

# The Biblical Hermeneutics of Geerhardus Vos: an Analysis, Critique, and Reconstruction

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(Note: Originally the reconstruction was a sub-section of the critique; now it is its own separate main-level section.)

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## **I. Introduction**

### **A. General Introduction: Three Prefatory Remarks**

Three quite general remarks are in order to orient the reader to this project. This will set the stage for the thesis and the body of this SIP.

#### **1. The Nature and Purpose of this SIP**

This Senior Integration Project is an analysis and critique of the hermeneutics of Geerhardus Vos. It is written in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Biblical Studies and Sociology majors. But this SIP is also written in the interest of *servicing* the fields of Biblical Studies and Sociology. It is the author's firm belief that a careful and Biblical understanding of hermeneutics will serve the purposes of both disciplines, both in terms of their academic as well as their "practical" sides. There is a great deal of overlap between these two disciplines on the "practical" side, and it should be apparent that an efficient and Biblical system of Biblical hermeneutics should be of much value for the kinds of "practical" ministry that go on in pastoral, counseling, and personal contexts. However, this project is intended to be of use for the academic side of both disciplines as well. In fact, in view of its resolution of certain Kantian problems concerning the application of Scripture, it can't help but be of such use! This goal of supplementing both the "practical" and academic sides of both subject areas will flow directly from our study of Vos's thought. It is expected at present that our examination of Vos will give special attention to his view of the covenant. So, then, in the course of developing the analysis and critique of the Biblical hermeneutics of Geerhardus Vos, it will become necessary both to analyze Vos's understanding of the doctrine of the covenant and to critique that understanding from a full-orbed understanding of the covenantal nature of Scripture. According to my instructor in Hermeneutics, there has not yet been written a definitive and satisfactory work on

the doctrine of the covenant in Reformed theology to date, and the theological community is still attempting to come to a clear understanding of the covenantal nature of Scripture. It is the hope of the present author that perhaps this SIP will be able to make a contribution to the development of our understanding of this doctrine which has truly all-encompassing implications for our understanding of Scripture and of the proper Biblical hermeneutics, as well as for all of life.

## **2. The Hope for Sociology in regard to the Hermeneutical Method this SIP will Develop and Use**

As was implied in the previous sentence, Biblical hermeneutics is integrally related to all of life. It is not simply confined to the realm of Biblical Studies, but rather it will most definitely prove to have implications for Sociology. This is because God has given us His written word which presents to us the covenant relationship with which He has blessed us and which literally fills the totality of our lives in His world. It defines the way in which we relate to Him and to other people, and it informs us about Him and His creation and about His laws and His promises as the primary components of our relationship with Him. As a result, we must agree that the Bible is definitely not a textbook on science or leadership or sociology, but rather, it is *the* textbook on *life*. We should realize that Scripture is not focused on a *narrow* subject but on the *broadest* of subjects: our covenant relationship with God, which ultimately includes all other subjects. It presents the covenant of life in such a way that it both provides substantive content for the various academic disciplines as well as directing principles for the understanding of those disciplines so that instead of being "left to our own devices," so to speak, we are rather left to *His* blessed devices. By the grace of God and through the proper use of His Word, there is hope for our engagement in various kinds of academic pursuit. We can be given purity of heart, our reasoning can be made captive to the Word of God, and our methods can be conformed to His righteous law. While it may seem to be something of a chicken-and-the-egg conundrum for the

present, nevertheless the present project is based on the belief that it will both depend on God's word for information and guidance throughout its progress while at the same time attempting to clarify the foundational view of the word of God which will best facilitate such a methodic use of God's word.

### **3. The Project's Niche and Intended Influence in Broader Contexts**

Part of this hopeful approach to academics (as well as life) which God has given to us through the revelation of His covenant is the understanding of the implications of His covenant for our academic disciplines. Whether his efforts have ultimately been faithful to Scripture or not, the theonomist Rev. Ray Sutton's book *That You May Prosper* is a refreshing Reformed attempt to relate the categories of the covenant as it is presented in Scripture to the central social institutions of life. Sutton attempts to lay out in parallel the Biblical versus historical views of family, church, and state according to the view of what he considers to be the covenant pattern found in Scripture.<sup>1</sup> While theonomy may have its problems the desire on its part to deal directly with society and its structures according to the word of God must be respected. It is the hope of the present author that this SIP will accomplish its intended goal not simply of critiquing the faults of a certain theologian but more importantly of laying the groundwork for future work like Sutton's, so that through such work in various academic and/or more "practical" contexts the fullness of the message from God to man will be heard and understood for the furtherance of the purposes of the Kingdom of God. This will hopefully eventually be accomplished in this project through spelling out a perspective concerning the nature of Scripture which the author has not seen worked out very clearly or fully elsewhere in Reformed theology, a perspective which

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<sup>1</sup>Sutton, Rev. Ray R., *That You May Prosper*. (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1987). Sutton follows on the heels of Kline and various covenant theologians associated with Kline's line of research, placing himself well within the circle of Reformed (and I suppose markedly theonomical) theology. I'm not trying to approve of theonomy by mentioning Sutton. He's just trying to apply covenant theology to other fields; that's praiseworthy.

should serve to remove many of the barriers which have been set up through the history of the theology of the church to the clear understanding of God's word. Having discussed the general nature, method, and impact of this SIP, let us move on to its thesis.

## **B. Thesis**

At this point we must move to a clear explanation of the thesis of this project, in order to clarify what the specific goal and focus of the rest of the SIP will be. The general analytical/critical thesis of this project is that the hermeneutics developed and used by Geerhardus Vos are markedly historicistic and influenced by the Freedom-Nature dualistic scheme which has developed in the history of modern philosophy. This twofold thesis exhibits an original analysis but focuses more heavily on laying out the negative aspects upon which we will focus in the critique.

The problem which ultimately results from the aspects in Vos's thought which will be critiqued is that they form obstacles to the correct understanding of Scripture, and as such systematically militate against the fullness of the role of Scripture in the life of the church and the believer. This allegation has been made toward Vos's general hermeneutical method in the past, but to my knowledge it has not been explained as adequately and systematically as it ought to have been. It is my intention in the critique to attempt a lucid explanation of this problem, as well as subsequently to accomplish a sympathetic reconstruction of Vos's thought to the edification of the church and the glory of God.<sup>2</sup>

It is my expectation and my hope that the analysis which will follow in this paper will be granted by any careful reader of Vos, and that the critique will be granted by any believing reader

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<sup>2</sup>I am concerned that the reader may not immediately notice the way in which the reconstruction is truly sympathetic to Vos's hermeneutics. In many ways, the reconstruction attempts to accomplish Vos's goals in a more workable and consistent manner than he himself was able to bring about, and for this it depends to a great extent on his prior project. I wonder if it would be wise to preface this paper with a similar one detailing Vos's contributions to Reformed hermeneutics, and to follow it up with an explanation of how the perspective in this paper includes and builds upon the good parts of Vos's thought. Time does not permit either of these further projects, and the preface has, I believe, already been written by those who have not yet taken the time to attempt a critique of Vos's system.

of Scripture. I want to be careful to warn the reader, however, that the critique must be seen as more of a *reconstruction* of Vos's system than a *destruction* of it.<sup>3</sup> Many of Vos's main goals and much of his general understanding should be retained for the benefit of the church, and should not be rejected. It is only a few certain aspects of his system, highly influential and all-pervasive though they be, which need to be corrected.

In order to be more clear about the things which must be retained in Vos's system, I should mention the following. First, this critique of Vos's thought must be qualified with a careful recognition of the concern Vos had for Biblical and Reformed orthodoxy. It must be understood by the reader that Vos was constantly working from within the context of Reformed theology, and he was constantly seeking to promote and defend Reformed doctrine. All of his writings, regardless of the problems which may become apparent in them during the critique, serve to build up a Biblical, Reformed understanding of Scripture, and do not evidence any desire to intentionally militate against Scripture and orthodoxy.

In this regard, it must be understood that Vos sought to defend Reformed orthodoxy *in the face of liberal interpretations* of Scripture. While it could be argued that Vos's primary methodological aim was to present orthodox Reformed *doctrine* over against the liberal *doctrines*, it is better to see that while he was defending *doctrine* he was even more concerned with the development of the correct *hermeneutical approach* to Scripture, which would both enable the church to gain correct doctrine from Scripture as well as to fend off the onslaught of the liberal hermeneutical methods and resultant doctrinal positions.<sup>4</sup> As such he was attempting to strengthen the church in its role as the pillar and ground of truth in the world.

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<sup>3</sup>This is why I have now raised the "Reconstruction" section of the critique to the level of a completely separate section; it is no longer part of the critique, but is the third section of this paper (hence the title "...an Analysis, Critique, and Reconstruction.")

<sup>4</sup>As Gaffin says in his introduction to Vos's *Shorter Writings*, p. xx: the "burden of Vos's program of Biblical Theology is to orient biblical interpretation to the history of redemption in a pointed and programmatic fashion."

As should become apparent in the critique, Vos was attempting to reconstruct the discipline of Biblical Theology by filling it with *orthodox* structure and content and divesting it of its liberal trappings. He did this because he knew that (in human terms) orthodoxy could not be expected to survive the liberal attack unless it also dealt with the *historical aspect* of Biblical revelation and religion.<sup>5</sup> He did a remarkably fine job of this project of connecting Reformed orthodoxy to a hermeneutical method which took into account the historically progressive aspect of revelation and religion, and his accomplishment should not be ignored. However, what will be shown in the critique is that he was not able to escape some of the insidious influences of the liberal theology he was fighting.<sup>6</sup> Thus, seen in its proper context, our critique is truly more of a reconstruction than a rejection of Vos's thought. To those who have been gripped by Vos's thought, it may be difficult to grasp the critique or to appreciate it, but it is my hope that by the grace of God the critique will be correct, clear, and understood by the reader.

### **C. Specific Introduction: Three Remarks**

Three further remarks will bring to light some central background issues which must be dealt with in order to gain the fullest benefit from reading this analysis and critique of Vos's thought.

#### **1. Methodological Note: The Chief End of Man is to Glorify God and Enjoy Him Forever**

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<sup>5</sup>The method Vos proposed to use in fighting the liberals was to posit the *true* organic unity of Scripture over against the false organicism promoted by the critical theory. Only an attack at the root could kill the tree of liberalism, and this could only be accomplished by demonstrating what the root *ought* to be according to Scripture. Cf. Vos, *Shorter Writings*, 22.

<sup>6</sup>Vos himself gives an extended explanation of the dangers Biblical Theology faces in terms of the pagan philosophical influences with which it had been steeped before his reconstruction of it, on pp. 15-21 of "The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline." The danger according to Vos is that Biblical Theology, while being very different from those philosophies in central respects, is yet similar due to its focus on the historically progressive nature of revelation and thereby stands in danger of naively adopting some of the same errors into which those pagan philosophies have fallen.

First, as part of the introductory material, I think that it would be wise to make it clear that my basic presupposition is of and my basic commitment is to the God of Scripture. While this may seem to be a matter of course in our present context, as the following analysis and critique will show, it is extremely easy even for a great Reformed theologian to make the mistake of not keeping God at the center of his system. It will prove revealing (I hope) as the critique progresses that unless the Triune God of Scripture is both worshiped and presupposed throughout, one's system of thought will fall into increasing disarray and increasingly cease to manifest the character of God. Vos's own primary goal as he explicitly stated more than once, as well as the goal and emphasis of Reformed theology, was to seek the glory of God above all else.<sup>7</sup> It is no doubt this drive to remain faithful to God, this love for God, this desire to see His glory displayed in its fullness throughout all of creation, human activity, and especially theology, which by the gracious working of God enabled Vos to achieve a more Biblical theology in comparison to liberal theology. It is my conviction that the present project will prove to be a failure unless it is hewn out through the sweat of responsible action which depends completely on the sovereign grace of God. Due to this conviction this project has already been rooted in much prayer for God's grace and humble reflection on God's word, though certainly not enough. My plea to the reader is that he also would seek to glorify God in full dependence upon God, that he would pray for the grace to be given a clear understanding of the issues involved in this paper in their relation to God on the basis of His revelation in His word. Just as there is no hope for the successful writing of this SIP without His conquering of the sinful tendencies of my mind, so also there is no hope for the profitable reading of this SIP without His Spirit guiding the reader's thinking according to His word. Please join me in the worship of God as we continue through this analysis and critique. Soli Deo Gloria!

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<sup>7</sup>E.g., *Shorter Writings*, 24, 232, 242.

## 2. Biographical Note: Who Was Geerhardus Vos?

Second, we should understand a general overview of Vos's life and work. Geerhardus Vos was born in 1862 from German parents in the Netherlands, and studied theology first in America in Grand Rapids and Princeton Seminary, and then in Germany in Berlin and Strassburg. He demonstrated exceptional academic ability and developed into a theological scholar of the highest caliber.<sup>8</sup> His extensive knowledge and deep understanding of Scripture as well as of Reformed and liberal theological writings is apparent throughout his work.

Following his formal training, Vos taught as a professor at Princeton Seminary from 1894 to 1932. He was one of the conservative and Reformed holdouts called the "old Princeton" during the period when Princeton was falling more and more into liberalism and practical theology which were characteristically devoid of true Scriptural content and based in subjective, undisciplined, or at least *biased* exegesis.<sup>9</sup> He pioneered and crystallized within the Reformed tradition the branch (note--not a school so much as a branch) of theology called "Biblical Theology," and the "Redemptive-Historical" method of interpreting Scripture, which, as far as I know, has remained popular only among certain circles of reformed thought. The term "Biblical Theology" has been used in liberal and neo-orthodox circles to describe a kind of study with whose *critical* attitude Vos did not want to identify his discipline. Vos chose the name "Biblical Theology" for his discipline, however, because a tradition had developed up to his time of using that term to describe the study of the *historical development of the core of the religion related to the Bible*, and he felt that while the traditional study had not focused on the *true* nature of Biblical religion it had nevertheless studied the history of the *supposedly true* Biblical religion, and so it was the best-known term which could be applied descriptively to his discipline.

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<sup>8</sup>From Gaffin's introduction to the *Shorter Writings*, ix-xi.

<sup>9</sup>This characterization of the decline of Princeton is taken from my recollection of a lecture by Charles Dennison, given on April 18, 1997, in the second-floor lobby of the C. G. Mills Science Building at Covenant College, Lookout Mountain, Georgia. Copies can be obtained from the Covenant library or John Livingston.

According to Vos, the characteristic nature of Biblical Theology, as opposed to Systematic Theology, is that while Systematic Theology studies the arrangement of Biblical revelation according to *logical* categories, Biblical Theology studies the arrangement of Biblical revelation according to its *historical* aspect--its historical presentation by God and especially the temporal *progress* and *development* of its presentation.<sup>10</sup> This will be described in more detail in the analysis of Vos's hermeneutics.

Vos had a marked influence on the thought of J. Gresham Machen, Cornelius Van Til, Hermann Ridderbos, and Richard Gaffin, as well as many other well-known and less well-known people in Reformed circles. Gaffin could be considered Vos's main proponent in the American reformed theological scene at the present time, and all of his books seek to remain faithful to the Redemptive Historical method. According to Rev. Charles Dennison, a major proponent of Vos and a pastor in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Van Til's "Creator-creature distinction," understanding of the war between the kingdoms (the "antithesis"), and emphasis on the "self-attesting God/Christ of Scripture," as well as many of his exegetical underpinnings, all find a direct root in Van Til's acceptance of Vos's thought.<sup>11</sup>

### **3. Explanatory Note: What is Hermeneutics?**

Third, in our discussion of specific background matters essential to the following discussion of Vos, let us examine a clear definition of the nature and parts of hermeneutics, the role of hermeneutics in the life of the believer, and the particular hermeneutical focus which this study of Vos's hermeneutics will take.

#### i) Its Definition

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<sup>10</sup>Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 17-25. Please note that all quotes from *Biblical Theology* are taken from the 1948 edition which was published by Eerdmans. Sadly the pagination is different in other editions, and I hope that this does not pose a problem to the reader.

<sup>11</sup>Charles Dennison, *Vos and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*.

In this SIP I am focusing on the *Hermeneutics* of Geerhardus Vos. Although I have used the term up until this point with the assumption that the reader is at least familiar with the word and probably familiar with its meaning to some extent, it would be wise to clarify our understanding of the nature of the subject matter upon which this project is focusing. The best definition of the nature of "Hermeneutics" which I have come across has been the one set forth by my recent instructor in the discipline. He analyzes the various areas of hermeneutics into the three primary fields or categories of philosophy--metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics.<sup>12</sup> His definition can be summarized as follows: A) The study of hermeneutics must systematically inquire into the necessary and sufficient conditions for getting the message of Scripture across to its readers so that it will be truly and fully understood. B) As such it will reflect upon the *phenomenon* of Scripture as the starting point, the *interpretation* of Scripture as the centerpiece and the *understanding* of Scripture as the capstone of hermeneutics.<sup>13</sup> Statement B means to say that the study of hermeneutics seeks to understand first the Biblical perspective concerning Scripture's nature, second the proper means we should use to interpret Scripture, and third the proper kind of understanding to which we should come as the result of the interpretive process. The study of hermeneutics tries to determine what Scripture *is*, what we should do to *interpret* it, and what understanding will *result* from a correct interpretation of Scripture.

#### ii) Its Role in the Life of the Believer

It could be objected to this study that it deals with a topic which is either removed from the experience of the average believer or is simply quite far from his mind most of the time. The

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<sup>12</sup>Although I am not any expert in systematic clarity, some parts of this SIP will also be arranged around these three categories in the interest of attempting to be clear and to cover the proper bases. The perceptive reader may have noticed that this organization is followed in the general outlines of the "General Introduction" and the following parts of the outline of the "Specific Introduction."

<sup>13</sup>Summarized from Krabbendam, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, front page of the course syllabus, as well as *passim*.

following points should help the reader understand some of the relevance of this SIP and its subject matter to the everyday experience of the normal Christian.

**a) Its normal function (relatively metaphysical perspective)**

The role of hermeneutics in the life of the believer is something like the role of the water pump that pumps the water throughout a city. It is always busily pumping away, but few people realize that it even exists. They simply turn on the faucet in their house and the water comes flowing out, ready for them to drink. To some extent, the principles of hermeneutics function in the back of a person's mind, and need not become explicit as long as one is able to readily understand God's word when one reads Scripture. In fact, a knowledge of the principles of hermeneutics would be quite unnecessary as long as everyone understood God's word without any difficulty.

**b) Its necessity in certain circumstances (epistemological necessity)**

Hermeneutics only becomes necessary when, due to our finitude, or due to sin and its pervasive influence in this life, God's word does not flow freely and abundantly into the mind, heart, and life of the believer. It is at this point that various questions arise, questions like "What does 'Hermon' represent in this passage?" "What is the point of this story?" "How does God still speak to us through this passage from the Old Testament?" and "Is God saying here that I have to obey the speed limits?" ☺ To use the analogy of the water pump, when the water coming out of the faucet sputters, will only trickle weakly into the sink, or even has stopped altogether, someone must go take a look at the pump house.

**c) Its ethical nature**

When something is inhibiting one's understanding of God's word, he must be diligent to seek out and use the means which He has given for understanding His word. Of course there will

be no success in such an endeavor unless one depends fully upon the sovereign grace of God through prayer, through trust in His promises and through obedience to His commands. As such the radically ethical aspect of hermeneutics becomes apparent. One must submit wholly to God in order to function properly as a finite creature, and further one has no hope for escaping one's sinful blindness to the truth of God's word unless one renounces his rebellion and submits to and worships God. Only then can he approach the task of fixing the hermeneutical "pump" in order to allow the word of God to flow freely into his life once again.

**d) Hermeneutics in relation to the "layman"**

It could be objected at this point that the theoretical side of hermeneutics is not of great use to the average Christian, and that it is more appropriate for the *theologian* to focus on hermeneutical theory. This is true insofar as there is a great deal of hermeneutical theory that is bound up in prohibitively obscure terminology and even difficult and complex concepts. However, in contrast to the technical side of hermeneutics we must recognize that there is also a very "normal" side to hermeneutics as well. Hermeneutics is also a normal part of life for the believer (not to mention the unbeliever!), as has been noted above. When a person has difficulty grasping God's message in Scripture, he must make a hermeneutical decision. He must decide either to ignore the passage, or to use some method to come to a better understanding of it. Because God's word is sufficient for all of the believer's needs, and further brings the fullness of God's blessings in this life, every believer (as well as every unbeliever) needs to seek out God's word diligently within the scope of his various abilities and responsibilities. This should involve the use of "spiritual" aids to understanding, such as prayer and diligent reading of Scripture, as well as both more "academic" aids and more "ecclesiastical" ones such as the ministries and wisdom of the church.<sup>14</sup> While the layman may not have the responsibility of overseeing and

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<sup>14</sup>These are the "spiritual," "disciplinary," and "ecclesiastical" means of understanding the intended meaning of God's word which John Owen presents in *ΣΥΝΕΣΙΣ ΠΙΝΕΥΜΑΤΙΚΗ*, 201-234. Note that in their similarity to the

leading the teaching and preaching of the whole church, he nevertheless must attend to God's word in regard to his life and the things under his care. The analogy with the water pump breaks down at this point. While a city can send a specialist to fix the city water pump, the individual believer, however much he rightly depends on other people for his interpretation of God's word, nevertheless cannot send any other (human) but himself into the depths of his own mind to fix his methods of understanding the word of God. The Spirit works as the specialist, but He does so within and (at least partially) by means of the mind<sup>15</sup> and gifts given to the believer.

