a perfect observance of his commands. Upon that condition he promises to them not only temporal blessings... but also spiritual and eternal. (Witsius, *Economy*, 2:181–82)

Here Witsius teaches that the church of the Old Testament only had to keep God's law imperfectly as the covenantal condition for both temporal and spiritual blessings. If this teaching seems familiar to you, it may be because Synod 2018 directly dealt with it (*Acts of Synod 2018*, 70).

While Witsius is correct to teach the necessity of good works for believers and within the covenant, he is wrong to do so in a conditional manner. Even when he explains that the condition is not a proper condition, it is undeniable that the condition of good works to be fulfilled must precede the possession of life and covenantal blessings.

To summarize the conditional aspects of Witsius' covenant theology from both books:

- Good works are necessary in order to (instrumental in) the possession (experience) of salvation.
- Good works are necessary before we can possess salvation.
- The law binds man to the covenant promises and allows man to lay hold of covenant promises.
- Man assures himself of salvation by the law.
- We must admit all of this as a condition in the covenant of grace.
- In this context, the covenant of grace is a mutual agreement between God and man.

Having looked more closely at Witsius' conception of the possession of salvation, it becomes clear that this concept cannot be abstracted from a conditional covenant. The *Standard Bearer* editorials shielded readers from the knowledge that Witsius first used the concept of the possession of salvation to declare a condition within the covenant. Thus readers have been shielded from the very context of the distinction between a right to salvation and the possession of salvation. Because the possession of salvation is the very point at which—according to Witsius—the covenant becomes conditional, one cannot take that very same point and apply it to anything else without dragging along Witsius' entire system of conditional covenant theology. Therefore, to insist that "the heart of the dispute" (Kooles, 127) is a failure to accept Witsius' distinction between a right to life and the possession of life is to insist that the heart of the issue is a failure to accept Witsius' conditional covenant.

Herman Witsius may indeed have wise and judicious insights into many areas of theology. However, for those within the Protestant Reformed Churches who desire to maintain her theological distinctives, Witsius' insights presented in the *Standard Bearer* editorials must not be applied to our denomination's present controversy.

—Nathan Lanning