### iii) Our Focus: Primarily the Biblical View of Scripture

As stated above in the definition of "Hermeneutics," the study of hermeneutics inquires into the nature of Scripture, the correct means of interpreting Scripture, and the final understanding which should result from a correct interpretation of Scripture. The first of these three areas will be the primary area upon which we will focus in our analysis and critique of Vos's hermeneutics. This particular focus is largely due to the way in which Vos himself appears to have been concerned with this first area of hermeneutics more than with the second two areas.

A correct view of Scripture, while it must be discovered through a careful study of Scripture, nevertheless must also be assumed in any study of Scripture. It is both necessary and helpful in that it serves to guide the reader within the *general outlines* of the structure and content of Scripture (it helps the reader to both fit Scripture's parts together *structurally* and to delve deeply into their true *message* (= *content*)), and thus helps him to arrive at an understanding of the message of Scripture more quickly and correctly. As such, in this first area concerning the *phenomenon* of Scripture, the gift which hermeneutics gives to us in regard to our

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metaphysics-epistemology-ethics distinction they are roughly analogous to the three areas of hermeneutics!

<sup>15</sup>I would rather speak of the *heart* here as opposed to the mind, but most readers will take the heart to be the seat of the emotions and *not* the seat of the rational, thinking mind as well. The heart, biblically speaking, is the seat of the mind (thinking), will (deciding/willing), and emotions (feeling/emoting). It is most proper to say that it is *this* heart in its three capacities in which the Spirit works to correct the hermeneutical methods of the believer who is not interpreting God's word correctly.

reading of God's inscripturated message is much like a general road map. We will be analyzing the general road map which Vos seems to have used and developed in his study of Scripture, and will attempt to critique it as well. Let us now move to the analysis.

## **II. Analysis: 2 Key Emphases**

The distinctive nature of Vos's system of thought is best summarized as follows. All of Vos's thought is characterized and molded by two central emphases. The first emphasis concerns the *historical* nature of revelation and the second emphasis concerns the *two ages* which dominate that historical revelation. These two emphases will provide the central organization of our analysis of Vos's hermeneutics, as well as the central focus of the critique. This is because it appears to the present author that while many aspects of Reformed orthodoxy, Scripture, hermeneutics, etc. come into play in Vos's thought, (nearly) all of the distinctive twists which his thought take can be explained as due to his emphasis on the two themes denoted above. To my surprise, after coming to this twofold understanding of the nature of Vos's system, I noticed that even the name of the hermeneutical method which has developed out of Vos's thought follows this twofold distinction: the "Redemptive-Historical Method" focuses on *history* and *redemption*. (As will become clear later in the analysis, central to the understanding of the "two ages" is the way in which *redemption* is the decisive act whereby God conducts a person from the one age/realm to the other age/realm.)

Before we examine the precise nature of those two emphases/themes, it will prove helpful to understand from the outset that the first characteristic emphasis--concerning the *historical* nature of revelation--provides the more *basic* and *foundational* structure of Vos's thought, and the second characteristic emphasis--concerning the *two ages*--provides the *capstone* or *final luxuriant flower* of Vos's thought. It is difficult to determine which emphasis is really more important or central to Vos, and it appears best to simply state that the first emphasis is more

*foundational* and the second one is more the *driving dynamic distinction* or *crowning conclusion* which is woven throughout the foundational structure.

While this may be something that will have to be corrected later,<sup>16</sup> it appears to me that the two central themes of Vos's thought should be clearly and systematically laid out in the analysis, and allowed to run together to a somewhat greater extent in the critique. Hopefully the analysis will help to solidify the nature of the two emphases so that they are clearly evident and distinct to the reader throughout the critique.

#### **A. Basic Construction: Scripture's Subject Matter is *Historical*:**

According to Gaffin, Vos had a great interest in the doctrine of the covenant from early in his career. While from a traditional covenant theological standpoint it is clear that Vos was upholding the central aspects of covenant theology, it is somewhat more precise to say that Vos's central approach to Scripture was to take into account its *historical* development, rooted in the historical development of revelation, which is further rooted in the historical progress of God's redemptive activity. The primary locus and clearest explanation of this aspect of Vos's thought is to be found in his *Biblical Theology*, especially in the introductory chapters. A further explanation of this part of his thought is found in "The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline" in the *Shorter Writings*.

##### **1. Centrality of the Progress of God's Redemptive Activity to Scripture**

In this section we will attempt to clarify the nature of some of the key aspects of Vos's focus on the historical nature of Scripture. Specifically, this description of the historical aspect of Vos's thought must focus on the way in which he believed that what is central to Scripture is the historical progress of God's redemptive activity, because it is the object on which Vos seeks to focus when he looks at Scripture and the archimedean point from which he seeks to construct

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<sup>16</sup>In order to more clearly demonstrate the dialectic's presence, perhaps.

the rest of his view of Scripture and of everything which flows from Scripture. According to Vos, Scripture reveals to us the progress of God's redemptive activity.<sup>17</sup>

### i) The Progress of God's Redemptive Activity

In order to break this summary statement down into its parts, let us first examine Vos's focus on the *events* described in Scripture. First, according to Vos, the task of Biblical Theology is to lay out the teaching of Biblical Revelation first and foremost through a careful study of God's historically progressive redemptive activity which is described in Scripture. This is manifest in Vos's strict definition of Biblical Theology: "Biblical Theology, rightly defined, is nothing else than *the exhibition of the organic progress of supernatural revelation in its historic continuity and multiformity.*"<sup>18</sup> (Emphasis his.) The "organic progress" of God's *revelatory* activity mentioned in the definition is rooted in the organic progress of God's *redemptive* activity. That this focus on God's redemptive activity is foundational to Vos's system can be substantiated from the following. As quoted above in a footnote, Gaffin's introduction to the *Shorter Writings* states that the "burden of Vos's program of Biblical Theology is to orient biblical interpretation to the history of redemption in a pointed and programmatic fashion."<sup>19</sup> Vos himself states that

"The specific character of Biblical Theology lies in this, that it discusses both the form and contents of revelation from the point of view of the revealing *activity* of God Himself. In other words, it deals with revelation in the *active* sense, as an *act* of God, and tries to understand and trace and describe this *act*, so far as this is possible to man and does not elude our finite observation. In Biblical Theology both the form and contents of revelation are considered as parts and products of a divine *work*. In Systematic Theology these

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<sup>17</sup>The keen reader will notice that in the next three subsections concerning "The Progress of God's Redemptive Activity" I am not following the order and organization in which Vos presents these key emphases of Biblical Theology. The reason for the order presented here is that it should prove helpful to the reader when he reads the critique and desires to look back to this section to remind himself of Vos's understanding of the historical progress of redemptive activity.

<sup>18</sup>Vos, "The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline," *Shorter Writings*, 15.

<sup>19</sup>Found on page xx.

same contents of revelation appear, but not under the aspect of the stages of a divine *work*; rather as the material for a human work of classifying and systematizing according to logical principles."<sup>20</sup>

While Vos's point in the above quote was to emphasize the centrality of *God* to the nature of the study of Biblical Theology, he also had a subsidiary emphasis on the way in which revelation depends on redemptive *acts*, and this is the reason I added the italics to certain words in the above quote.

What are the acts which Vos considers "redemptive acts" of God? These are historical events found in Scripture like the Exodus and "the incarnation, the atonement, [and] the resurrection of Christ." Vos considers them "objective" and "central" because they have to do with the production of the salvation of *all* members of the covenant community and are not primarily located in the subjective experience of individual believers.<sup>21</sup>

In regard to the relative priority of redemption and revelation, it is clear Vos tied together redemption and revelation by claiming that in general redemption comes first and revelation comes second as the interpretation of the antecedent redemption. While it is true that Vos held that redemptive acts are generally preceded by "predictive" or "preparatory" revelation,<sup>22</sup> nevertheless it is clear that the revelatory word which *follows* a redemptive act is the true and clear revelation of the antecedent redemptive act. He says, "revelation does not stand alone by itself, but is (so far as Special Revelation is concerned) inseparably attached to another activity of God, which we call *Redemption*....Revelation is the interpretation of redemption; it must,

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<sup>20</sup>Vos, "The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline," *Shorter Writings*, 6-7. Note that curiously Vos contrasts the "divine work" (BT's focus) and "human work" (ST) by emphasizing that the divine work follows the principles according to which divine "activity" is organized, and the human work follows "logical principles" of organization. Do the divine and human works inherently then have different principles of organization? God acts in history, man categorizes with his mind. Surely this exalts God above man, but does it also deprecate man's (systematic-theo-) logical organization as if it is not original to God? It opens the door.

<sup>21</sup>Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 14, 15.

<sup>22</sup>"...such act-revelations are never entirely left to speak for themselves; they are preceded and followed by word-revelation. The usual order is: First word, then the fact, then again the interpretative word. The Old Testament brings the predictive preparatory word, the Gospels record the redemptive-revelatory fact, the Epistles supply the subsequent, final interpretation." *Biblical Theology*, 15.

therefore, unfold itself in instalments as redemption does."<sup>23</sup> Succinctly put, "Revelation follows events."<sup>24</sup> The conclusion is that for Vos *events* are more foundational and "prior" than revelation.

#### ii) The Progress of God's *Redemptive* Activity

The whole focus of Vos's hermeneutical approach in *Biblical Theology* is to examine the progress of God's *redeeming* acts in Biblical history in order to understand the revelation concerning God which was given through those redeeming acts. This emphasis becomes apparent not only in the introduction but also throughout the book. He notes that the promise concerning the Seed in Gen. 3:15 sets up the whole course of the rest of history in that there will be a conflict between the one side of God, His redeemer, and His followers, and the other side of Satan and his followers (52-55). The descendants of Cain are described in Gen. 4-5, but are ignored after the mention of Noah's descent from Cain's brother Seth, because Cain and his unfaithful descendants do not fit into the plan of Scripture to trace the central development of God's redeeming activity (58). This general pattern of tracing the redemptive activity of God through Adam (52-55), Noah and the period following him (56-78), Abraham and the patriarchs (79-114), Moses and the Exodus, the conquest of the land (115-200), the implementation of the kingship through David, the outflow of the kingship and the prophetic ministry (203-318), and the final redemption of God by means of Christ, His church, and the final destruction of the earth and creation of the new heavens and earth (321-429) is precisely the emphasis within Scripture on which Vos intends to focus when he looks at Scripture.

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<sup>23</sup>*Biblical Theology*, 14.

<sup>24</sup>Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 203. The context of this quote is a discussion of the justification for calling the prophetic period an improvement over or higher stage than the patriarchal period. What Vos knows he must search for is an antecedent *event* in which to root the revelation of the prophetic period. His solution is that the prophetic period is based on the event of the antecedent implementation of the *kingship*. Although Vos does see that the prophets were largely involved in predicting and preparing for the redemptive activity of the NT period which was yet to come in the future, his emphasis here is not that the prophetic revelation is rooted in *future* events, but rather in *past* events. Thus it should be beyond dispute that for Vos, "Revelation follows events."

### iii) The *Progress* and *Goal* of God's Redemptive Activity

It must be further understood that this redemption and its resultant revelation have a *progressive* nature. This means that they have an origin and a goal, and that early in their historical development they are smaller and less developed, and as their history progresses, they grow larger, more complex, and more complete.

This process of growth is defined by the final goal toward which it is aiming. Each stage along the way toward the goal or final fulfillment comes nearer and nearer to the completeness of that final state. Vos liked to use the analogy of a flower or tree which starts as a seed, grows more and more, adding new branches and leaves as it goes, and finally blossoming out into its luxuriant maturity when it reaches its final form. From start to finish it was constantly developing, but yet it remained the same substance from beginning to end. Further, it had always been aiming toward its mature state, and each successive stage along the way should be understood to find its meaning and goal in that final state. Thus the goal toward which the process of growth aimed helps one to understand the true nature of the process of growth. It is this kind of progression Vos attempts to show us in Scripture in his *Biblical Theology*. He attempts to trace the progressive development of redemption and its resultant revelation from its first small and undeveloped beginnings in the Garden of Eden, through its various additions and changes, to its near-final form in the New Testament and its final perfection in heaven.

This philosophy of (Biblical) history presented by Vos is well-summarized in the following statement:

"In these ideas the prophets begin to grasp more clearly than had been done before the principle of the continuity, i.e., of a history of redemption and revelation. The true principle of history writing, that which makes history more than a chronicling of events, because it discovers a plan and posits a goal, was thus grasped not first by the Greek historians, but by the prophets of Israel. Hence we find also that the activity

among these circles includes sacred historiography, the production of books like the Books of Samuel and Kings in which the course of events is placed in the light of an unfolding divine plan. Good meaning can thus be found in the ancient canonical custom of calling these historical writings 'the earlier prophets.'"<sup>25</sup>

It will be essential to the later parts of this paper that we notice here that in Vos's understanding, our position late in history allows us to look back on the whole process of redemption and to see it in light of the final goal toward which it aims. We know the final NT revelation concerning the final redemptive end of the world, and this vision of the final goal allows us to correctly understand the true nature of the progress which has been occurring from the beginning. This aspect of Vos's thought will be described in more detail in the critique.

It must be noted at this point that the goal of redemptive history is intimately connected to Christ and His work in the NT. This will have to be elaborated upon later, but for the present it should suffice to quote Vos's summary of the center of Jesus' attitude toward the OT:

"What we mean is this, that Jesus regarded the whole O.T. movement as a divinely directed and inspired movement, as having arrived at its goal in Himself, so that he Himself in His historic appearance and work being taken away, the O.T. would lose its purpose and significance....He was the confirmation and consummation of the O.T. in His own Person, and this yielded the one substratum of His interpretation of Himself in the world of religion."<sup>26</sup>

Christ and His work form the ultimate "fact" or "event" upon which all of true religion ultimately rest, and from which the significance of all other aspects of Biblical religion--including its revelation--must be derived.

#### iv) Two Further Aspects: Organicism and Events

##### **a) Organicism: Substantial, Integrated Unity in its Progressive Development**

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<sup>25</sup>Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 208.

<sup>26</sup>Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 383.

Throughout his writings, Vos uses the term "organic" to describe the nature of redemption and revelation. It is somewhat difficult to summarize exactly what this term refers to. This is because it has many implications or senses, and in some ways will remain foreign to the modern reader until he comes to understand it within the context of 19th century thought. Central to the concept is that redemption and revelation have a substantial, integrated unity in their progressive development. Webster's dictionary provides a helpful nudge through its definition of *organicism*: "any of various theories that attribute to society or the universe as a whole an existence or characteristics analogous to those of a biological organism."<sup>27</sup> This is helpful in that what Vos meant by terming the process of redemption and revelation "organic" is that it is analogous to a biological organism in that it has a life of its own, even something like a body whose parts are fit together into a perfectly integrated whole. He meant that it has a deep complexity which can not be fully known, as well as a driving life force or principle according to which it acts, develops, and grows.

In the first chapter of *Biblical Theology*, Vos describes "The organic nature of the historic process observable in revelation." He makes the point that revelation is organic because it is perfect at the beginning even though it grows fuller and fuller as part of its historic progress. A seed is no less perfect than a full-grown tree. The revelation given by God in Genesis 3 directly after the Fall was just as sufficient for salvation as the revelation in Christ in the NT. Further, because revelation is organically rooted in the process of redemption, revelation must follow the patterns of ebb and flow found in the progress of redemption. The epochal divisions which are characteristic of the organic nature of redemption thus become represented in revelation.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, Tenth Edition, Ed. Frederick C. Mish. (Springfield, Massachusetts: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 1994) 819.

<sup>28</sup>Cf. *Biblical Theology*, 25, where Vos states that Biblical Theology, in its attempt to follow the historical development of revelation, must heed the way in which God has divided Biblical history into epochs according to the successive covenant-makings which form the partitions and initiating ceremonies of the epochs.

Further, the organic nature of revelation explains the increasing diversity of genres and forms of expression which becomes evident as revelation progresses. Just as a growing tree develops more and more branches, offshoots, leaves, and flowers as it grows larger, so also revelation develops more diversity within its substantial unity as time goes on.

Some further aspects of the organic nature of redemption and revelation are mentioned in "The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline," pages 10-15. These will be largely agreed with in the critique but will need modification, and thus it is good to quote a couple large sections at this point. First, Vos states that the organic nature of revelation is found in that

"Although the knowledge of God has received material increase though the ages, this increase nowhere shows the features of external accretion, but throughout appears as an internal expansion, an organic unfolding from within. The elements of truth, far from being mechanically added one to the other in lifeless succession, are seen to grow out of each other, each richer and fuller disclosure of the knowledge of God having been prepared for by what preceded, and being in its turn preparatory for what follows."<sup>29</sup>

Further, "the heart of divine truth...must have been present from the outset."<sup>30</sup> Vos describes the essential unity of revelation admirably in terms of its organic nature. He holds that what comes out in the end of the process (the "flower") was implicitly found in the beginning of the process (the "seed"):

"each subsequent increase consisted in the unfolding of what was germinally contained in the beginning of revelation. The Gospel of Paradise is such a germ in which the Gospel of Paul is potentially present; and the Gospel of Abraham, of Moses, of David, of Isaiah and Jeremiah, are all expansions of this original message of salvation, each pointing forward to the next stage of growth, and bringing the Gospel idea one step nearer to its full realization. In this Gospel of Paradise we already discern the essential features of a covenant-relation, though the formal notion of a covenant does not attach to it. And in the covenant-promises given to

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<sup>29</sup>Page 11.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

Abraham these very features reappear, assume greater distinctness, and are seen to grow together, to crystallize as it were, into the formal covenant. From this time onward the expansive character of the covenant-idea shows itself. The covenant of Abraham contains the promise of the Sinaitic covenant; the latter again, from its very nature, gives rise to prophecy; and prophecy guards the covenant of Sinai from assuming a fixed, unalterable form, the prophetic word being a creative word under the influence of which the spiritual, universal germs of the covenant are quickened and a new, higher order of things is organically developed from the Mosaic theocracy, that new covenant of which Jeremiah spoke, and which our Savior brought to light by the shedding of His blood. So dispensation grows out of dispensation, and the newest is but the fully expanded flower of the oldest."<sup>31</sup>

We conclude with this quote, and will come back to these ideas in the critique.

#### **b) Two Comments on Events**

##### 1) Events Are Revelatory in Themselves

It appears in many places that the *word* of God does not receive an equal emphasis with the *act* of God in Vos's systematic understanding of the nature of Biblical religion as well as of Biblical hermeneutics. Rather, Vos emphasizes that the historical *events* (redemptive deeds/acts of God) which are described in Scripture are revelatory in themselves, and even form the central and foundational core to all other revelation. The following quote is the best introduction to this point:

"Even this, however, is not sufficient to show the historic character of revelation in its full extent. Up to this point we have only seen how the disclosure of truth in general follows the course of the history of redemption. We now must add that in not a few cases revelation is *identified* with history. Besides making use of words, God has also employed acts to reveal great principles of truth. It is not so much the prophetic visions or miracles in the narrower sense that we think of in this connection. We refer more specially to those great, supernatural, history-making acts of which we have examples in the redemption of the covenant-people from Egypt, or in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. In these cases the history itself forms a part of

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<sup>31</sup>Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 11.

revelation. There is a self-disclosure of God in such acts. They would speak even if left to speak for themselves."<sup>32</sup>

It should be noted that later on the next page he states that "without God's acts the words would be empty, without His words the acts would be blind." It is clear that Vos understood that there is a distinction between word-revelation and deed-revelation from this last quote, such that deed-revelation is not complete without word revelation. However, in order to resolve the tension between these two quotes and to be precise in the analysis, I must make a critical comment here. Its explanation is relegated to the following footnote,<sup>33</sup> but its central point is that

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<sup>32</sup>Vos, "The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline," *Shorter Writings*, 9.

<sup>33</sup>The explanation of the critical comment is as follows. It appears to me that due to his foundation in the Dutch Reformed tradition Vos clung to the distinction between "General Revelation" and "Special Revelation" which defines the primary difference between the two kinds of divine self-disclosure in terms of their *secondary source* (God being the primary source) and *effect*, but does not pay as much attention to their *nature*. (Cf. *Biblical Theology*, chapter 2.) The **secondary source** of General Revelation is *creation*, while the secondary source of Special Revelation is *God's word*. Special Revelation can bring about the **effect** of salvation, while General Revelation cannot do so apart from Special Revelation.

The problem with the Dutch view is the ambiguity surrounding the word "revelation," such that creation is considered to be "revelatory." The Reformed Presbyterian heritage (as well as Van Til) has clarified the distinction between the two kinds of divine self-disclosure in terms of their *nature* or *mode* in addition to their secondary source and effect, such that the Presbyterians say that creation is not technically revelatory in nature. The nature of Special Revelation is that it is given in words, as a message, which entails that as long as it is coming from God it is the divinely authoritative, clear, necessary, and sufficient revelation of God (i.e., it is the only divine revelation which has the four attributes which may only be applied in the present age to Scripture.) The nature of General Revelation, however, is not authoritative, clear, necessary, and sufficient apart from the word-revelation from God which supplies those aspects of His self-disclosure. General Revelation, taken apart from the things which come through Special Revelation, cannot communicate a divinely-*authoritative* message, provide *clear* definitions, nor is it *sufficient* to save and edify the sinner. Rather, it *manifests* the truth about God and His creation. This is because General Revelation is not in the form of words.

Rather than coming through words, it comes through our capacity for observing things in creation. This kind of knowledge-acquisition appears to be what Psalm 19 and Romans 1 are describing, where truth about God is manifest to man *without the mediation of words* (Ps. 19:3, literally, says "There is no speech, there are no words, their voice is not heard") but yet clearly and bringing blessing to the believer (Ps. 19) and a curse to the unbeliever (Rom. 1). It is not to be identified with so-called "empirical" knowledge which is defined as integrally *opposed* to "rational knowledge," because the "manifestation" proclaimed in Scripture, unlike "empirical knowledge," *does* result in ideas and *does* present a unity of experience.

It appears to be due to this reasoning that the Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter I. Section I. prefers to call *creation-revelation* by the term "manifestation" and to restrict its usage of the term "revelation" to refer to *word-revelation*.

*Manifestation* is described in the first sentence of WCF 1.1, and is identified with God's "*works of creation and providence*": "Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men inexcusable; yet they are not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation."

*Revelation* is described in the second sentence of WCF 1.1, and is identified with "*Scripture*": "Therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manner, to reveal Himself, and to declare that His will unto His Church; and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit

Vos's usage of the distinction between General Revelation and Special Revelation left him open to the error which much of Dutch Calvinism is open to in its accidental elevation of the deed-manifestation of God in some aspects to the revelatory status which should only properly be ascribed to God's word-revelation. As a result, despite his recognition of the existence of a distinction between word and deed, he focused on the *deeds* of God as if they were more central than God's *words* to Biblical revelation.

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the same wholly unto writing: which maketh the Holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing His will unto His people being now ceased."

This distinction is much to be preferred in light of the Biblical description of the role of God's word in relation to His creation, and will benefit the reader by preventing him from looking to a different source of authoritative, clear, necessary, and sufficient revelation than the divinely-appointed one. It must be understood in this regard that God's word to man is always spoken in the context of His creation and resultant manifestation, and is fully dependent on God's manifestation in creation in order for it to refer to something. Yet the primacy of divine revelation must be maintained over manifestation, such that the definitions which are given to the words come through divine revelation in their reference to His manifestation. God's words define themselves, albeit only in the context of and in reference to His manifestation. They also serve to form the guiding definitions of the world around us, for they give an authoritative, clear, necessary and sufficient nature to our knowledge which is also gained through manifestation. Further they provide us (through their description of reality as well as their all-encompassing ethical implications) with the correct method for determining the nature of various parts of creation the nature of which does not appear immediately clear after reading God's word. This perspective is contrary to the position of Dooyeweerd, but it allows a full reign to all scientific endeavors and even gives such endeavors the fullest basis for claiming a correct understanding of the nature of creation, and thus it should not be rejected by the Dooyeweerdian but rather accepted gladly. It also avoids the problem of a dualistic epistemology in that it clings to the absolute necessity of both manifestation and revelation to the achievement of a correct understanding on the part of the believer, and construes no conflict or separation between the two aspects of God's self-disclosure. In terms of the furtherance of holiness, it is in this context the only proper outworking of a desire to remain faithful to God's word in *all* of life, and ultimately is a worshipful recognition of the glory of God manifest in creation and described in His word, for there is in God a perfect and awesome harmony between the universal aspects and the particular aspects of His nature.

I must qualify this footnote; the above paragraph was part of the original version of this paper in 1998. I'm writing this paragraph in 2003. I am more willing to use the term "revelation" to refer to "general revelation," and to say that general revelation also has the attributes of scripture (authority, necessity, sufficiency, clarity). (Van Til argues this in "Nature and Scripture," [The Infallible Word](#), 261-275.) General (deed-) revelation must have those 4 attributes of scripture, because God's words must be able to refer to His deeds authoritatively, necessarily, sufficiently, and clearly. General revelation can be authoritative, clear, etc., even without being interpreted by the words God speaks in scripture, but it is only thus interpreted correctly insofar as the interpretation given to it by man's mind is formally identical to the interpretation God's word supplies. In other words, when unbelievers without God's word interpret God's deeds correctly, they do so by reconstructing an interpretation in their minds which is formally identical to God's word. (E.g., the works of the law are written on man's heart, not the words. Man supplies the interpretive words, if he is not listening to God's word (Ps. 19--"there are no words"), but he cannot escape the way good deeds manifest themselves to be good, and evil deeds manifest themselves to be evil.) My concern in the above paragraph was the interpretive priority of God's words over His deeds; His words interpret His deeds. The second commandment requires us to maintain this priority; anything else in the end is idolatry. Vos's system still elevates what I consider general revelation--God's deeds of creation, providence, and redemption--to an interpretive priority over God's words, a priority I find unbiblical, especially because of the requirements of the second commandment.

This role of redemptive events as actually revelatory is given the place of a central and foundational core to the rest of revelation in the following quote:

"Furthermore, we observe that this system of revelation-acts is not interpolated into the larger system of biblical history after a fanciful and mechanical fashion. The relation between the two systems is vital and organic. These miraculous interferences of God to which we ascribe a revealing character, furnish the great joints and ligaments by which the whole framework of sacred history is held together, and its entire structure determined. God's saving deeds mark the critical epochs of history, and as such, have continued to shape its course for centuries after their occurrence."<sup>34</sup>

Concerning the transformation of the present world into the coming redemptive world, Vos implies that these redemptive events do not only provide the joints and ligaments of history, but also form the bone and marrow of all revelation, in that they are what revelation bids us to focus on, as well as are themselves the very source of revelation (*italics are mine*):

"If, then, this supernatural process of transformation proceeds on organic principles, and if, as we have shown, *revelation is but the light accompanying it in its course, the reflection of its divine realities in the sphere of knowledge*, we cannot escape from the conclusion that revelation itself must exhibit a similar organic progress. In point of fact, we find that the actual working of Old Testament redemption toward the coming of Christ in the flesh, and the advance of revealed knowledge concerning Christ, keep equal pace everywhere."<sup>35</sup>

The significance of these things will have to be addressed in the critique. For the present let it suffice to say that the intuition arises again that for Vos, it is more important for the interpreter of Scripture to follow the organization of the historical *events* than to follow the organization of the text of Scripture.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Vos, "The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline," *Shorter Writings*, 9.

<sup>35</sup>Vos, "The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline," *Shorter Writings*, 12.

<sup>36</sup>This focus on events over words now becomes more apparent in Vos's introductory statements to his definition of Biblical Theology:

"Biblical Theology is that branch of Exegetical Theology which deals with the process of the self-revelation of God deposited in the Bible.

In the above definition the term 'revelation' is taken as a noun of action. Biblical Theology deals with revelation as a divine activity, not as the finished product of that activity. Its nature and method of

## 2) Events Are *Real*, Not Simply Ideas or Ideals

One of Vos's primary purposes of developing this emphasis on events is to fight the liberal interpretations of Scripture which deny the historical accuracy of the Biblical account. Since the development of post-Medieval science in the Enlightenment, secular thought has granted such a high status to the ability of the modern "rational" mind and methods that it has been willing to allow its scientific theories and conclusions to *critique* Scripture and its presentation of the truth. This elevation of science over the authoritative word of God has been the primary attack on orthodox Christianity since the Reformation, and has been dealt with by many if not all major hermeneutical theorists in the Reformed tradition. One of the central ways in which orthodox Christianity has attempted to stave off this onslaught, especially in its 19th century form of the liberal historical-critical method, has been to find correct arguments for the historical accuracy of Scripture. The reason for this focus is that the message of Scripture ultimately cannot be trusted if it does not present the truth concerning historical events when it purports to present such truth. While many have fought the historical-critical method by developing relatively minute arguments concerning particular historical events, Vos's project was to place the events of Biblical history in such a central location in his system of interpretation that they cannot be removed without thereby ripping the heart out of the system, but further he desired to show that the fullness of Biblical revelation, the message of the Gospel, and of true religion flow directly, irreversibly, and overwhelmingly from the *real* events in which God was *really* acting in history. As such Vos was attempting to approach the argument with the liberals

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procedure will therefore naturally have to keep in close touch with, and so far as possible reproduce, the features of the divine work itself."

Apparent here is that Vos emphasizes that revelation is an *event*, rather than that it is a *message*. From Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 13. Cf. also Vos, *The Self-Disclosure of Jesus*, 21.

I fear that the reader who is unfamiliar with Vos's writings may not be convinced by the argumentation I present on this point, but I expect that the reader who *is* familiar with Vos's writings will readily agree that although Vos *does* focus very strongly, carefully, and successfully on Scripture in his hermeneutical activity, he nevertheless does emphasize the central revelatory function of the events more than he does the central revelatory function of the inscripturated word.

*transcendentally*, in that rather than simply meeting the opponent's objections he desired to present the perfect system which ought to gain full acceptance and which they could only deny to their shame.

The critical-historical method often resulted in attempting to find the kernel--an element of "true religion"--within the husk--the supposedly culturally-relative, biased, inaccurate account given in Scripture. This definition of the "true religion" for which the liberals searched came not from Scripture, but from the supposedly "scientific" constructions of secular thought, and was forced upon the text of Scripture. As a result, much of liberal thought describes "true religion" in markedly humanistic terms. According to the liberals, Scripture gives us "high ideals" which can guide us in our lives, it shows us "great men of the past" who lived good lives and can inspire us in the present, it shows us "the Christ" who was either a real man or a myth, but regardless of who He really was the great stories which are told about Him show us the highest elements of the religious spirit. This kind of humanism is asinine to the believer who knows the true God, trusts His word, and finds his life in an intimate connection with the *reality* of God's historical activity in the past as well as in the present. Vos's project in regard to this humanistic Gospel of liberalism was to present the Biblical Gospel to the liberals in order to convert them and to give the church the hermeneutical tool that would keep them rooted in Scripture, in God's central redemptive activity, and thereby in God Himself. God is real, so is His activity, and so is orthodox Christianity. Thus Vos finds it better to focus in Scripture first and foremost on the *events* rather than on the *textually-presented ideas*.

This approach to and conflict with liberalism becomes apparent throughout his writings when he takes on the liberal interpretations of various parts of Scripture as well as their hermeneutical assumptions. Vos indicates that this is an integral part of his own project in his

two primary introductions to his historical emphasis, which are the first chapter of *Biblical Theology* and his first article in the *Shorter Writings*.<sup>37</sup>

v) The Implications for Hermeneutics: Redemption's Progressive Development Provides the Structure for Our Understanding of Scripture

It will be essential to the later parts of this paper that we notice here that in Vos's understanding, our position late in history allows us to look back on the whole process of redemption and to see it in light of its final goal toward which it aims. This vision of the final goal allows us to correctly understand the true nature of the progress which has been occurring from the beginning. This aspect of Vos's thought has already been mentioned and will be examined in more detail in the critique. What must be worked out here are the central benefits which are given to us according to Vos due to our perspective from which we are allowed to view the completed product of revelation.

First, the central progress which is retrospectively discovered in history *gives meaning to the whole of Biblical history*. One would not know the fullness of the purpose of things described in the OT if one could not see that they are all part of the plan of God to bring men to salvation through the work of Christ, a plan which has been worked out masterfully from the beginning of redemption and revelation to the present time, and which will continue to be worked out until the end of this present age.

Second, the discovery of the progress of God's redemptive activity *is conducive to our understanding of the application of the text of Scripture to our present lives*. The progress defines our present historical context and place in the developing plan, and it also defines our

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<sup>37</sup>This is apparent throughout pp. 15-20, but *especially* in the full paragraph on p. 22 of "The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline," *Shorter Writings*. I would like to quote the paragraph on p. 22 for your convenience, but it is too long.

relation to the events which Scripture describes and which occurred in the past. We realize that we are not in the earlier period of time--the earlier epoch or covenant--but rather we are in the NT and post-apostolic epoch, awaiting the second coming. This means that the things which were part of the bygone economy speak to us *typically*, meaning that they serve as analogies for us of various aspects of the redemption we have through Christ. But further, they speak to us of the great plan of redemption which has been progressively developing, such that we realize that unless the bygone things had been put in place by God, their fulfillment in the present epoch could not have come, and we would not now be able to receive the salvation we have. Thus they remind us of our salvation by "pointing to" God's great plan of redemption and thus also to their fulfillment in Christ. The organic unity between the bygone historical redemptive events and institutions and the present redemptive activity of God necessitates that we may neither forget those past events nor consider them inconsequential, for the present depends fully on them. However the organic nature of the progressive growth and development also means that we must relinquish our grasp on the former things and lay hold of the redemptive realities/events of the present epoch and of the age to come.<sup>38</sup> This provides a general structure within which we can understand how the text of Scripture relates to us--both in how the text is meaningful as well as in how we are conjoined to the redemptive events/realities about which the text is speaking. Supposedly, this explanation resolves the problem of the cultural and temporal gap between our present experience and the historical past about which the text of Scripture speaks.

This concludes our discussion of Vos's emphasis on the historical progression of redemption as part of the central thing which he seeks to examine when he looks at Scripture. To recap, what Vos attempts to trace in Scripture is the grand progressive development and structures of the redemptive activity of God, from history's beginning to its end.

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<sup>38</sup>(If I remember correctly) It is in this sense that Vos, borrowing an image from Christ, says somewhere that the seed must die before the flower can come to full bloom.

## **B. Basic Guiding Distinction: Progress of History is Defined by the 2-Age Construction**

We must now move on to the second main point of our analysis. While Vos's emphasis on the *historical progressiveness* of God's redemptive activity forms the basic framework of his system, his emphasis on what he calls the "two ages" forms the pinnacle which flows from and defines the final outlines of the basic framework in an integral combination with that basic framework. Vos's second emphasis is well-conceived of as the pinnacle and epitome of his thought, for it is from an understanding of this aspect of his thought that one may look back across the whole of the basic structure and understand the organization of many of the particular aspects and components of the more basic structure. This "guiding" nature of Vos's second emphasis is due to the way that one of the two "ages" in the two-age construction forms the *goal* which as noted above provides the directional characteristic so essential to the *historical progress*. As such, we see the beginnings of the way in which the two emphases of Vos's system fit together in an integral fashion.

### **1. The Two Ages: The Pauline Eschatology**

While the first emphasis of Vos's thought (historical progression) is worked out primarily in Vos's book *Biblical Theology*, the central foundation and description of this second emphasis (the two ages) is worked out in Vos's book *The Pauline Eschatology*. To orient the reader to the rest of his works, it appears that the rest of his writings generally serve to apply and flesh out these two emphases in regard to certain aspects of the history of redemption and revelation. Most notably, Vos's work on Hebrews is an attempt to demonstrate the synthesis between the two sides of his thought, which he holds to be the purpose of the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews.

The central nature of the two-sided distinction between the "two ages," according to Vos, is primarily a metaphysical one. He holds that there are two separate metaphysical realms, the

higher one being the "heavenly" realm, the lower one being the "earthly" realm. All of history, all of redemption, and all of revelation is characterized by these two realms. The clearest brief summary of this perspective which I can find is as follows:

"Besides from a rhetorical point of view, we can study the philosophy of the parables from a theological point of view. It would be wrong to assume that the parables which Jesus spoke were nothing more than homiletical inventions, not based on any deeper principle or law. It would be more correct to call them spiritual discoveries, because they are based on a certain parallelism between the two strata of creation, the natural and the spiritual (redemptive) one, because the universe has been thus constructed. On the principle of "spiritual law in the natural world," the nature-things and processes reflect as in a mirror the super-nature-things, and it was not necessary for Jesus to invent illustrations. All He had to do was to call attention to what had been lying hidden, more or less, since the time of creation....But it is precisely in John that the theological principle of the duplex structure and stratification of the universe is explicitly enunciated. The great contrasts governing the teaching here, both of Jesus and of the Evangelist, are expressed in the terms "earth" (opp. "heaven"); the "world" (opp. "not this world"); "the earthly things" (opp. "the heavenly things"); "the things beneath" (opp. "the things above"). Between these fundamental contrasts the relation prevails that in order of thought and preeminence the heavenly things precede. They form the original, the opposites are the copies.

Practically speaking, the higher sphere is that whither all religious tending and striving must be directed."<sup>39</sup>

Vos insists that the relationship between these two realms is one of *analogical similarity* in some respects but yet of utmost importance the relationship between the two realms is one of *total antithesis* in terms of their essential natures. The things to be identified with the first realm/age are: creation, history, progressive development, the Old Covenant, and sin and evil. The things to be identified with the second realm/age are and heaven, eternity, changelessness, the New Covenant, and righteousness and goodness. The antithesis is evident in the *war* between the kingdoms of God (higher) and of Satan (lower), heaven and hell, good and evil, where the higher realm wins due to the progressive outworking of God's plan of redemption and of His

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<sup>39</sup>Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 380-381.

glorification which results from redemption. God will receive and is receiving the glory, because in Christ, the church, and the second coming, He has won, is winning, and will win the war.

Vos's concept of the two ages is the dominating two-sided distinction which runs throughout his writing. As should become apparent in the critique, this distinction between the two ages guides the vast majority of the systematically twofold distinctions which Vos is wont to make. To Vos, things are often to be seen either to be primarily associated with the higher "heavenly" "age to come" realm or to be primarily associated with the lower "earthly" "this present age" realm.

## **2. The Two Eschatologies**

The second primary point to be made concerning Vos's emphasis on the 2-ages which runs throughout his thought is the way in which this relates to eschatology. Vos states in many places that the 2-age construction in its absolute and clear form is given to us only in the later writings of Paul. It does not come from earlier parts of Scripture, although there is an analogical similarity to Paul's thought which is found throughout the revelation preceding Paul's. According to Vos, what Paul gives us in his discussion of the two ages is the final philosophy of Biblical history, the perfect perspective from which we can understand the total progress and essential nature of redemption and revelation. It is only from our understanding of the heavenly realities that we can understand our present existence, and it is only from our understanding of those same heavenly realities that we are able to see what was really going on in the progress of redemption and revelation in the OT. It would be good to quote Vos at this point to illustrate, but before the quotations from Vos can be properly understood, Vos's distinction between the *two eschatologies* and the shift from the one to the other must be understood.

### i) Distinction between the Two Eschatologies

The two eschatologies which Vos has in view are most clearly and explicitly distinguished as the "consecutive" eschatology and the "transcendent" eschatology. These are the clearest terms that Vos uses to describe the two eschatological systems.<sup>40</sup> The first system, the "consecutive" eschatology, is the one which was revealed first. It is the view that holds that the earthly age comes first and then the heavenly age comes second, completely replacing the earthly age. The two ages are related *consecutively* in time. This view was the primary eschatology of the OT, according to Vos. The second system, the "transcendent" eschatology, had been hinted at in the OT but is not clearly and perfectly formulated until the late writings of Paul, during his imprisonment. It is the view that holds that the heavenly age *overlaps* the earthly age and has done so from at least the time of the coming of Christ. As such both the heavenly age and the earthly age exist side-by-side in the experience of the believer. The believer lives in the earthly age and yet has gained access to the spiritual realities of salvation which come from God in heaven by virtue of the believer's faith-union with Christ. However, apart from the dual citizenship and dual experience which is granted to the believer, the separation between the two realms themselves remains. The heavenly age or realm is "above" the earthly age or realm, and the earthly realm is "below" the heavenly realm. The heavenly realm can become manifest in the earthly, but the two cannot and do not mix. The things of earth are "evil and transitory," and the things of heaven are "perfect and abiding."<sup>41</sup> Thus the relationship between the two realms here is *transcendental* in being or mode of existence. The higher transcends the lower, the heavenly transcends the earthly.

## ii) Shift between the Two Eschatologies

### **a) The Organic Relation between the Two Eschatologies**

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<sup>40</sup>E.g., Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology*, 36, 61; "Eschatology of the New Testament," *Shorter Writings*, 26.

<sup>41</sup>Vos, "Eschatology of the New Testament," *Shorter Writings*, 28.

These two eschatological systems, the "consecutive" and the "transcendent," are *organically related* to one another in Vos's view. The second system flowed out of the first one.<sup>42</sup> The first one's progress was defined by the second one. It was necessary for God to reveal the understanding of a *future* perfect age which would succeed the *present* evil age (= consecutive view) before He could later reveal the understanding of the *higher* perfect realm/state/age (the heavenly realm) into which believers are allowed access in the present and will be fully transported to after their death and in the final resurrection (= transcendent view). But it was also necessary for God to reveal His ultimate purpose of bringing people to live in the eternal transcendent heavenly realm in order for the consecutive eschatology truly to have been rooted in the future perfect state.

**b) The Shift: A Modification of the Former into the Latter**

Not only are these two eschatologies tied together in terms of the way in which they depended on and presupposed each other, but the history of redemption and revelation has shown a gradual but definite progressive *shift* from the first eschatological construction to the second one. The future perfect state was foretold throughout the OT, and hints of the transcendental nature of heaven were given in the later prophets. In Christ's life as presented in the Gospels, and in the early writings of Paul, the upward-looking (transcendental) as opposed to forward-looking (consecutive) eschatology becomes slightly more apparent, and then in the later writings of Paul the fullness of the transcendental perspective is finally laid out in the utter antithesis between the two ages.<sup>43</sup> It is not as though the transcendental perspective on reality would not have been correct in the OT, but rather the transcendental perspective was not revealed in its perfection until the NT. I.e., heaven *did* exist in a transcendental relationship to the OT "types and

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<sup>42</sup>Cf. Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology*, 41.

<sup>43</sup>"Within the epistles of Paul we can trace the gradual transition from the one habit of thought to the other." Vos, "Hebrews, the Epistle of the Diatheke," *Shorter Writings*, 198.

shadows" (religious forms and institutions) during the period of the OT, but it was not clearly *known* as a present reality. It was seen as a *future* reality instead. Vos makes this clear when he says "Broadly speaking, the development of NT eschatology consists in this, that the two ages are increasingly recognized as answering to two spheres of being which coexist from of old, so that the coming of the new age assumes the character of a revelation and extension of the supernal order of things, rather than of its first entrance into existence."<sup>44</sup> However, this shift of perspective is also rooted in a metaphysical change--God's Kingdom is coming, and the New Heavens and New Earth are here in principle and coming in future absolute fullness through the work of Christ.<sup>45</sup>

**e) The Shift: The Replacement of the Former by the Latter**

The shift of perspective described in the previous paragraph is not simply one of *modification*, but it is also one of *replacement*. The "transcendental" eschatology *is* an organic modification of the "consecutive" eschatology, but it is also an organic *replacement* for the "consecutive" eschatology. Because it grew out of the earlier perspective, and because it is different and better than the earlier perspective, in the mind of the NT believer it must *replace* the old eschatological perspective. According to Vos, a "rearrangement of perspective" has taken place.<sup>46</sup> Vos holds that "the teachings of Paul concerning the historic organism of the Old Testament economy" should be determinative for the NT believer's understanding of the true nature of the OT in terms of its progress toward redemption in Christ.<sup>47</sup> Especially in the writings of Paul it is evident that "The horizontal, dramatic way of thinking gives place in part to

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<sup>44</sup>Vos, "Eschatology of the New Testament," *Shorter Writings*, 28. Cf. "Hebrews, the Epistle of the Diatheke," *Shorter Writings*, 198.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>46</sup>Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology*, 41. See also the footnote above (about 3 footnotes away) quoting p. 198 of the *Shorter Writings*.

<sup>47</sup>Vos, "The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline," *Shorter Writings*, 20.

a process of thought moving in a perpendicular direction and distinguishing not so much between before and after, but rather between higher and lower."<sup>48</sup>

**d) The Shift: The Essential Parallelisms**

This shift between *succession* and *transcendence* in Biblical eschatology is parallel to the distinction between the *historical* emphasis in Vos's thought and the *2-age* emphasis in Vos's thought. The historical progression of redemption and revelation partakes of the character of the earthly and developing, as does the "succession" eschatological view. The 2-age construction emphasizes the eternity and changelessness of heaven, even in the way it existed during and above the OT period which was characterized by its "earthiness," and as a result the 2-age construction is parallel to the "transcendence" eschatology. It appears then that the distinction between the two eschatologies is also parallel to the relationship between the two ages. The first eschatology is more earthly, and through the progressive revelation of the *eternal* heavenly salvific realities the eschatological view which incorporated a constant *flux* or *process* gradually and organically became replaced by the fuller and more complete, even more *correct*, eschatological view which incorporates the *eternal* realities of heaven as its central component.

The previous paragraph may be hard to follow, but please trace its distinctions and parallelisms, and you will see that the analysis is correct. Perhaps a table will help to make the paragraph clear. Here are the things which were placed in parallel:

<b>First Parallelism</b>		
Vos's 2 Emphases:	HISTORICAL	2-AGE
The 2 Eschatologies:	SUCCESSION	TRANSCENDENCE

**Reason for Parallelism**

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<sup>48</sup>Vos, "Hebrews, the Epistle of the Diatheke," *Shorter Writings*, 198.

Temporal quality:	PROGRESSION	ETERNALITY/CHANGELESS
Realm:	EARTHLY	HEAVENLY
<b>Second Parallelism</b>		
The 2 Eschatologies:	SUCCESSION	TRANSCENDENCE
The 2 Ages:	EARTHLY	HEAVENLY
<b>Reason for Parallelism</b>		
	<i>FLUX</i> PROMINENT	<i>ETERNAL</i> PROMINENT

**e) The Shift: Synthesis of Two Poles**

Because of the parallelisms above which develop in Vos's thought, it becomes apparent that in the "shift" between the two eschatologies we come to see that the two emphases of Vos's thought form two poles. The first pole is the "earthly" pole, which is found both as the basic structure of his system as well as the characteristic of the beginnings of redemption and revelation, and the second pole is the "heavenly" pole, which is found as the final flower of Vos's system as well as the final end of the whole redemptive/revelatory process of history. Everything which falls between these two ends of both history and Vos's system is a gradual process of synthesis whereby the definite antithesis between the age to come and this present evil age is "organically" synthesized through the progressive motion from "earth" to "heaven." The earlier and lower moves to the later and higher. On the one hand, the synthesis is needed because there is a definite continuity or connection between the earthly and the heavenly which must be explained in such a way that the antithesis between the two realms also makes sense. On the other hand, the antithesis must make sense because the heavenly is the most important realm which must be preserved and clung to by the believer. The synthesis is achieved by the

*historical progress*, the antithesis is manifest in the 2 *ages*. Metaphorically, the seed grows into the flower (synthesis), but the seed must die before the flower can come to life (antithesis). There is a mutual exclusion between the beginning and end of history, but there is also a mutual presupposition. The end can't come without the beginning, and the beginning can't be understood except in light of the end.

This analysis of Vos's thought brings clarity to the whole system, and will be used in the critique as the overarching description of the central aspects of Vos's thought.

#### f) The Centrality of Hebrews

The shift between the two eschatologies is *accomplished* in the writings of Paul, but it is *explained* in the Epistle to the Hebrews, according to Vos. The earlier parts of the OT Scriptures, as well as the progression evident in Vos's *Biblical Theology*, provide the best understanding of the earthly pole of Vos's thought characterized by historical progress. Paul provides the furthest clarification of the heavenly pole of Vos's thought characterized by the two-age construction. This is the emphasis of *The Pauline Eschatology*. The Epistle to the Hebrews serves to explain the organic connection between the two poles, in order to smooth our understanding of the shift of perspective from succession to transcendence, the earthly to the heavenly.

According to Vos, the chief problem of historical theory is that of *identity in flux*. If everything is changing, what is it that remains the same from one moment to the next, from one epoch of history to the next, from the beginning to the end? When this question is applied to the history of Biblical religion, the believer desires quite properly to be able to say that Biblical religion has remained the same at its essential core from the beginning of history to its end. Otherwise, it becomes impossible to see how the unchanging God could be in charge of such an arbitrarily changing religion, and the question of the reality of OT religion as well as of NT religion becomes impossible to answer. According to Vos, this is precisely the question the

Hebrew converts were concerned with as they tried to reconcile the "earthly" components of OT religion with the "heavenly" components of NT religion. How did they fit together? Were they the same religion? Can we honestly and correctly judge that this newfangled "Christianity" is truly the outflow of the OT religion?

It is my expectation that Vos found these questions to be the same questions which were being raised by the liberals who denied the organic unity of the orthodox faith. The liberals drew a sharp distinction between the OT and NT religions, and attempted to criticize the textual presentation of orthodoxy by construing various parts of Scripture as if they did not truly fit together, but rather had simply been developed by the same group of people over a long period of time. To the liberals, it did not really matter whether the various parts of Scripture fit together perfectly according to the way in which they presented themselves, because (to the liberal mindset) all human creations and historical writings evidence human fallibility and a process of development from a less correct understanding to a more correct understanding of the truth. Thus the liberals looked for the religion expressed in the text as if it could have been a manifestation of true religion, but also as if it was not understood and expressed as perfectly as it could have been, if only the poor wretches from the past would have understood religion as well as the liberals could now with their modern scientific understanding. If only you could see us now, Moses! Yes, there is a bit of sarcasm in those past two sentences, but the point is that the liberals were destroying the work of the church by casting doubt on Biblical Christianity (understood in an orthodox sense.) While Moses stood face to face with God, beheld Him in His awesome glory, spoke with Him, and brought God's words to His people with great conviction and reverence for the LORD, the liberals, having beheld the theories of science, were debating whether Moses truly wrote the Pentateuch and denying that its religion was the one which we must follow today.

Into this fray Vos intended to bring the Gospel as fully as he could, especially by explaining the way in which the historical diversity of the history of Biblical religion was nevertheless rooted in a vital continuity and even perfect unity. This is why he emphasized that all of Biblical religion is rooted in the eternal realities of heaven, to which all historical forms of Biblical religion have been anchored and have provided access. This is also why he strove to show that the OT religion was really rooted in the realities which have only come to their fullest expression in the NT religion. In doing this he could destroy liberalism with the Gospel, and allow the Gospel to take root in the hole that was left. The Epistle to the Hebrews, then, serves to defend orthodoxy as well as to fit the two poles of Vos's thought perfectly together.

I do not know how to substantiate these things from Vos's writings in a brief manner. Perhaps I can hope that the reader who is willing to read this far in the paper may have already read Vos's writings or at least is interested in doing so in the future. Assuming that this is so, I will attempt to demonstrate that what I have said above about the role of the Epistle to the Hebrews in Vos's thought is correct.

First, Vos summarizes the function of Hebrews:

"The service rendered by the author of Hebrews in this field is not, however, confined to the recognition of the principles of progress, comprehensiveness and finality inherent in the covenant-idea. Profound perceptions as these are, they do not touch the fundamental problem of the philosophy of history, which is likewise the basic problem of the philosophy of redemption and revelation. It is not enough to know that history moves towards a goal; the great question, without the solution of which the thinking mind cannot rest satisfied, concerns the element of identity in the flux of development. What is the stable, the constant substance that underlies the ceaseless, never-resting change? To what extent and where and in what form is the goal that beckons at the end present at the beginning? Derive the past and present all their value from the future, or do they contain a solid reality of eternal worth in themselves? These questions are urgently pressing in the sphere of religion, where the dignity of God and the dignity of man's spiritual relation to Him do not at any point allow the human subject and its Godward experience to be regarded as a mere transitory

phase, a passing ripple on the surface of the stream. And they become most pressing of all when we enter the field of revealed religion, of special redemptive history, of the covenant of grace, where the bond between God and man becomes so intimate and precious that the postulate of a fixed essence unalterably the same through the ages will not be denied. God is not a God of the dead, but a God of the living; to Him all in all times must live; and an evolution which would leave no room for the presence in every one of its stages and moments of such a true life unto God is incompatible with the idea of religion itself. There is a catholicity of religion not merely in the form of space but as well in the form of time. It is the distinctive merit of the Epistle to the Hebrews that, in connection with its doctrine of the covenants, it has raised this great problem and found for it an answer that satisfies not only the religious mind in general but satisfies the heightened covenant-consciousness of the Christian believer in particular."<sup>49</sup>

The *covenant* is largely the central carrier of the synthetic progress. Paul did not focus on either the covenant or its role in the synthesis between the poles, but Hebrews does.

"Paul does not apply this train of thought to the idea of the covenant; the Epistle to the Hebrews does. As a result, what Paul gives in his distinction between the present world and the world to come and in the equation of Christianity with the latter is a religious philosophy of the history of the race in general. The present age and the present world stand for the reign of sin and evil, "the flesh," as Paul calls it; the age or world to come is the realm of redemption, the reign of the Spirit. "The present age" and "the present world" always have for Paul an evil connotation: the two eras of eschatology are ethically contrasted. The writer of Hebrews, on the other hand, by specifically equating the world to come with the New Covenant, is led to identify the first age with the first covenant. The distinction between the two ages is drawn entirely within the sphere of redemption and revelation, and the primitive philosophy or theology attaching itself to this distinction becomes specifically a philosophy of redemption and revelation."<sup>50</sup>

As such the covenant also becomes central to the understanding of how the historical *discontinuity* of the two poles of history fits into the picture. This role is apparent to some extent in the above quote. The core of Vos's argument for how the synthesis and antithesis are both true

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<sup>49</sup>Vos, "Hebrews, the Epistle of the Diatheke," *Shorter Writings*, 196.

<sup>50</sup>Vos, "Hebrews, the Epistle of the Diatheke," *Shorter Writings*, 195-196.

is that the NT's heavenly realities were existent in heaven as the final foundation and source of OT religion. In Hebrews,

"Still the main stress is laid on the other side, on the fact that in reality all along the world to come had preexisted in its heavenly form. The chronological relation is reversed; that which in course of historical development appeared the last was in a deeper and truer sense the first. Broadly speaking, the Christian things are not a new product of time; they are rather the descent into time of the essence of eternity."<sup>51</sup>

As such, the OT people were able to partake of the same religion we have in the NT, because they were able to experience the same realities we experience today.

"We shall now be prepared to understand how the recognition, that the two worlds exist and have existed side by side from the beginning, enables the author of Hebrews to solve the chief problem of the history of redemption and revelation. For it is in Hebrews that the first age and the first world are identified with the first covenant. When, therefore, the question is raised, how the Old Covenant can be identical in substance with the New, what is the common essence, that notwithstanding the great progress from one to the other, makes them two coherent stages in the expression and conveyance of the same spiritual reality, the answer is immediately forthcoming: the same world of heavenly spiritual realities, which has now come to light in the Person and work of Christ, already existed during the course of the Old Covenant, and in a provisional typical way through revelation reflected itself in and through redemption projected itself into the religious experience of the ancient people of God, so that they in their own partial manner and measure had access to and communion with and enjoyment of the higher world, which has now been let down and thrown open to our full knowledge and possession. In other words, the bond that links the Old and New Covenant together is not a purely evolutionary one, inasmuch as the one has grown out of the other; it is, if we may so call it, a transcendental bond: the New Covenant in its preexistent, heavenly state reaches back and stretches its eternal wings over the Old, and the Old Testament people of God were one with us in religious dignity and privilege; they were, to speak in a Pauline figure, sons of the Jerusalem above, which is the mother of all."<sup>52</sup>

The connection between the OT and NT religion is made through the heavenly realities which existed transcendently above earthly existence in both eras, but which were only fully

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<sup>51</sup>Vos, "Hebrews, the Epistle of the Diatheke," *Shorter Writings*, 199.

<sup>52</sup>Vos, "Hebrews, the Epistle of the Diatheke," *Shorter Writings*, 199.

revealed in the NT. The covenant contains the earthly forms of religion--the OT covenant contains the OT forms of religion, the NT covenant the NT forms of religion. The OT "type" (temporary earthly form of religion) manifests, even *teaches about* the "reality," but is not the reality. The heavenly reality does not exist in the earthly realm, but in the religion of the OT the heavenly reality *could nevertheless be accessed* by humans living on earth.

"According to [Hebrews] 10:1 the law has the shadow of the good things of the world to come, not the image itself. That image the New Covenant possesses; but it existed in the presence of God in heaven when He gave the law to Israel, and from it the shadow came forth which the law presents. True, the Old Testament forms also prefigure what is to follow in the line of historic emergence; they are forecasts in the Pauline sense, but they are this only because first they are reflexes of a heavenly reality which was destined at the end of the ages to come down to earth and fill the New Covenant. If the painter first draws a sketch from the work of art that lives in his inner vision, and then projects the picture from its spiritual form of existence into the form of canvas and color, the sketch will be a prophecy of the finished painting, precisely because it was a shadow of the picture in concept. In a somewhat similar sense the author of Hebrews means by shadow the sketch which God drew on the ceremonial canvas of the law of the eternal things that form the object of His vision in the world above."<sup>53</sup>

The connection between the OT and the NT religion is drawn, then, from the OT believer, through the OT "type" which was their form of acting out their religion in an earthly manner as well as God's method of manifesting the nature of the heavenly realities to them, through the heavenly realities themselves, through the bridge of eternity, back down through the NT forms of religion, to the NT believer. Scripture fits into this picture as the revelation which describes the OT believer, the OT typical forms, the heavenly realities, the NT religious forms, and the NT believer. It is clear that the OT typical forms are not of the same substance as the heavenly realities nor are they of the same substance as the NT religious forms. The continuity between the OT forms and the NT forms is found in the *analogy* between them as well as their mutual

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<sup>53</sup>Vos, "Hebrews, the Epistle of the Diatheke," *Shorter Writings*, 200.

connection to the heavenly realities, but the continuity is *not* found in the sharing of a common substance. This is Vos's synthesis of the two emphases of his thought. It provides for him the solution to the question of historical continuity and diversity, identity in change--i.e., the One and the Many problem as it is found in historical theory. There *is* a connection between the earthly and the heavenly, a progress from the one to the other, and yet still a distinction and antithesis between them--the Old and earthly has gone, the New and heavenly has come to take its rightful place.

"It needs, after what has been said, no lengthy demonstration to show that Hebrews vindicates by this philosophy of history in the most satisfactory manner the identity and continuity of the Old Covenant with the New. Still it is not a work of supererogation to call attention to this. The concrete purpose for which the epistle was written gave occasion for placing great emphasis on the superiority of the New Covenant to the Old. And this undoubtedly is also the proximate purpose in the mind of the author when he formulates that antithesis: there the shadow, here the image itself. But the antithesis would be overdrawn and the author's mark overshot if we were to interpret this as meaning the old has only the shadow of the new. As we now know, the author's real intent is this: the old has only the shadow of heaven, the new has the full reality of heaven. And therefore to do the author full justice the stress should not be laid exclusively on the statement that there is "only" a shadow, but equally on the fact that there "is" a shadow of the true things of religion under the Old Covenant. The word in the prophets cannot take the place of the word in the Son, but it is a word in which God spoke. The sacrifices and lustrations could not do the work for which alone the priestly work of Christ is adequate, but they were in their own sphere faithful adumbrations and true means of grace, through which a real contact with the living God was actually maintained."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>Vos, "Hebrews, the Epistle of the Diatheke," *Shorter Writings*, 202-203.

While this solution was satisfactory to Vos, it is not satisfactory to the present author. The following quote should serve to bring out two implications of Vos's system with which we will take issue in the critique. The first point of contention is the extent to which the OT believers understood the nature of the heavenly realities. The second point of contention is the extent to which the OT type and the NT religious form are truly unified.

"When again and again, in pursuance of the immediate end in view, the author declares their [that is, the OT types' and shadows'] weakness and unprofitableness (7:18), this is meant comparatively, but is not intended to void them of all religious efficacy. If taken in an absolute sense, such statements would warrant the inference that the Old Covenant had no spiritual substance at all, that the saints of old moved wholly among shadows, for which no body was yet in existence. This would be the same erroneous impression that is sometimes derived in an even stronger degree from the Pauline statements in which the apostle speaks of the religious life under the law, statements which seem to allow nothing for this life in the way of positive spiritual privilege and enjoyment, and to dwell only on the condemnatory, cursing, slaying function of the law. And yet we know from Paul that he was well-acquainted not only with the objective foreshadowing which the facts of the Christian redemption had found in the Old Testament but also with the subjective prelibations which had been tasted by the saints of those days. And so it is in Hebrews. With whatever degree of clearness or dimness they might themselves apprehend the fact, God stood in spiritual relations to the people of Israel; they were not cut off from the fount of life and blessedness."<sup>55</sup>

Note first in the quote above that Vos *does* claim that the OT people knew about their salvation, and experienced parts of the same salvation which we experience today. It should be obvious that I sympathize greatly with his concern here and believe he is on the right track. Yet notice also that the fuller-meaning approach remains influential in Vos's description of the OT economy and revelation in relation to the NT economy and revelation. He emphasizes that the religion of the OT partook of the *same spiritual realities* which we know to be the core of NT religion. But yet he is also willing to grant that the OT believers may have had a somewhat dim

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<sup>55</sup>Vos, "Hebrews, the Epistle of the Diatheke," *Shorter Writings*, 203.

or unclear understanding of the realities of which they were partaking. Their perspective is described as limited and less than ideal, yet still sufficient in its "seed" form. Thus the "objective" redemption/revelation of their period was a "foreshadowing," and it is only the "subjective" experience of salvific realities that is a "taste[ing]." Even in this concession to the reality of OT religion, the emphasis remains that even though the OT religion had a rightful reality of its own, the NT religion is better and must *replace* the OT in terms of its "objective" components as well as in the experience of the believer. Too much epistemological unity between OT illumination and NT revelation and illumination seems to be lost. This is my first contention.

Note second in the quote above that while Vos grants that the OT believers experienced the same *heavenly* realities which we experience today, he does not grant that those heavenly realities enter the realm of the earthly and *become earthly realities themselves*. Rather, they remained heavenly realities in the OT, just as they do in the NT. One wonders how it is possible, then, to speak of a unified Biblical religion which is truly part of our *earthly* experience, and which exists as a part of *earthly* reality, if the OT earthly forms of religion do not share any substance with the NT earthly forms of religion. Is the sacrament of communion a part of the true religion, or is it not? Was Passover? If the type and antitype contain nothing in themselves of the heavenly reality, there is no *real, substantive* unity between the type and antitype. Or between the salvation of the OT and the salvation of the NT, in its application and reception. Hopefully questions such as this will be given answers in the critique and reconstruction.

### **3. The Central Role of Christ**

In all of the above summary of Vos's system, the central role of Christ has remained largely in the background. In some ways I regret this, because Christ's role is very important to Vos, as well as to myself. However, systematically speaking, it is profitable to reserve the

discussion of His role for this late point. It is only within the context of the synthetical *historical* flow of God's redemptive activity, and within the antithetical structure of the 2 *ages*, that Christ's activity gains its central and dominating significance. To Vos, "the Messianic is at bottom a species of the eschatological."<sup>56</sup>

#### i) Accomplished the Central Redemptive Work

The first way in which Christ is central to the whole system is in the fact that in Christ's coming to earth, having a perfect human nature, a perfect record in God's court of law, and living a perfect life, through His suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension, He performed the central redemptive work which had to be accomplished in order for salvation to be made available to NT believers as well as those in the OT. As such the NT revelation which followed Christ is simply an explanation of the significance of Christ's work, even an outworking of the revelation which came through this most important of Divine acts.

##### **a) The Center of History**

The NT revelation, evidencing God's eternal plan of redemption, shows us that the redemptive act of God in Christ was foreshadowed and eagerly awaited in all of the OT, and that all of the redemptive activities of God which occur after Christ's first coming flow out of Christ's central redemptive work. As a result, it becomes apparent that Christ forms the center of history. All of history leads up to Him, and all of history flows from Him.

##### **b) The Center of the 2-Age Construction**

It becomes apparent as well in the NT that the "heavenly realities" which become spiritually ours through salvation are all found within Christ Himself. He is our new man, our righteousness, our holiness, our Prophet, Priest, King. Most of all, He is our God, in whom we find our greatest desire and joy, who so fills our vision that all "earthly" realities pale into

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<sup>56</sup>Vos, *The Self-Disclosure of Jesus*, 19.

insignificance. He is the heavenly reality. But further, He is the One who has descended to the earthly realm to accomplish the redemptive act which will convey us from our sinful, "earthly" existence to our final, transcendent "heavenly" existence. As a result, in the NT it becomes apparent that Christ is the central Mediator and Conveyor between the two realms. Christ is central to the 2-age construction.

#### c) **The Center of All Revelation**

Due to this absolute centrality of Christ to Vos's system, it is inevitable that Christ also is central to all Biblical revelation. The OT reveals Him prospectively, foreshadowing Him not only through promissory announcements of His coming and work, but also through the very nature of God's redemptive acts in the OT period. Those acts, as well as the types and shadows of that period, were all simply a reflection of the heavenly reality which is Christ, regardless of whether the OT people knew that such was the case. The NT reveals Him retrospectively, giving us a clear picture of His redemptive work and its significance, and tying all of revelation together in the Person and work of Christ. Biblical revelation serves, then, to direct all men to seek faith-union with Christ whereby they may gain the blessings of eternal (heavenly) life in Christ.

#### **4. Recap: Pinnacle**

Vos's emphasis on the distinction between the two ages forms the pinnacle of his thought. It flowed from his understanding of the historical development of redemption, and ties that historical development together in a way which could not be understood correctly until the accomplishment of redemption had taken place and the whole of Biblical revelation had been given. The two ages clarify our understanding of the history of redemption by revealing its central progress and especially the *redemptive* nature of that progress. Vos's emphasis on the 2 ages comes from the writings of the Apostle Paul who clarified and presented this distinction more than any other writer of Scripture. Paul's writings serve for Vos as the corrective lens

through which all of Biblical revelation must be understood. "If we believe that Paul was inspired in these matters, then it ought greatly to facilitate our task in producing the revelation structure of the Old Testament. It were superfluous labor to construct a separate view of our own."<sup>57</sup> Vos holds that the whole of Paul's ("dogmatic") theology flows from this final understanding of the history of redemption:

"What gives dogmatic coloring to his teaching is largely derived from its antithetical structure, as exhibited in the comprehensive antitheses of the First Adam and the Last Adam, sin and righteousness, the flesh and the Spirit, law and faith, and these are precisely the historic reflections of the one great transcendental antithesis between this world and the world-to-come. It is no wonder that such energetic eschatological thinking tended towards consolidation in an orb of compact theological structure. For in it the world-process is viewed as a unit. The end is placed in the light of the beginning, and all intermediate developments are construed with reference to the purpose *a quo* and the terminus *ad quem*. Eschatology, in other words, even that of the most primitive kind, yields *ipso facto* a philosophy of history, be it of the most rudimentary sort. And every philosophy of history bears in itself the seed of a theology. To this must be added that the Pauline outline of history possessed in the Messianic concept a centralizing factor of extraordinary potency, an element whereby the antitheses above named were dissolved into an exceptionally harmonious synthesis."<sup>58</sup>

In Vos's explanation of the dominating and reorganizing nature of Paul's eschatology, Vos states that the antithesis provides the synthesis:

"In distinction from the O.T. point of view the structure of Paul's eschatology appears antithetical. It places the end under the control of one principle with the sway of which an opposite principle of equally comprehensive rule and of primordial origin is contrasted, so as to make the two, when taken together, yield a bisection of universal history. By giving the soteric movement this cosmical setting it claims for it the significance of a central world-process, around the core of which all happenings in the course of time group themselves. By this one stroke order is brought into the disconnected multitudinousness of events. The eschatology, without losing touch with history, nevertheless, owing to the large sweep of its historical reach, becomes philosophico-theological. It no longer forms one item in the sum-total of revealed teaching, but

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<sup>57</sup>Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 22-23.

<sup>58</sup>Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology*, 60-61.

draws within its circle as correlated and eschatologically-complexioned parts practically all of the fundamental tenets of Pauline Christianity. Here this can only be briefly premised; it will have to be shown by detailed investigation at subsequent points. It will appear throughout that to unfold the Apostle's eschatology means to set forth his theology as a whole. Through a conceptual retroversion the end will be seen to give birth to the beginning in the emergence of truth."<sup>59</sup>

The two age construction is both the final completion of and the replacement of the historical progress.

### **5. The Value of the Two Age Construction**

To place this second emphasis of Vos's thought in the best light possible, we must recognize that he was attempting to allow the fullness of the glory of God to be the chief end of his systematic approach to Scripture. He constructed his system such that one realizes that God's glory is put on display to its fullest extent only in the age of fulfillment--the final perfection which will fully come into existence in heaven. But beyond this, his system itself is constructed such that it directs one to look not at the things of the past but rather to the things of the perfect future in order to see the fullness of God's glory. Further, by retaining the necessity and goodness of the revelation of God's glory in the past by tying it in to the final future, he feels that his description of the way Scripture is perfectly rooted in God's glory provides the epitome of Reformed hermeneutics as well as a trump card in the struggle with the liberal (mis)interpretations of Scripture.

### **III. Critique**

Vos was truly a Reformed light in a dismal liberal landscape. This must be carefully understood by any who desire to interact with his works. There is a great wealth of insight to be gained from Vos's writings into the problems of the liberal view as well as into the true way in which God has acted in the course of history and spoken in His word. Even the layman can

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<sup>59</sup>Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology*, 10-11.

profit in his understanding of Scripture through an acquaintance with the historical flow and organic unity of God's redemptive activity, as well as of the antithesis between the two kingdoms of Satan and of God.

However, as will become apparent in this critique, Vos is nevertheless an historicistic and "modern" light in the landscape of Scripture. As was stated above in the thesis, when compared with Scripture, Vos retains some of the trappings of 19th century Historicism. Further, he retains some of the trappings of the modern philosophical movement. Specifically, in his emphasis on the *historical progress* of redemption and revelation, he defines the present in terms of the future fulfillment toward which the present is growing. This is a product of Historicism. In his emphasis on the two ages, he allows aspects of the Freedom-Nature 2-realm construction which is found throughout modern philosophy to enter into his system.

The serious student of Vos must deal with these two influences, and must cling to God's self-disclosure of His glory in word and deed, in order to save himself from the consequences of these non-biblical influences in Vos's hermeneutical approach. Only in this way will the proper system of interpreting God's word be laid out for the benefit of the church, enabling the church to draw deeply from both the revelation and the redemption of God in Christ. It is my desire to enable the reader and the church at large to carry out this task of remaining faithful to God and His word by first clarifying the problems in Vos's thought and then seeking to lay out the central teaching of Scripture which corrects those problems.

### **A. Nature of Scripture: The Central Issue**

The central issue upon which we have attempted to focus in regard to Vos's thought is his view of the nature of Scripture. In our discussion of Vos's view of Scripture, we have ranged far beyond a simple and abstract discussion of the the central nature of this first area of hermeneutics, and we have attempted to trace the implications of Vos's thought for the second

two areas of hermeneutics as well. (Again, the areas of hermeneutics are: 1) the Biblical View of the Phenomenon of Scripture, 2) the Biblical Method(s) for the Interpretation of Scripture, and 3) the Biblical Understanding of Scripture.) We will do the same in the critique. However, we must come back to this issue in retrospective clarity at this point. What is Vos's view of the nature of Scripture? In summary form, it is the written text which reveals to us a) the progression of the History of Redemption, and b) within this general structure, the antithesis between the Two Ages, and within the combination of the two primary emphases, c) the centrality of Christ.

### **1. Scripture: The Proclamation of Covenant**

It is my hope that we will follow a helpful organization of topics in this critique. It seems best, then, to address the *general* nature of Scripture at the outset. It appears that while Vos's view of Scripture is helpful and partially correct, it is preferable and more accurate to understand that Scripture is the *proclamation of the covenant*.

#### i) Proclamation

First, Scripture is "proclaiming" the covenant.<sup>60</sup> Basically, this means that Scripture itself is *preaching* to us. It is presenting the truth in such a way that we as the audience are supposed to receive it with faith (i.e., we should *believe* what is being said to us, thereby appropriating the promised blessings by faith) and obedience (we should live our lives as the text of Scripture directs us to live, of course in dependence upon and by virtue of the sovereignly-given ability to do so). This "proclamation" is what God does when He presents the covenant to His people. First, He presents it in this manner to His messengers--the prophets, apostles, teachers, etc.--and second He uses those messengers to present the covenant to the rest of the people in the same manner, both imitating and carrying on the pattern of God's presentation of the covenant. Preaching is *discriminating*--meaning that it makes it clear to the listener that he has only two

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<sup>60</sup>I do not use this word in a Barthian sense, for those of you whose ears may have pricked up at the use of this term.

options--to receive the covenant in faith and obedience, thereby receiving all of its blessings, or to reject the covenant in unbelief and disobedience, thereby coming under the curse of the covenant. There is no escape from the preaching of the covenant; once you hear it you are under obligation to worship and cling to God in faith and obedience within the structure of the covenant, and can only choose between the blessing and the curse. It is true that God sovereignly determines what the audience's response to the preaching of the covenant will be, and it is also true that from man's perspective and within man's power there is a real choice to be made.<sup>61</sup> However, even that human choice cannot escape being defined within the structures of the covenant which has been preached to the hearer. As such the preaching of the covenant is also *applicatory*--it is addressed to the audience within the context of their life and everything that has some relation to them, and cannot be seen to define and influence only a small portion or aspect of their life.

#### ii) Covenant

What are the structures of this covenant, and what is its nature? It appears best from the teaching of Scripture to understand that the essential nature of the covenant concept throughout Scripture is that of a *mutual bond-relationship between two parties*. Much can be added to this basic core, of course. For instance, when the parties are both *personal* beings, the relationship is defined a bit further in terms of the nature of an *interpersonal bond relationship*. An *interpersonal* bond relationship has two primary structural components: law and promise. The law is what one person requires of another, the promise is what one person commits to do for the other. Something else that can be added to the nature of the mutual bond-relationship is the relative primacy of the parties. A covenant can be between relative equals, such that neither party has more authority than the other in the relationship. In contrast to this kind of covenant,

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<sup>61</sup>I.e., God's sovereignty and man's responsibility are *both* real.

the covenant between God and man is *not* made between equals. Rather, in the covenant between God and man, *God* is the only party who can create and administrate the covenant. He makes the laws, and He makes the promises. Man is the secondary party to whom the covenant relationship with God is given, and is not "in charge" in the relationship. God is in authority, man is under authority. The implication here is that God simultaneously requires obedience to the law and promises blessing within the context of obedience. God requires a commitment from man, and God commits Himself to man. Man can lose the blessing only if he disobeys the law.<sup>62</sup>

This covenant between God and man takes the center stage of the life of man. All things in life come into the purview and service of the covenant relationship between God and man. The law and promise of the covenant work their way into all parts of life through their expression in the words and deeds of God and man as well as through their functioning in God's administration and man's reception of the law and promise of the covenant. As such from the human perspective all things in life appear to be an expression of and part of God's covenant with man.

### iii) Scripture's Focus

#### **a) Structure of Old and New Testaments**

Scripture itself appears to be primarily focused on the covenant as its subject matter. Genesis follows the structure of the covenant(s) in its presentation of its subject matter. Assumed from the beginning is the covenantal nature of God Himself as the metaphysical ground and root of the divine-human covenants, as well as the necessary epistemological presupposition of all divine-human covenants. The Covenant with Creation as the context and components of the Covenant of Life is presented first, in 1:1-2:3. Second the Covenant of Life is presented in

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<sup>62</sup>These ideas have been partly taken from Krabbendam, *Biblical Hermeneutics, Christian Doctrine*, and in interaction with the writings of Vos, O. Palmer Robertson, and Charles Hodge. And of course I have throughout been attempting to use these writings to help me understand the teaching of *Scripture* as the final authoritative word on the issue.

2:4-2:25. Third the Covenant of Life by means of Grace is presented in 3:1-3:24, and its continued administration/reception is described from ch. 4 to ch. 5. Fourth the Covenant through Noah is presented in 6:1-9:17 and its continued administration/reception from 9:18-11:32. Fifth the Covenant through Abraham is presented in its progressive unfolding and administration/reception from 12:1 to the end of the book.

The OT and the NT are also primarily focused on the covenant as their subject matter as well. The rest of the Pentateuch details the Mosaic Covenant, the historical books leading up to 1 Samuel describe its continued administration/reception, 1 Samuel onward in the OT has to do with the Davidic Covenant. The Wisdom literature of the OT does not necessarily follow a historical order of presentation, but still follows the Scriptural focus on the proclamatory presentation of the covenant. Such is also the case with the prophetic books. The NT presents the New Covenant in Christ.

#### **b) The Completed Canon**

The principle of organization of the canon is the covenant. The order of the books in their Scriptural presentation is not necessarily historical or chronological, though there is a general historical progression. The date of the writing of the text or of the historical events mentioned in the subject matter is not determinative for the text's place in the canon. The books are not necessarily arranged according to literary genre. However, a significant parallel can be seen between the OT and the NT in that they both follow the same format by beginning with a concentrated presentation of the core of the covenant (Pentateuch and Gospels), are followed by a historical outflow (Historical books and Acts), include Wisdom literature (Job-Song of Solomon and James), include prophetic books/letters of instruction (Prophets and Epistles), and have apocalyptic literature near their conclusion (Daniel and Revelation). This parallel appears to manifest the continuity of the OC and NC as well as the way in which the NC is better than the

OC.<sup>63</sup> While the arrangement of books is not strictly according to genre, nevertheless, as with the historical progression, there is a general arrangement according to genre. It appears best in light of this to hold that the historical progression generally manifest in Scripture is due to the historical nature of the covenant, and the organization of the literature according to genre is due to the the covenant's presentation in *word* in addition to *deed*. Further, due to the way in which the covenant both structures and fills all of life from the human perspective, it should be no surprise that the covenant is presented in a typically "human" and "living" fashion. In this way, one comes to understand that it is not first *time* (history), *language* (genre), or anything else which is primarily responsible for the organization of the Biblical text, but rather the *covenant in its proclamatory presentation* which provides the organizing principle which becomes manifest in all of the less all-encompassing aspects of the manner in which Scripture is organized.

#### iv) In Comparison to Vos's Emphases

Vos's emphasis was that Scripture is organized according to the history of redemption and the 2 ages, and is centered around Christ. In opposition to the absolutization of this as the principle of the organization of Scripture, it appears that Scripture holds itself to be organized around the proclamation of the covenant, which includes an historical aspect as well as many of the aspects Vos combines to form the 2-age construction. Further, it appears that Scripture is not primarily centered around Christ but rather around the Triune God, including Christ. This elevation of the Trinity as more all-encompassing than Christ both is more representative of God's nature Himself and is more faithful to His revelation of Himself before the Fall as well as after the Fall. God is central to the pre-fall revelation, and the whole of Scripture progressively reveals more and more of the Trinity as it nears its completion.

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<sup>63</sup>This parallel was brought to light by Krabbendam, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, p. 4:24.

One thing that must be addressed at this point is Vos's understanding that Scripture focused on the history of *redemption*. The Scriptural presentation of the covenant certainly has to do with the aspect of redemption, but its focus also appears broader than redemption. This will have to be addressed later from a fuller understanding of the critique of Vos's position, but for the present it would be beneficial to note following concerning the relative primacy of redemption and the covenant in Scripture.

v) The Relative Primacy of Redemption and the Covenant: The significance of the function of Gen. 1-2<sup>64</sup>

a) **Preliminary Critique: First, concerning the nature of the text in its multiple levels**

1) In relation to context: Redemptive Purpose

Seen in the context of the texts dealing with the Covenant of Grace, or, seen in the context of the book, Pentateuch, or Scripture as a whole, the text of Gen. 1-2 has a redemptive purpose.

2) In relation to text: Particular Purpose

But, seen in relation to itself and its primary referent (covenantal-historical entity)--the covenant of life--the particular purpose of the text is not to accomplish redemption, but to present the covenant of life in a proclamatory fashion to the reader.

b) **Second, concerning the function of the text**

1) The Basis of the Text's Function: The Covenant of Life in Deed

(i) *The function of the covenant of life*

In the progressive building of the covenantal edifice, the covenant of life functions to provide the "background and context"<sup>65</sup> of the later covenants, but there is one more aspect of its

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<sup>64</sup>This was initially a short essay which was sparked by Gaffin's footnote, listed below.

<sup>65</sup>These are Gaffin's terms in Vos, *Shorter Writings*, Introduction, fn. 17 on p. xvi.

function that must be understood. It also provides the *bone structure* upon which the "additions" of the later covenants are built. As such it is incorporated into those later covenants as the most central part of those covenants. Inasmuch as we still live within the categories of and interact with the realities of the law and promise of that initial covenant, we still live in that covenant.<sup>66</sup> Although our present New Covenant is most certainly a covenant of grace, it is more essentially a *covenant with our God*, which is, of course, built on the initial structure given in the covenant of life.<sup>67</sup> We must remember, then, that *all* of the covenants between God and man are first of all just that--covenants between God and man, following the pattern of the first one (because they incorporate the first one)--and only secondly do they include more or less additions to the earlier covenants.

We should be careful to note, then, that the later covenants cannot be understood without first presupposing and understanding the first covenant, the covenant of life.<sup>68</sup> Further, the later covenants cannot be presented, much less *received*, unless the first covenant is (explicitly or implicitly) presented and received, for the later covenants are built on and incorporate the first one.<sup>69</sup>

2) This function's implications for the purpose and function of Scriptural texts

(i) *Reminder: Particular purpose*

As was argued above, the *particular* purpose of Gen. 1-2 is not redemptive, but covenantal--its purpose is the presentation of the covenant.

(ii) *Scripture presents us with God's prior presentation of the covenant, and thus*

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<sup>66</sup>True Organic Unity

<sup>67</sup>True Organic Growth

<sup>68</sup>True Covenant Theology (Word)

<sup>69</sup>True Covenant Life (Deed)

*follows the outline and character of  
God's presentation*

The initial covenant between God and man serves as the foundation of the later covenants, and similarly, the text that presents that covenant provides the foundation for the later texts of Scripture. This is because Scripture presents man with God's prior presentation of the covenant, and resultantly follows the outline and character of God's presentation, and thereby carries on God's presentation in an organic fashion even in its textual re-presentation. All texts in Scripture other than Gen. 1-2 are predicated on Gen. 1-2, and on the covenant presented therein. These texts that are built on Gen. 1-2 present the covenants that are built on the initial covenant of life (this is quite natural in view of the nature of the progressive building of the covenants upon one another.) Thus, it should be apparent that both due to the covenants upon which these texts are built, and due to the nature of the whole text itself, these later texts necessarily are presenting *relatively* less essential details than the Gen. 1-2 text presented.<sup>70</sup> The details are less essential to the covenant as well as to the meaning of the text. The clear implication of this is that redemption, although a key theme of Scripture, and the distinguishing characteristic of any and all covenants of grace, is not the *primary* element of our present covenant in either its historical or inscripturated presentation, and neither was it primary in the past. It appears that anything less than this view is tantamount to dispensationalism in the way that it construes the covenants as well as the Scriptures to be discontinuous and in conflict with one another.<sup>71</sup>

**c) Conclusion**

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<sup>70</sup>What is meant here by "*relatively* less essential" is that although redemption becomes an essential aspect of the blessing of the covenant after the Fall, it is not as all-encompassing or all-pervasive to the nature of the covenant as the covenant itself is. Further, the fact that covenant blessing can only be received via God's grace in all the Covenant(s) of Grace does not mean that redemption is the central and primary attribute of the covenant or of its blessings. Rather, it is both a necessary condition for and an essential part of the means to the reception of the blessings of the covenant.

<sup>71</sup>This allegation of a dispensational tendency hopefully will be addressed more fully later.

From the above, the conclusion must be drawn that the focused goal of Scripture is not primarily *redemption*, but *the presentation of the covenant*. As such, and in different terms, we should understand that Scripture is not first and foremost based on the "history of redemption," but on the "history of the covenant."<sup>72</sup> I propose, therefore, that we do not refer to our method of interpreting Scripture as "Redemptive Historical," but rather "Covenantal Historical" or even "Covenantal" under the assumption that the covenant has an historically-progressive aspect built into its structure. This is more true to the actual history to which Scripture refers, and concomitantly is more true to Scripture itself.<sup>73</sup> The covenant is primary in Scripture, and redemption is the distinguishing mark of all covenants of grace. Let us always remember that God redeems man not for the sake of redemption, but for the higher purpose of showing His glory and delighting in doing so, specifically through His covenant relationship with man.

## **2. Implication: Scripture's Scope not Restricted**

As will hopefully become apparent throughout the following discussion of more specific aspects of Vos's system in contrast to Scripture's nature, the final result of this change of perspective is that the scope of Scripture is no longer restricted to anything less than the all-encompassing Covenant of Life between God and man. This will open the door to the free flow of God's word into the heart and life of the church, and will make it more clear as to the methods which the church (and all its members) may use to come to an understanding of Scripture, while also serving to reconstruct but not destroy Vos's hermeneutical system. Ultimately this will be

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<sup>72</sup>In order to retain the sense of positive eschatological movement connoted by "Redemptive History," it must be understood here that the covenant in view is God's covenant *of life for (or "favor toward") man*, which is of course sovereignly administered and aiming at the full display of God's glory in creation. God's glory includes His abundance of goodness and blessing, and this appears to be involved in the temporal progress of the covenant in history, where the covenant becomes increasingly "better."

<sup>73</sup>Assumed in this concluding paragraph is that the reader already agrees that Vos's usage of the distinction between "redemptive acts" and "redemptive revelation" is proper but is better summarized and unified through the concept of the covenant, seen in its distinct presentation in word and deed. Thus God gives covenantal words and performs covenantal deeds.

shown to be the result of the return of God in all of His glory to the center of the hermeneutical system.

## **B. Scripture's Historical Aspect: Substance and its Progress**

Having examined the general nature of Scripture in comparison to Vos's understanding of the general nature of Scripture, we will now address Vos's two main emphases in more detail. In order to understand the critique of his two main emphases it is necessary to point out one further aspect of Vos's thought.

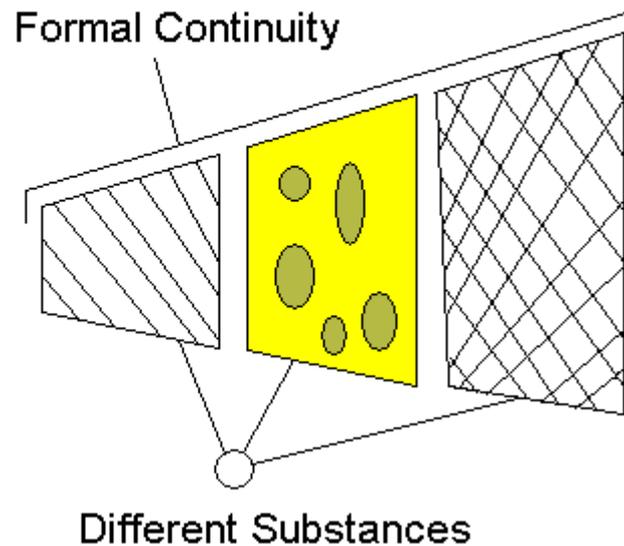
### **1. Vos: Further analysis: Substantively Different Chunks with Overarching Formal Continuity**

It appears that Vos desired to emphasize the unity the one overarching covenant of grace and the continuity of each successive covenant with the one(s) which came before it. This is clear throughout his writings, and is central to the thought of the area of Reformed theology called Covenant Theology. However, it appears that in his description of the continuity of each successive covenant with the earlier covenant(s) he misses one key aspect of the continuity of the covenants.

While Vos believes that each successive covenant grows organically out of the one which came before it, he also seems to hold that the *substance* of each successive covenant is different from the substance of the covenant which came before it. He holds that there is a unity found throughout the substances of the various covenants, but (in terms of the 2-age construction) also describes the "realities" which are granted to the believer both in the OT and the NT to be something different from the central aspects or "substance" of the covenants which were given in the OT and the NT. One could describe Vos's view of the unity and the diversity of the covenants to be as follows: the history of the covenant is made up of substantively different chunks which share an overarching formal continuity. (See Fig. 1 for a graphic representation of

**Fig. 1**

**Vos's View**



this construction.) My critique at this point is that this does not take into account the way in which the later covenants include the substance of the earlier covenants. As such Vos's description of the continuity between the covenants remains too formal.

The reason for this construction in Vos's thought appears to be that for Vos the substance of the earlier covenants cannot be allowed to continue into the final state, because the "earthly" cannot enter the "heavenly." The seed must die before the flower can come into being. The seed is no longer present in its original form once the flower arrives. The seed can only be said to be present in the sense that it is the *origin* of the content of the flower, but because the form of the substance has been rearranged into a new ("higher") form, the true continuity between the seed and flower can only be seen in the progress that is evident in both and the content which is shared by both. The *form* of the earlier does not continue into the later. I will now briefly attempt to point out some ways in which this kind of imperfect continuity is present in Vos's thought.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup>If the reader desires he may also review the discussion (in the analysis section) of the two eschatologies, and especially of the *shift* between the two eschatologies, in order to see the beginnings of this problem in Vos's thought.

### i) Substance Constantly Changing: New Replaces Old

First, it appears that Vos holds that the substance of the covenant is constantly changing through the course of history, in such a way that the new substance replaces the old substance. An example of this kind of thinking is Vos's discussion of the Covenant of Works. Vos describes man's condition before the fall as one of "perfect uprightness." Adam would have eventually eaten from the Tree of Life and become confirmed in righteousness in such a way that he became unable to sin. However, because Adam ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil he lost the blessings of the Covenant of Works. Vos holds that man due to his creaturehood is bound to obey the law of God, but Vos does not include the law within the essence of the covenant. Rather, the essence of the covenant is the *promise*. Because Adam lost the blessings of the original covenant, Vos holds that the promise in the Covenant of Works "falls away" from the picture. Thus he has to say that when the Covenant of Works is made with man the new promise of salvation-blessings through the sure work of the Messiah *replaces* the former promise and is a different promise in terms of its substance. Vos desires to end up in this position because he desires to make the point that the pre-fall covenant had a certain "conditionality" of blessing upon the fulfillment of the law which which is removed in the post-fall covenant. Assumed here is that the change of the promise from conditional to unconditional means that the former promise was vitiated, at least for the direct experience of the believer.<sup>75</sup> The continuity here between the two covenants (promises) is found through the idea of the historical redemptive progress. In order for the higher and heavenly to come, the lower and earthly must fall away.

### ii) Substance Constantly closer to Goal: "Organic" Development

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<sup>75</sup>Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology, 242-245, also, 254-258.

Although this has been treated to some extent above, it is helpful to remember at this point Vos's view of the organic nature of Biblical history and to notice that the problem of substantive discontinuity lurks within the supposedly unified "organism." Vos claims throughout his writings that the substance which is constantly developing in history is "organic." The idea here is that there is a real, nearly living thing which forms the substance of Biblical history; an organism. This organism is continually in a process of flux--it is continually changing. This process of change is directed toward a certain goal, meaning that the substance itself is constantly becoming more and more like the final state toward which it is developing. This is a process of growth, where the substance (supposedly) retains its identity and internal unity as it develops. However, the external and visible forms which are identified with the substance are themselves subject to change and even become replaced as a part of this process of growth. This is what Vos thinks happens to the substance of the Old Covenant with its types when it is replaced by the New Covenant with its "realities." However, even on this view Vos ends up saying that the realities are themselves not earthly realities but rather heavenly realities. This turns the substance of the New Covenant's religious forms into earthly realities, and makes us wonder in what way it is that the New Covenant truly enables us to have a closer apprehension of the realities themselves. It appears, then, that Vos thinks that the substance of the organism can change to such a great extent that what remains of the unity of the organism's various successive forms is simply the developmental process of redemption that is occurring in every form.

This kind of thinking is further evident in Vos's view of the two eschatologies, discussed in detail in the analysis. The first eschatology grows gradually into the second one, but the second one, when it has finally arrived, *replaces* the first one because it is more "heavenly" than the first one.

### iii) Equals Fuller Meaning Method

In regard to the method by which Vos has come to discover the process of God's redemptive activity throughout Scripture, it is apparent that the primary thing which brings the whole progress of history into view is the revelation of the goal toward which history is moving. It is only when the *later* portions of Scripture are seen by the people of God that they can realize the goal toward which all of Biblical history has been progressing, and it is only when the *end* comes into view that the beginning can be correctly understood. The goal by definition brings the progress into view, and specifies what the nature of the progress is. This makes Vos's system dependent on a method which sees a "fuller meaning" in the OT once the NT revelation is allowed to shed its light on the OT.

#### iv) Also Equals Typology

Concomitantly with the Fuller Meaning Method, Vos develops a view of "typology" which evidences this kind of formal unity but substantive discontinuity. The "types" of the Old Covenant followed the pattern of the New, and in this sense there are analogies of the new in the old. However, it is made clear throughout Vos's view of typology that due to the antithesis the "types" do not share the same substance with either the heavenly realities or the New Covenant religious forms.

#### v) Summary

Forgive me if this last section has been pedantic, but it seemed necessary to review and clarify the way in which Vos holds to a view of the development of the covenants which sees only a formal unity which does not fit perfectly with the substance of the covenant, and results in a substantive discontinuity. Hopefully this section will help the reader understand the next section better.

## **2. Critique**

It is the critical thesis of this SIP that Vos's two main emphases were shaped in part by the philosophical context within which he worked. It appears that his emphasis on the historical progress of redemption and revelation is influenced by Historicism, and that his view of the 2 ages is influenced by the modern Nature-Freedom scheme. Both Historicism and the Nature-Freedom scheme must be explained at this point. I do not know how to keep Vos's two emphases separate in this critique, and so I will allow them to run together to some extent. Just as the 2-age construction seems to be found as the flower of the historical progression, the Nature-Freedom scheme appears to be built out of Historicism. I will begin with a discussion of Historicism, move to an analysis of the Nature-Freedom scheme, and then attempt to demonstrate the presence of both in Vos's thought.

#### i) Historicistic

In order to understand Vos's hermeneutics in context, it is necessary to understand the nature of Historicism. It should become apparent in the following that Vos's view of history and of the study of history follows the central structures of the basic ideas of Historicism.

##### **a) General trends in Historicism**

The best understanding of the nature of Historicism to which I have been able to come is summarized by Maurice Mandelbaum in his book *History, Man, & Reason*. Mandelbaum gives a helpful general definition of Historicism. His definition is that "Historicism is the belief that an adequate understanding of the nature of any phenomenon and an adequate assessment of its value are to be gained through considering it in terms of the place which it occupied and the role which it played within a process of development."<sup>76</sup>

Mandelbaum fleshes this definition out throughout his book but the best summary of what he means is given in four points concerning the historicistic construction which is

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<sup>76</sup>Maurice Mandelbaum, *History, Man, & Reason: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Thought*. (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971) 42.

characteristic of Hegel's thought as well as Comte's and Marxism. **First**, there is a *unified historical process* which involves all historical entities in its movement and which must be studied by the historian. **Second**, beneath all historicistic thought "was presupposed an underlying substance or subject *which* changes. Thus, a pattern of change conceived in the terms made familiar by Aristotle and by Hegel is not to be construed simply as a sequence of related forms; these successive forms are regarded as having an inherent connection with one another because each of them is viewed as a phase in a single, unified process, and because each expresses some necessary feature of that process." **Third**, Mandelbaum notes that the substance which changes has an *organic* nature. He states that "both Comte and the Marxists shared Hegel's view that, during any phase of this developmental process, the various attributes of society were organically related to one another, forming a coherent whole." **Fourth**,

"The second basic presupposition connected with treating history in terms consonant with the Aristotelian and the Hegelian views of developmental processes is the fact that the later stages of these processes were considered as being higher realizations, or fulfillments, of what was only implicit in the earlier stages. To be sure, significant differences existed between the Aristotelian doctrine of the relation of act to potency and Hegel's dialectical emphasis on the role of negation in change. Nevertheless in both cases the end was conceived as representing a higher and more perfect level than had been attained in any of the developmental stages preceding it. This did not entail that, according to Hegel (or even according to Aristotelianism), the value of each of the earlier stages was wholly relative to the value of the end. Since the end could not be attained in one leap, but only through transformations from one stage to the next, each stage had its own value. That value, however, could only be adequately appreciated through understanding how each stage in the development was related to the goal-directed process of which it was a part...it is only in terms of the later stages of development, when latent powers have become fully explicit, that we are in a position fully to understand the nature of a developmental process and adequately interpret the earlier stages of that process. This familiar teleological theme is, of course, most manifest in Hegel:

The living substance...is that which is truly subject, or what is the same thing, is truly realized and actual (*wirklich*) solely in the process of positing itself, or in mediating with its own self its transitions from one state or position to the opposite....It is the process of its own becoming, the circle which presupposes its end as its purpose, and has its end for its beginning; it becomes concrete and actual only by being carried out, and by the end it involves.<sup>77,78</sup>

Note here that although Mandelbaum calls this his second point elsewhere he considers it his fourth point.

Mandelbaum's summary of the essential features of Historicism, then, are 1) that it posits a unified historical process, 2) it posits a substance which changes according to the laws of that process, 3) it posits the organic nature of the substance, and 4) it posits that the not only the process as a whole but also each stage of the process and the organic substance which changes within that process all aim toward a goal and are all properly understood only in terms of the way in which they are progressing toward the attainment of that goal. Further, this goal-orientation assumes that the fulfillment of the goal is the best situation possible, and each stage along the way, although of some value in itself is yet not to be considered *perfect*.

I must mention that every description of Historicism I have found has described it in similar terms to the terms used by Vos, but more importantly those descriptions have followed the general outlines which Mandelbaum has laid out. While I do not think I understand Historicism as well as some other people, nevertheless it is undeniable that Mandelbaum's general definition of Historicism fits Vos's system to a 'T,' especially in regard to his focus on the progress of redemptive history toward the goal of heaven, and the fuller-meaning method of interpreting that progress which he roots in Paul's eschatological interpretation of the Old Testament.

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<sup>77</sup>Mandelbaum is quoting here Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Mind* [1807], trans. J. B. Baillie. Introduction by George Lichtheim. (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1967) 80-81.

<sup>78</sup>Mandelbaum, *History, Man, & Reason*, 128-129.

**b) Hegel's clarification (and modification/change) of parts of  
Historicism: Key is *Reinterpretation***

Especially in relation to the Fuller-Meaning method, it is helpful to understand the relationship between Hegel and Historicism. As far as I can tell, it appears that Hegel developed his thought in the context of Historicism, clarified some aspects of the Historicistic model, and also developed his own system which in its idealist aspects were very much different from the rest of Historicism. It appears to me that Hegel's dialectic, in its idealist aspect, is not much of a product of Historicism, and did not have a great deal of influence on Historicism subsequent to Hegel. However, in terms of the way that his philosophy held that the later "fullness" of the progressive development *negates* the earlier stages which are only "partial," it appears to me that Hegel was simply clarifying one aspect which had been implicitly assumed in the Historicist model prior to his arrival on the scene. The key idea to trace in the following discussion is the connection between Hegel's view of history's progress toward a goal and his view of the way the past must be reinterpreted in light of the goal, or at least in light of the present understanding of reality.

1) Hegel's Dialectic

Hegel believed that history should be described as the progressive realization of the Absolute Idea (Freedom) in History (Nature),<sup>79</sup> which was done by means of the progressive movement of the World Spirit. The progress of the World Spirit was evident primarily in the progressive development of philosophy. This progress was the progress of the *revelation* of the Absolute Idea in History.

The way in which the dominant philosophy (as well as the culture within which it is found) changes in history, according to Hegel, is through the continual revision of truth (which

<sup>79</sup>These background terms of "Freedom" and "Nature" are used here to indicate the way in which the Hegelian dialectic is an attempt at solving the Freedom-Nature or Subject-Object dualism set up by the philosophy of Immanuel Kant.

is initially called the "thesis") through the process of the revelation of new, contradictory truth (called the "antithesis"), and the subsequent melding of that new truth with the old truth into a new and better system of truth, thus bringing about a synthetic revision of one's overall system of truth (called the "synthesis"). This is the "Hegelian Dialectic." The older systems of thought were in some ways perfect in themselves, although in comparison to the absolutely *perfect* and final eschatological<sup>80</sup> realization of the Absolute Idea in Nature (i.e., the final consummation or fulfillment) they are considered imperfect. The synthesis is an alloy of the old revelation and the new revelation, and thus Hegel holds that the synthesis grew organically from the old revelation, and includes parts of that old revelation. However, due to the way in which the synthesis has brought together two contradictory (antithetical) systems, the synthesis also contains a new interpretation of reality which allows it to reject the precise interpretation of reality given by the old revelation (philosophy). As such the synthesis is the negation of the earlier philosophy, forming a new antithesis, which necessitates that the process will occur all over again. It should be noted by the reader that it is not quite accurate to think of the thesis-antithesis-synthesis progress in terms of a triangle, where the thesis is on the left-bottom corner of the triangle, the antithesis is on the right-bottom corner of the triangle but at the same level of development, and then the synthesis is at the top of the triangle, indicating that the synthesis is at a higher stage of development. It is more correct<sup>81</sup> when summarizing Hegel's position to describe the thesis-antithesis-synthesis progress in terms of a *relative* relationship. By this I mean that the thesis is one stage of development, the antithesis is a further stage of development, and the synthesis is an even further stage of development. (This is represented by "Perspective 1" in the table below.)

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<sup>80</sup>I use this term here because Löwith used it to describe the *Historicistic* understanding of history. Perhaps his usage is colored by his theological concerns and perspective, but he seemed to describe Hegel as if Hegel had theological concerns and used theological terminology as well. I refer here to Löwith's book, *From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth Century Thought* and his book, *Meaning in History*.

<sup>81</sup>According to some book I have read, the identity of which I cannot remember presently.

However, if we shift our focus a bit to include the philosophical system which follows after the synthesis (as in "Perspective 2" below), and ignore the system which we initially called the thesis, we are just as justified in calling the three successive systems at which we are now looking the "thesis," "antithesis," and "synthesis," even though doing so means that we have shifted all of the names forward one notch along the line of developing systems.

<i>Subsequent systems of thought:</i>	<i>System 1 --&gt;</i>	<i>System 2 --&gt;</i>	<i>System 3 --&gt;</i>	<i>System 4</i>
Perspective 1:	thesis -->	antithesis -->	synthesis	
Perspective 2:		thesis -->	antithesis -->	synthesis

Essentially, if we understand Hegel's dialectic as he presented it we see that the usage of the terms is relative to our particular focus, and an antithesis is simply a system which rejects the system which directly preceded it, and a synthesis is simply a system which, although rejecting the system immediately preceding it, also melds together the *two* most recent systems which preceded it. This is the characteristic historical dialectical development of thought, according to Hegel.

This progressive realization of the Idea (Freedom) in History (Nature) which is accomplished through the work of the Spirit is termed an "organic" development by Hegel, and central to what this means is that both the historical development itself and the system of truth produced in its process are always and only defined by the *end* or *goal* of the development. Thus if, as he himself claimed, Hegel *was* the epitome of all of the development of philosophy, then his system was absolutely "right" and could not be surpassed. However, for every other system previous to Hegel, while those systems were "right" in their own eyes while they lasted, and although their own eyes *were* the only human standard of truth at the point in time in which they existed, nevertheless each one of those systems was eventually modified even down to its

ultimate core or essential "unity" (as I am using that term elsewhere) when the next antithetical/synthetical system of a higher order of development was developed. Thus there is supposedly utter continuity throughout all of the philosophies, cultures, and history, in terms of the organic *process* of development itself, and yet there is also utter discontinuity throughout everything in terms of the *antithetical* nature of the systems of thought which are developed. Each new "epoch" of the process has its own system of thought, and the final "epoch" has (from the viewpoint of Hegel's philosophy) the perfect perspective from which to understand the other epochs. It should be apparent that the tension between on the one hand the "perfection" of Hegel's "final" perspective and on the other hand its organic growth out of the other "not yet" final and therefore imperfect perspectives cannot be resolved. How is it for Hegel that a bad tree bears good fruit? He holds that the final fulfillment is in some way pulling the progress along toward the realization of that same fulfillment,<sup>82</sup> but he also holds that the imperfect organism which is developing somehow develops into perfection. This is not simply a mystery, but rather appears to be a contradiction, because perfection does not come naturally out of imperfection.

**c) Historicism, Fuller-Meaning Reinterpretation, and Vos**

It appears that Hegel was clarifying the nature of the progress-thinking of 19th century Historicism by positing that *both* a synthesis between the earlier and the later *and* an antithesis (negation) between the earlier and the later were central to the development of history toward its eschatological goal. The fuller revelation of the later stages of history serve to cast a reinterpretive light on the earlier stages of history according to the Historicistic view that the past

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<sup>82</sup>Here we see the "backward" direction of being and meaning in history, in Hegel's system. Being and meaning flow backward *from* history's consummation, *through* history present, *to* history past, in that order. As such the present can both understand the past better than those in the past could, and may rightfully critique the past. In regard to progressive sanctification and revelation, Hegel has some insight. But it is wrong to take Hegel's system and then on its basis to believe that God's later revelation critiques His past revelation; such is to make God out to be a liar. The sin of misunderstanding God's past revelation is ours, not God's. It is better rather to hold that in God's administration of the covenant, being and meaning flow *from* the beginning of history *unto* its end, not the other way around.

must be interpreted in light of the perfect future fulfillment. This is very nearly the same thing as the Fuller-Meaning method of interpreting OT passages, and the typological method of understanding OT events, objects, and institutions. It is clear to the present author that any thinking which follows Hegel's dialectical view of the development of systems of thought contains ultimately unresolvable tensions between the beginning of the process and the end of the process, as well as between the concepts of Freedom and Nature. Because it is evident that Vos had a characteristically Historicistic view of the history of redemption, any careful student of Vos must evaluate Vos's thought in order to determine whether there does exist the same unresolvable tension between the past and the future, the relatively "Natural" and the relatively "Free/Ideal," in Vos's system. Vos himself warned against this in his rejection of the evolutionary theory of the development of the true religion.<sup>83</sup> My belief is that Vos did largely escape the influence of evolutionary "theology," but he did not fully escape it insofar as he attempted to make the end clarify and provide the correct interpretation of the beginning of the history of revelation. This appears to evidence some kind of low view of the desirability of retaining in the present age and into the heavenly state the things given by God to man at the beginning of covenantal history, and it seems to evidence a desire even to escape the good things which are part of "earthly" existence. As such we are preparing to examine Vos's 2-Age construction in the context of modern philosophy. The decision concerning whether Vos falls into the unresolvable tensions of historicistic thinking will largely be determinable by an examination of Vos's understanding of the antithesis between the two ages.

ii) Within His Historicistic Perspective, the 2-Age Construction  
Takes On the Character of the Modern Nature-Freedom Scheme

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<sup>83</sup>Vos, *Shorter Writings*, 15-20; *Biblical Theology*, 19-20.

Throughout his writings Vos makes many 2-fold distinctions. They begin to form a pattern to the careful reader, in that they typically place one disjunct "higher" than the other in some way or another. This is due to his all-pervasive attempt to show the significance of the two ages for theology and Biblical interpretation. It appears to the present author that these two-fold distinctions are not only to be understood as rooted in the nature of heaven and earth, but are also rooted in the modern philosophical distinction between the realms of "Nature" and "Freedom." In order to put Vos's system into a historical perspective, it seems helpful to give a brief summary of the history of modern philosophy and of its influence on the history of Biblical hermeneutics.

#### 1) History of Modern Philosophy

In the movement from the Middle Ages to the Modern period, science gained in respectability and power in the mind and life of the western world. Spinoza's rationalism and Locke's empiricism combined to allow the modern man to conduct an inquiry into the *real* historical beginnings of Christianity from the modern mindset which denied the reality of miracles and believed in the autonomous powers of human reason. As a result Scripture was reinterpreted according to the supposedly authoritative standards of science, and orthodoxy was rejected in preference for a history-of-religions view of Christianity, which placed Christianity on the level of all other humanly-created religions. Science, however, became oppressive to the hands that had created it, because it seemed to restrain human freedom and individuality in practical life as well as to make even the *possibility* of true human freedom and the truth of non-scientific knowledge philosophically doubtful. Man was faced with a stifling order from which he desired to escape. Such has been the case for most of the history of modern philosophy.

Immanuel Kant attempted to preserve the realm of human freedom by claiming that reality is divided into two realms--the higher realm being the realm of Freedom, and the lower realm being the realm of Nature. The realm of nature is the realm of cause and effect interactions

and laws, the realm of empirical observation ("sense impressions") and of human reason ("the categories of the understanding"). It is the realm of oppressive order. This is the realm where science examines the world and may be used to control the world. It is characterized by what Kant termed "Phenomena." The realm of freedom, on the other hand, is the realm of religion, where right and wrong are contained in religious morality, and most importantly, where religion and true freedom are out of the reach of science. It is the realm of "things in themselves," also called "Noumena" in distinction from the "Phenomena" of the realm of nature. The things in themselves are reached by the human by *practical* activity which is intimately connected with moral obligation, but cannot be reached by the scientific rational/empirical methods. In Kant's system, Freedom is free from the destructive tendencies of Nature.

Hegel was concerned that this sharp separation between the two realms removed Freedom from being immanent in the Natural world, and thus he argued that Freedom and Nature, perfect freedom and perfect order, gradually merge and mix with one another in the dialectical movement of the World Spirit.

Kierkegaard did not like the rationalistic metaphysics of Hegel because it seemed inhuman to him and as a result Kierkegaard held that true human freedom is gained through human existence which is more than and transcends mere "natural" and scientific existence.

Heidegger continued this existentialist direction and held that true knowledge of and experience of the realm of freedom could not be gained by human activity and especially human "scientific" investigation which turns that realm into an "object," because he did not believe that the realm of freedom contained the kind of order which could be discovered by science. What the human has to do is wait for the realm of Freedom to open itself up to him.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup>The above brief and partial history of modern philosophy is a summary of Krabbendam, *Biblical Hermeneutics*: Section 2: The History of Hermeneutics, 20-21, with a few additions.

The problem throughout the history of modern philosophy has been the interrelationship of the two realms of Freedom and Nature. It is clear to the modern man that he lives in the realm of Nature, but he desires to escape the constraining order characteristic of Nature. Therefore he attempts to build connections with the realm of Freedom, but due to his definition of the realm of Freedom as that which is beyond the destructive reach of Nature, he finds that he cannot reach the realm of Freedom from the realm of Nature, and further he cannot perceive the way in which the realm of Freedom may reach into the realm of Nature, if it ever does. This is the end of the modern rope at which Heidegger struggled. The two realms mutually presuppose the existence of each other (Freedom is freedom from order, Nature is order which does not allow freedom), but they also mutually exclude each other (Natural order cannot enter the realm of Freedom, Freedom cannot enter the realm of the Natural order.)

2) History of Non-Orthodox Hermeneutics from the Reformation to the Present<sup>85</sup>

The history of modern hermeneutics has followed the history of modern philosophy in terms of the way in which it has borrowed the ideas of philosophers who were struggling with the Nature-Freedom construction. In the time of the transition from the Medieval period through the Reformation, revelation was seen to be superior to reason, but not opposed to reason. Rather, it made reason possible. Although this was bound up with the Thomistic schema, nevertheless it was more of a reflection of orthodoxy than rationalism.

The **rationalism** which developed after the Reformation placed reason as the final authority over revelation. It became wedded with the empirical view that all thought had to do with the realm of sense which was decidedly *not* "transcendent" or "supernatural." As such both

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<sup>85</sup>Taken largely from Krabbendam, *Biblical Hermeneutics*: Introduction, 6-9, Section 2: The History of Hermeneutics, 20-27, Section II. Trends in Hermeneutics, 27-33, and "The New Hermeneutic," in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, & the Bible*. Ed. Earl D. Radmacher and Robert D. Preus. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1984, 535-571.

reason and sense were supposedly confined to the realm in which it was supposed God did not live.

This gave rise to the view of **liberalism** that whatever did not square with science, nature, and reason could not be accepted as true revelation from God, emptying Scripture of things "supernatural." Schleiermacher, in dependence upon Kant, was a major hermeneutical theorist along these lines, and (effectively) reduced religious life to the realm of emotion and ethical activity while attempting to explain how it is possible to come into a vital connection with the realm of Freedom. One gets the sense though in his poetically-tinted writings that he didn't really believe that the Biblical God was the one with whom the religious person comes into contact in a religious experience. Rather, it is simply the mystical "infinite" aspect of reality which one discovers in the "finite" world.<sup>86</sup> As a result Schleiermacher led the liberals in their use of science to destroy the church's trust in the historical accuracy of Scripture and to reduce Christianity to the "natural" development of religion. The "natural" view of the essence of Christianity crowded out the supernatural activity of God. It is primarily this school of thought which Vos was intending to combat.

In reaction to this loss of the supernatural and the concomitant encroachment of the orderly, mechanistic world of "nature" upon even what little was left of the realm of human religious freedom, **neo-orthodoxy** attempted to find a better and true way to construct a "storm-free" zone of "freedom" which somehow coexisted with the realm of nature but was eternally protected from the ravages of the constraining order of nature. Thus it attempted to preserve an analogy of the "supernatural" God and His revelation and religion in order to preserve the all-important freedom of man. However, in doing so it did not retain the true content of Scripture but rather replaced it with a continued rejection of its historical accuracy, inerrancy, infallibility,

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<sup>86</sup>Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*. Trans. and ed. Richard Crouter. (Cambridge University Press, 1996) *passim*.

and "reasonable" nature of God's revelation and held to a mystical view of the mode and content of revelation. Barth and Bultmann are the central players here, and they depended upon the philosophy of Heidegger.

The "**New Hermeneutic**" continued this rejection of the orthodox view of Scripture but focused its efforts on struggling with the (never quite admitted) impossibility of the resolution of the subject-object dialectic<sup>87</sup> set up by Kant's attempted synthesis of the realms of nature and freedom. There must be some kind of connection between nature and freedom, the subjective "knower" and the objective "known." "God" must be able to speak to man. However, because of the Kantian dialectic, all divine self-disclosure in the realm of nature--revelation which becomes manifest to the human to observe it as an object--by definition cannot be understood by the logic of the realm of nature (for that logic does not fit the non-objectifiable reality being expressed through the instrument of that logic) and (as with neoorthodoxy) Scripture becomes full of contradictions and mystery. Similarly all divine self-disclosure in the realm of freedom--revelation which is somehow given without being objectified--is by definition only understood by something other than logic, and thus cannot be spoken of in objectifying terms. In terms of an explicitly transcendent(al?) critique, the goal of objective non-objective knowledge by definition is impossible from the outset and remains so to the end. The forced separation of the universal aspect of reality (order--objectifiability) from the particular aspect of the same reality (freedom--non-objectifiability) at the outset precludes any explanation of their substantive harmonious coexistence at the end. But further, their belief that in the midst of this antithesis between

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<sup>87</sup>I am introducing the reader gradually throughout this paper to the idea of a "dialectic." My usage of this term follows the definition given by Krabbendam throughout his writings. The essential nature of a "dialectic" or "the dialectic" is that it is a totality structure (metaphysics) which is primarily composed of two poles which both mutually presuppose one another and mutually exclude each other, and do so simultaneously. This mutual presupposition causes any system which includes the dialectic to seek a synthetic explanation of the two poles, and this mutual exclusion causes any system which includes the dialectic to end in an internal contradiction of the deepest sort. The only place at which I diverge from this usage of the term is in reference to Hegel's Dialectic, which, although it also evidences the nature of "the dialectic" (my usage) it is used in common parlance to refer to something which is larger and different from "the dialectic."

Freedom and Nature there was a mysterious synthesis to be found drove them to continue searching for a way to fit these diametrically opposed realms together.

This brings to light the central dynamic at work in this whole historical process. Essentially, patterns of thought in this history of philosophy have followed the character of what we will term the "dialectic." (The essential nature of a "dialectic" or "the dialectic" is that it is a totality structure (metaphysics) which is primarily composed of two poles which both mutually presuppose one another and mutually exclude each other, and do so simultaneously. This mutual presupposition causes any system which includes the dialectic to seek a synthetic explanation of the two poles, and this mutual exclusion causes any system which includes the dialectic to end in an internal contradiction of the deepest sort.)<sup>88</sup> From the outset the two realms were defined as

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<sup>88</sup>I can imagine a clever reader noting that I only reveal the idea of the dialectic at this late stage in my paper, and thus am asking the reader to go back and reinterpret earlier parts of my paper in light of this later, more clear definition which has been guiding my concern all along. Am I then using the fuller-meaning method I eschew? My, you're clever. : ) Perhaps I'm imposing this definition of dialecticism upon the whole history of philosophy, as well, and committing the kind of anachronism I critique in Vos. Ah, the whole paper crumbles, then! : )

But such is not the case. I introduce the dialectic at this point because now, after Vos's system is analyzed, I can show how Vos's system fits the pattern of the dialectic. The "reconstruction" section of this paper finds God's eternal unity and diversity to be foundational to the covenant within Himself, to His covenantal interrelation with creation, and to His covenant man, as well as to the whole progressively growing structure of the covenant and history, *from the very beginning*. In other words, the reconstruction presents a non-dialectical theology as our proper epistemological starting point, to replace the dialectical elements in Vos's system. So the starting point of the third section is God, in all His triune glory; that starting point likewise was introduced at the beginning of this paper. The reason the reconstruction comes last, after the "Analysis and Critique," is somewhat arbitrary. None of these 3 sections of the paper is really intelligible when held utterly apart from the other; I debated long and hard in my mind which section should come first while planning this paper. I would hold that the paper's end is implicit in its beginning, and its end was even declared from its beginning. Likewise in the history of the covenant, of man, and of philosophy. God revealed Himself non-dialectically at the beginning; man perverted His non-dialectical revelation by conceiving of it in a dialectical fashion, specifically in Adam and Eve's rebellion (I've detailed this some at [www.alwaysreformed.com/publicdocs/papers](http://www.alwaysreformed.com/publicdocs/papers).) It is this (always partial) rebellion against and perversion of God's revelation that is at the root of the history of dialectical philosophy.

So, I would hold that our epistemological task is not first to retrospectively reinterpret God's originally necessary, sufficient, authoritative, and clear revelation, as if its original revelation or illumination was in error, but rather, to use Van Til's term, our task is to "implicate" ourselves progressively more and more into the structure of God's revelation. Any (innocent) ignorance or (culpable) errors are ours, and are not inherent in God's revelation. We must divest ourselves of our sinful rebellions against that revelation (of our false interpretations) as God's originally perfect teaching subsequently necessitates that we be rebuked by that same revelation (cf. the order of teaching-then-rebuking in 2 Tim. 3:16). Our original epistemological state--our starting point--in the broad scope of the history of revelation, is not the estate of the fall, but the estate of creation in original righteousness; that original perfection is the created foundation for our thinking. Because of this, while there is a sense in which in the estate of the fall redemption takes a leading function (over the pre-fall kind of epistemological revelation/reception) as the restoration to our original perfection of knowledge, nevertheless, it is the (extension of that originally-created) revelation and reception of that knowledge which is the task necessitating redemption.

on the one hand mutually presupposing the existence of the other and on the other hand mutually excluding any harmonious interaction with the other. The mutual presupposition drove them to seek an explanation of the connection between Nature and Freedom. The belief in the mutual exclusion prevented the theorists from succeeding. In fact, only the presupposition of harmony between the two aspects of reality will allow an "explanation" of it in terms of that presupposition. This makes it evident that the theorists' lack of presupposition of the truth is due to a lack of *belief* in the truth. The people involved did not believe in the harmonious coexistence of freedom and natural order either with their minds or with the fullness of their hearts, due to their sinful rebellion against God and lack of worshipful awe at the fullness of His glory; for He must be worshipped as the God who is both free and ordered in His composition. Their rebellion blinded them to the glory of God and drove their selfish grasping for "small" salvations (or small gods!--Rom. 1:18-32) in emphasizing only one aspect of reality (e.g., rationalism) or their "violent" attempts to tear reality apart into wrongly-defined halves and then to fit it back together again by force (the method of existentialism). Only the worship of God in the sumtotal of His attributes--in all His glory--revealed to us "ever since the creation of the world,"<sup>89</sup> can by His grace salvage such a dialectical and therefore problematic view of creation

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More simply put, I think the reader should have already agreed with my conclusions before I state them in this paper. If they disagree, it's their fault! : ) So long as I've been faithful to God's original revelation. If I haven't, then that is precisely the point on which I should be critiqued. (According to the hermeneutics I'm advocating in this paper.) So if I'm judged by the standard of whether or not I've remained faithful to the hermeneutical principles God has revealed and employed from the beginning of revelation until now, even if I've been unfaithful at points here, I've still won the argument. The critic hasn't rejected my method, but attempts to use it against me. It would appear that if someone employs a method which finds its *only* standard of interpretation *exclusively* in the final goal of history, they should not be unhappy with me for continually disagreeing with them; how could I have known the final conclusion to which I should come until that conclusion is presented to me? They have offered me no prior foundation on the basis of which I should come to their conclusion. Their conclusion has no basis; it only has a goal. I cannot help but think to myself--in the past God has described such conclusions as the vain imaginations of men. Are they not still this in the present?

It is far better, and more soundly biblical, to treat the beginning of history as the foundation, the end as the goal, and both as in perfect harmony with each other, rather than construing them in dialectical tension or opposition with each other. I believe this is the more biblical method. And the method more faithful to God.

<sup>89</sup>"For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse." (Rom. 1:20)

and Biblical revelation. Only when both God's creation and Scriptural revelation are seen as disclosures of His glorious nature toward the blessing of mankind in the covenant relationship will such systematic downfalls be escaped.

### 3) Vos's Distinctions Examined

In the context of this summary of the history of philosophy's struggle with the Nature-Freedom dialectic, Vos's many two-fold distinctions show the influence of this modern philosophical construction. Vos explicitly intends to demonstrate the way in which the two realms of Heaven and Earth (or fairly interchangeably, the two ages) structure the eschatological teaching of both the OT and the NT, but he also desires to show their influence and presupposition throughout the aspects of OT and NT teaching which are not usually considered eschatological. As a result he allows many of his two-fold distinctions to be colored by his understanding of the antithesis between the heavenly realm and the earthly realm. Let us examine many of his distinctions, though certainly not all, in order to be aware of the ways in which his view of the 2 ages is influenced by the Nature-Freedom construction.

#### *(i) Partial List for the Ambitious Reader*

For those of you who would like to do more research into this aspect of Vos's thought, and for those of you who desire to see the prevalence of Vos's two-fold distinctions, I offer the following list of significant two-fold distinctions from Vos's writings. It is arranged according to the parallel between the 2-age construction and the Freedom-Nature construction. Note that in each individual distinction (when read in context) it is clear that the disjunct found to the left is considered higher or better by Vos, and note that (when compared with each other) the distinctions fall into a general pattern of association with the two sides of the Heavenly-Earthly distinction. The critique centers on the way that, once this parallel between the distinctions is recognized, it becomes clear that this parallel and the assumed antithesis between Heaven and

Earth causes Vos to reject some parts of what he considers to be the "earthly" which should not properly be rejected according to a Biblical view of reality. The precise character of this rejection quite often follows the character of the dialectical opposition between Freedom and Nature which also became apparent in the history of philosophy and hermeneutics.

### List of Two-Fold Distinctions in Vos's Writings

Heavenly / Freedom	Earthly / Nature	(Page)	Heavenly / Freedom	Earthly / Nature	(Page)
<i>Biblical Theology</i>					
Spiritual (religious)	Science	11	Spiritual	Naturalistic	305
-personal, passive, hidden	-impersonal, active, plain		New Covenant	Old Covenant	322
Passive, receptive attitude		12	-eternal	-temporary, abrogated	
God's order of presentation	Scientific approach of reception	13	Spirit	Letter	323
Revelation: Divine activity	Product: Scripture	13	-Righteousness	-Condemnation	
Fact	Abstract	14	-Paul	-Moses	
Semitic -practical knowledge	Hellenic -intellectual knowledge	17	Speech & vision of God	Reading law	
(Non-objectified)	Objectified	30	Christ = fact	Apostles = interpretation	325
Grace	Justice	30	Heaven	Earth	328
Symbolical	Words	37	-Divine	-Human	
Simple <i>practical</i> purpose, <i>unreasoned</i> will of God	Theology, metaphysics (= science)	42	-Pre-existent Messiah	-Human nature	
Spirit--immortal	Flesh--mortal	50	-Super historical	-Stream of history	
Progress of redemption	Development of natural life	62-63	-Vertical (Transcendental)	-Horizontal (Successive)	
Hebrew	Greek	73	Spiritual (redemptive)	Natural	380

<b>Heavenly / Freedom</b>	<b>Earthly / Nature</b>	(Page)	<b>Heavenly / Freedom</b>	<b>Earthly / Nature</b>	(Page)
Concrete	Abstract	73	-Order of redemption	-This world	
Sacred, private, night	Experiences & scenes of the day	82	-Heaven	-Earth	
Sight	Hearing	83	-Not this world	-The world	
Permanent	Temporal	90	-Heavenly things	-Earthly things	
Universalistic	Particularistic	90	-Things above	-Things beneath	
Spiritual	Law/culture	92	Grace	Law	402
Supernatural	Natural	95	Shemitic	Hellenic	418
Grace	Nature	96	NT church	OT church	427
Infinite	Utterly inadequate	97	-Kingdom of God	-Gates of Hades	
Spiritual	Earthly, typical	101	-Life	-Death	
Historical text (deed)	Prophetic text (word)	251			
Miracles (deed), typical, eschatological, supernatural, future		251			
Ethical laws	Physical laws	285			
Principles of spiritual significance	Forms	286			
Supernatural element	Paganistic tendencies	304			
Ethical	Subethical	305			
<b><i>The Pauline Eschatology</i></b>					
2nd Adam	1st Adam	<i>11, 12</i>	Eternity	Temporal	13
-Antetype	-Type		Redemptive Heavens and Earth	Cosmical Heavens and Earth	40
-Age to come	-This world/age				
<b><i>Shorter Writings</i></b>					
God active (revelation)	Man active (science)	7	-Eternal	-Probationary	
Promise	Law	244	Mosaic Law	Law in Covenant of Works	255

Heavenly / Freedom	Earthly / Nature	(Page)	Heavenly / Freedom	Earthly / Nature	(Page)
-Covenant	-Nature	244, 255	-Fixity of Covenant of Grace: Unalterable, eternal	-Fixity of Covenant of Works: Temporal, uncertain covenant	
-Covenant of Grace	-Covenant of Works				
<b><i>Grace and Glory</i></b>					
Eternal--freed to	Change--law of	118			

(ii) *Discussion of Distinctions*

It must be remembered that Vos used these distinctions in order to defend an orthodox understanding of God, Scripture, and Christianity, in the face of liberal views which were much worse than any smaller errors into which Vos fell. In the following we will examine a large number of Vos's distinctions and notice the ways in which they appear to be influenced by the Nature-Freedom construction.

On p. 11 of *Biblical Theology* Vos describes the method of scientific research as the study of impersonal objects through the active investigation of man. Over against this he argues that the study of God, even if it is "scientific," is nevertheless a *spiritual* and *religious* activity, which means that one is dealing with a personal Being (God) who is hidden from view (unlike the world which Science investigates), and one must depend *passively* on God's own self-disclosing activity rather than actively attempt to capture Him through scientific methods in order to study Him. God must remain free of Nature's scientific methodology, and cannot be manipulated by the creature. The influence of Kant and even perhaps Schleiermacher on the general construction is undeniable here, even though it is also clear that within this general structure Vos attempts to

defend the Reformed understanding of the necessity of Divine objective revelation. Kant held that Nature was the realm of science, and Schleiermacher emphasized that true religion could only come into a person who had a "passive, receptive attitude"<sup>90</sup> toward the realm of Freedom. In his elevation of God's revelation, Vos also elevated the necessity of passivity and receptivity over against activity, when he could have elevated other concepts, such as the necessity of *faith* in the revelation of God. Faith, although being a reception of the promise, also includes the aspect of *active* appropriation of the promise.

The distinction between the scientific approach to understanding reality as different from and "lower" or less good than the other "receptive" approach is parallel to Vos's description of the respective directions of theological investigation and Divine revelation, on p. 13. While man must approach revelation through a process of investigation which comes closer and closer to God's initial revelatory activity and finally views that activity itself, God comes from the opposite direction, by first revealing Himself in time and space, and proceeding to solidify and preserve that revelation and eventually oversee and enable the human investigation of that revelation in Scripture. God's revelatory activity is seen to be central and higher than man's investigative activity, but notice further that God's self disclosure "in time and space" appears also to be more central and higher than the "final product" which is Scripture. It appears most important to Vos that when one attempts to understand Scripture he must study the revelation which occurred *in history* and *prior* to the production of Scripture. This is the historicist in Vos desiring to trace the movement and growth of the development of the organism of redemption/revelation, but it is also a somewhat Kantian understanding of the distinction between scientific investigation and divine revelation.

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<sup>90</sup>These terms appear on p. 12.

On p. 14 Vos uses the phrase "in the abstract" to describe the human construction which would not fit the divine activity, and describes the divine activity as a "matter of fact" which is more correct than the human construction. Note that the human construction is criticized according to its *rational* aspect--it is an abstraction, rather than rebellion, mistake, imperfect observation, etc. The historical "event" is closer to the realm and characteristics of freedom from nature.

Similarly, on p. 17 the nature of "Hellenic" (Greek) knowledge is described as purely intellectual contemplation, while the nature of "Semitic" (Hebrew) knowledge is described as practical, living, experienced knowledge. This construction contains echoes of the Kantian distinction between "practical" knowledge of the realm of Freedom and knowledge of the realm of Nature according to the purely *formal* and *rational* "categories of the understanding."

On p. 20 Vos states that in contrast to Kantian philosophy Biblical Theology must cling to the infallible, faultless character of revelation, because if Biblical Theology does not do this its only option appears to be the admission that the liberals are right in their claim that His revelation is "tied up in the limitations and relativities of the world, the medium of expression obstructing His intercourse with the world." It appears that Vos grants that a *Kantian* understanding of (religion and) revelation rather than some *other* kind of view of revelation is the result if Biblical Theology ceases to maintain the perfect freedom of God from the constraints of nature. As such Vos still seems to be working within the Kantian categories, even though he rejects the liberal history-of-religions understanding of Christianity.

Contra a Kantian view which holds that all supposedly "divine" revelation is given through *acts* rather than words, and that the true thought-content of Scripture is due to merely human (fallible) reflection upon those acts, Vos maintains that while acts may be central to revelation God also gives interpretive *words* as a further form of revelation (pp. 21-22).

However, this does not seem fully to escape ascribing a *revelatory* quality to acts. On p. 23, for instance, Vos even implies that theology can be gained from General Revelation, and that it is gained in some sense apart from the usual dependence of theology on Scripture: "...aside from General Revelation, all Theology is supposed to rest on the bible."

On p. 24 note that (as is true in many places in his writings) even though Vos sees an intimate relationship between revelation (word) and redemption (deed), he does not tie them together in the concept of the covenant, but rather sees the *deed* aspect of the covenant as more foundational and central to its nature and to our focus upon it. This appears to be the case due to his historicistic emphasis on events as central to the organism of history and his belief that (redemptive) events are closer in their being and nature to the heavenly realm than (redemptive) words are.

On p. 28 Vos holds that "natural" or "General" Revelation is given to all men but Special Revelation must be supernaturally (freely) added by God on top of General Revelation. General Revelation consists of the "innate" knowledge (analogy to the categories of the understanding) which is filled out by "the discovery of God in nature" (analogy to reception of sense impressions.) On p. 29 Vos affirms the propriety of developing a "Natural Theology" which depends on the natural revelation of God, though he qualifies it with the necessity of God's gracious superintendence of the process of that knowledge acquisition:

"Redemption in a supernatural way restores to fallen man also the normalcy and efficiency of his cognition of God in the sphere of nature. How true this is, may be seen from the fact that the best system of Theism, i. e. Natural Theology, has not been produced from the sphere of heathenism, however splendidly endowed in the cultivation of philosophy, but from Christian sources. When we produce a system of natural knowledge of God, and in doing so profess to rely exclusively on the resources of reason, this is, of course, formally correct, but it remains an open question, whether we should have been able to produce such a thing with the

degree of excellence we succeed in imparting to it, had not our minds in the natural exercise of their faculties stood under the correcting influence of redemptive grace.

The most important function of Special Revelation, however, under the regime of sin, does not lie in the correction and renewal of the faculty of perception of natural verities; it consists in the introduction of an altogether new world of truth, that relating to the redemption of man."<sup>91</sup>

From this quote it is ultimately undeniable that there is an intimate harmony and theoretical identity between Dooyeweerdianism and Vos's strain of the Redemptive-Historical method, in that the "redemptive" teaching of Scripture does not teach about the world of science and nature, but rather about the *different* world of "redemption." As such it is not a part of the Natural horizon of human experience and reasoning, but rather it breaks in from above--from the realm of redemptive realities.<sup>92</sup> Further, what is seen to teach us about the realm of Nature is not Scripture, but rather natural reason. Scripture may exert "the correcting influence of redemptive grace," but it appears that for Vos Scripture's focus remains on the revelation of realities which are not of the realm of nature.

On page 30 he says concerning the *post-fall* redemptive self-disclosure of God: "Many new things belong to this, but they can all be subsumed under the categories of justice and grace as the two poles around which henceforth the redeeming self-disclosure of God revolves." This is a recognition of the two primary components of the covenant, but it also describes those two aspects as *poles*. If one remembers the analysis of Vos's system, I referred to the historical progression as the one "pole" of Vos's thought, and the antithesis as the other "pole" of Vos's thought. Here we begin to see more clearly that for Vos the historical progression is associated with the realm of Nature, or in "this age," and the antithesis is associated with the realm of

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<sup>91</sup>Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 29-30.

<sup>92</sup>Yes, here I am alluding to neo-Kantianism in Dooyeweerd, and to the correlative problematic affinities between Dooyeweerd and Barth. I did not intend this originally, but Kline's intrusion ethics does not sound so different on the face of it from Barth's "senkrecht von oben" ("dropped straight from above"), precisely because it assumes there is an antithesis between the transcendent and immanent realms.

Freedom, or in "the age to come." In some ways Vos's thought evidences a desire to escape from the Natural constraints of "law" or "justice" through the Freedom which comes by "grace." This is more apparent in Vos's definition of the nature of the covenant, where its primary component is the *promise* and the law is less than a primary component. The James of Scripture, however, believes in a "law of perfect freedom." Scripture teaches that true freedom is according to the law, not an escape from the law.

Further, in the next sentence, he states that "It should be emphasized, however, that in this world of redemption the substance of things is absolutely new. It is inaccessible to the natural mind as such." This emphasizes the mutual exclusion between the two realms. Further, a mutual presupposition exists as well: "To be sure, God does not create the world of redemption without regard to the antecedent world of nature, nor does He begin His redemptive revelation *de novo*, as though nothing had preceded. The knowledge from nature, even though corrupted, is presupposed." Note, however, that the knowledge from nature is not *included* in the knowledge from redemptive revelation. The antithesis must be maintained. Continuing on to p. 31, Vos states "Only, this does not involve that there is a natural transition from the state of nature to the state of redemption. Nature cannot unlock the door of redemption."

On p. 37 he states that preredemptive special revelation was "exceedingly primitive. It is largely symbolical, that is, not expressed in words so much as in tokens." Here "was the most direct spiritual fellowship; the stream of revelation flowed uninterruptedly, and there was no need of storing up the waters in any reservoir wherefrom to draw subsequently."<sup>93</sup> Here *words* are less "spiritual" than symbolical *deeds*, evidencing the historicistic emphasis on the centrality of *events* rather than *texts*.

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<sup>93</sup>Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 30.

On p. 42 Vos seems to indicate that there is a distinction between the nature of the *practical* which is not "reasoned" and the *scientific* or theoretical which is reasoned. He lifts up the practical as better for the purposes of the preredemptive special revelation. This seems to be a reflection of the Kantian dualism.

On p. 50 Vos associates the regenerate spirit with immortality and the physical flesh with mortality, explaining how man is both mortal and immortal. This is orthodox, of course, but through its connection to eschatology it is placed in parallel with the antithesis between the heavenly and the earthly in such a way that one could get the impression that mortality is essential to *all* flesh, which is not true of the resurrected bodies of Christ in the present and all believers at the final resurrection.

On pp. 62 and 63 Vos describes the "proximate" focus of the Noachian revelation to be "the development of natural life" rather than the subject which is more central to Scripture, "the prosecution of redemption." It appears that Vos must separate parts of the Noahic covenant out as not central to the flow of revelation because they are "natural" rather than "redemptive." It is preferable to understand that all of the "natural" world (if we must use that term), or all of creation, is involved in the covenant relationship between God and man, and that while redemption is the means of re-entry into that covenant relationship for fallen man, the presentation of the redemptive process of that covenant in no way prevents or limits Scripture from presenting the parts of that covenant which are gained through redemption but which are not technically the same thing as redemption. The *covenant* takes center stage in Scripture, not redemption.

On p. 68, it appears that due to the organic unity of the process of redemption in history, "The supernatural process of redemption remains in contact with the natural development of the race." Thus the historical progress drives toward the synthetical understanding of the two realms.

On p. 73 Vos argues that the Shemites were superior to other groups of people for the task of bearing redemption and revelation (true religion). Vos distinguishes a relatively natural feature of the Shemites--their psychology--from a relatively "free" or heavenly feature of the Shemites--their religious character. The psychological mentality of the Shemites is characterized by Vos as *passive* and *receptive*, as opposed to *active* or *productive*. These terms make the description of the Hebrew mind sound a great deal like Schleiermacher's view of "true religion." The religious character of the Hebrews is described by Vos on pp. 74-75 as *submissive* toward God (or toward a god), involved a *personal* relationship with the god, was *practical*, involved a "careful distinction...between God and nature," where it was clear that "Where...the transcendent power and majesty of the deity is felt, the temptation is much lessened to confound God with the world or draw Him down into the realm of nature or matter." Not simply a distinction but further an *opposition* of some kind between the realms of Freedom and Nature is maintained by these distinctions.

On p. 80 Vos holds that the emphasis of Scripture on redemptive *facts* makes the reduction of Biblical characters to *examples* in connection with a lack of concern for the historical accuracy of the account totally improper. Scripture is not a compilation of *myths*, but a description of "*real actors* in the *drama of redemption*." While the historicity of the facts referred to in Scripture must be staunchly defended, we must hold that the nature of Scripture as the proclamation of the covenant can include the use of past characters as examples of the principles which are true of the administration and reception of the covenant. While "the covenant in its historically progressive presentation to man" is a more full summary of the focus of Scripture than "examples of holy living," nevertheless the proper understanding of the covenant must include an understanding of the principles of its administration and reception by people of the past, and in this manner the Scriptural presentation of the covenant uses the actors

of the drama of redemption as examples. Vos's concern for orthodoxy in terms of the historical factuality of Christianity, worked out within the context of an historicistic emphasis on the centrality of the deed-aspect of the covenant and the secondary nature of the word-aspect of the covenant, worked out further within the Kantian elevation of "things-in-themselves" (Noumena--Freedom) as in some ways more real than their rational representations (Phenomena--Nature), seems to have been involved in this repudiation of the liberal emasculation of Scripture's characters to mere "examples."

On pp. 82-83, Vos explains the change in the mode of revelation during the Patriarchal period as follows: "On the whole we may say that revelation, while increasing in frequency, at the same time becomes more restricted and guarded in its mode of communication. The sacredness and privacy of the supernatural begin to make themselves felt." While I fully agree that God and creation are distinct from one another and are separate substances, not sharing any content with each other, nevertheless I get the feeling that Vos interprets this change in the mode of revelation in light of and as an expression of the utter antithesis between the realms of Heaven and Earth. This is what for him explains God's choice of significantly special locations in which to appear, God's preference of nighttime theophanies to daytime theophanies, and God's preference of visions to more "natural" modes of appearing.

On pp. 92-93 Vos does something which significantly ties together his view of progress and of the two realms. He says: "The history of the patriarchs is more universalistic than that of the Mosaic period. When the people were organized on a national basis and hedged off from other nations by the strict, seclusive rules of the law, the universalistic design was forced somewhat into the background....And positively also the principles on which God dealt with the patriarchs were of a highly spiritual nature, such as would make them universally applicable." Thus Vos holds that "The revealed religion of the O. T. in this respect resembles a tree whose

root system and whose crown spread out widely, while the trunk of the tree confines the sap for a certain distance within a narrow channel. The patriarchal period corresponds to the root growth; the freely expanding crown to the revelation of the new Testament; and the relatively constricted form of the trunk to the period from Moses to Christ."

Note here that he considers the universalistic aspect of religion to be the way in which it is not *restricted*. Notice the terms "hedged off," "strict," "seclusive," and "forced;" these are terms of conflict. As such the centrality of the progress of redemptive history toward *freedom* comes into the picture. The restriction is accomplished by means of the law, in order to lead to Christ. By using the term "spiritual" to refer to this universalistic aspect, it appears that he desires to construe it in distinction from the way in which the Mosaic law was relatively "natural" or earthly. Notice that the involvement of earthly politics in the OT religion keeps it from being as free from nature as it could be. Further, notice that the universalistic aspect of religion in the OT is not complete in itself but must be eventually fulfilled in the NT. The general progress of redemption, in Vos's mind, is from the relatively "natural" to the relatively "free." However, this restriction of its progress in the center seems to be a retrogression which is difficult to explain.

Over against this view of the nature of God's *progressive(?)* redemptive activity, we must maintain that the introduction of the law should not be seen primarily as a *limitation* or narrowing of the progress of redemption but rather an expansion of the covenant. Both the promises and laws of the Mosaic Covenant were better than what had gone before. As O. Palmer Robertson argues, it was better than the earlier covenants in that it made Israel into a nation (which was one of the promised *blessings* of the Abrahamic Covenant!) and was a more comprehensive revelation of God and His covenant laws and promises as they are woven throughout all of life.<sup>94</sup> It could be further argued that although the covenant's scope was

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<sup>94</sup>O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*. (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980) 186-188.

restricted in that it was offered to fewer *lines* of descendants from Abraham, nevertheless it is better to understand that the covenant's scope was broadened in that it covered a larger number of total *people* and through the nation of Israel gained a solid root in a culture and came into contact with the other cultures or "people groups" on the border of Israel. As such, the covenant and its community was truly expanding. Note well that this understanding escapes the influence of the freedom-nature scheme, in that it does not construe the law as if it militates against either freedom, the promise, blessing, or redemption. In the Scriptural presentation, no dialectical relationship exists between the beginning and end, progress and eternity.

On p. 94 Vos considers some aspects of redemption to be "contrary to nature." On p. 96 he says that God's supernatural procedure "overpowers nature in the service of His grace." But from a covenantal view of Scripture we ought to understand that God is never in conflict with creation except when sin comes into the picture. Even then He sovereignly directs what occurs. The essential nature of the conflict is between good and evil, rather than between the creation and the Creator. It appears that by placing many diverse distinctions into the Freedom-Nature construction Vos ends up allowing the conflict between good and evil, the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness, to bleed over into the distinction between many other things which are not truly opposed to each other in their essence.

On p. 97 Vos almost sounds like Schleiermacher or even the neo-orthodox view when he says "Faith and a desire for more faith frequently go hand in hand. The reason is that through faith we lay hold upon God, and in grasping the infinite object, the utter inadequacy of each single act of appropriation immediately reveals itself in the very act." The reason he sounds odd here is that he construes a tension and conflict between the (scientific/natural) human action of grasping God by faith and the (free) divine action of granting faith to man. The orthodox view sees a perfect identity of the human action and the divine gift, where the distinction between the

two perspectives (divine and human) on faith does not imply that there is a contradiction between those perspectives or a lack of perfect identity between the nature of the divine gift (perfectly adequate) and the nature of the human action (inadequate, in Vos's presentation). Are we "grasping the infinite object," are we appropriating, or are we not? While we may not know exhaustively, may we yet know truly? It is not wise to say that belief is unbelief; they are distinct. The gift, which is from God--originating within God Himself--is faith. The gift is the human action. Thus it is impossible to deny a fundamental accord between the Giver and the gift, the gift and its implementation by reception.

On pp. 144-145 Vos describes two perspectives on the Mosaic law. Prospectively from the OT perspective the law proclaims the gospel and thus supports the gospel. Retrospectively from the NT perspective the gospel replaces the law and thus negates its continued active function in the NT period. The form of religion in the NT period is *different* from the form of OT religion. There was a lack of "freedom" under the "constraint" of the OT law, and only the NT "rise[s] superior to [this] legal environment" in that it "brought...full liberty" from the OT law.

Here it becomes apparent that the Freedom-Nature construction is involved in the way Vos's view of the covenant is one of formal continuity and substantively different chunks. The relationship between the OT and NT, the types and their fulfillments, and the Mosaic law and the NT fulfillment all follow the distinction between the relatively "natural" and the relatively "free." In order for the heavenly realities to develop (synthetically--mutual presupposition) from the earthly realities, freedom must be gained (antithetically--mutual exclusion) from the earthly realities. As a result, general principles of continuity are proclaimed, but when the substance of OT religion is compared to the substance of NT religion, it is clear that the substance is different, that the one substance replaces the other, and even that it is in some kind of antithetical conflict

with the other. The principle of conflict<sup>95</sup> empties the principle of continuity<sup>96</sup> of content, making it all but a farce. This dialectical simultaneous mutual presupposition and mutual exclusion is a systematic impossibility. Vos's two main emphases are incompatible with one another, because he has unwittingly inducted Kant's dialectic into his theology.

If any doubt remains that Kant's philosophy has had its influence on Vos's systematic hermeneutical distinction between the Heavenly and the Earthly, or that my analysis and critique are correct, let me show the reader that Vos refers directly to Hegel, to Historicism, and even to Kant's terminology when he warns us away from following after the pattern of liberal Biblical Theology. Vos knew liberal Biblical Theology was Kantian; he was trying to escape from Kant's influence by being more biblical, and was largely successful. However, he worked in the thought-world of the liberal biblical scholarship of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries, whose terminology and patterns of thought were thoroughly Historicistic and Kantian.

On pp. 19-20 of *Biblical Theology* Vos says,

Ever since its birth in this rationalistic environment Biblical Theology has been strongly affected, not only in the way in which philosophical currents have touched Theology in general, but in a special manner to which its nature especially lays it open. This is shown in the extent to which, at the present time the treatment of Biblical Theology is influenced by the philosophy of evolution. This influence is discernible in two directions. In the first place, the qualitative advancement found by the hypothesis of evolution in the world-process is extended to the emergence of religious truth. It becomes an advance, not only from the lower to the higher, but from the barbarous and primitive to the refined and civilized, from the false to the true, from the evil to the good. Religion, it is held, began with animism; next came polytheism, then monolatry, then monotheism. Such a view, of course, excludes revelation in every legitimate sense of the word. Making all things relative, it leaves no room for the absoluteness of the divine factor. In the second place, the philosophy of evolution belongs to the family of positivism. It teaches that nothing can be known

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<sup>95</sup>Mutual exclusion between the two ages - Vos's second main emphasis.

<sup>96</sup>Mutual presupposition between earlier and later - Vos's first main emphasis.

but phenomena, only the impressionistic side of the world, not the interior objective reality, the so-called "things in themselves." Such things as God, the soul, immortality, a future life, etc., cannot enter into human knowledge, which in fact is no knowledge in the old solid sense. Consequently all these objective verities come to be regarded as lying beyond the province of Theology. If the name "Theology" is still retained, it is as a misnomer for a classification and discussion of religious phenomena. The question is no longer as to what is true, but simply as to what has been believed and practised in the past. Alongside of this general camouflage of the science of religion under the name of Theology, and inseparable from it, runs the turning inside out of Biblical Theology in particular. This becomes the phenomenology of the religion recorded in the literature of the Bible.

Vos distinguishes "two directions" in which Biblical Theology is influenced by the philosophy of evolution." These two directions are the two halves of my analysis, and of my critique. This indicates that Vos agrees with the essentials of my analysis. The first area of influence is in a "qualitative advancement....not only from the lower to the higher, but from the barbarous and primitive to the refined and civilized, from the false to the true, from the evil to the good." He says this advancement is found by "the hypothesis of evolution in the world-process...in the emergence of religious truth." This "evolutionary" model of the nature of history is at the core of 19<sup>th</sup> Century German Historicism, as has already been demonstrated. Hegel, who clarified Historicism's central concerns and further promoted its development as a system of thought, more than anyone is known as the originator of the language of "the world-process." Has liberal BT not been influenced by Hegelianism? Vos here says that it has, and that we must flee from this influence. The underlying, driving, motivating concern of both Hegel and Historicism was Kant's Freedom-Nature dualism, Kant's dialectic between the Noumenal and Phenomenal realms. So secondly, Vos warns us against this more fundamental and general problem throughout liberal Biblical Theology: "In the second place, the philosophy of evolution

belongs to the family of positivism. It teaches that nothing can be known but phenomena, only the impressionistic side of the world, not the interior objective reality, the so-called "things in themselves." Such things as God, the soul, immortality, a future life, etc., cannot enter into human knowledge, which in fact is no knowledge in the old solid sense." Kantianism had developed in the history of religions school into a "positivism," which believed that only what could be discerned and justified on the basis of rational/empirical investigation--the "phenomena" in Kant's Phenomenal realm--could be believed in as true. All things in Kant's Noumenal realm--which Kant lists as "God," the human "soul," and "things-in-themselves," cannot be known by the mind of man, so positivistic science believed, following Kant. As such scientific investigation could only be a study of the "phenomena," and hence was called "phenomenology" by the later Kantians (neo-Kantians; Husserl, Heidegger, etc.) Vos finds the first thread in liberal Biblical Theology wanting because it allows later religion to condemn earlier religion, and thereby denies the unchanging character of God, and of His revelation. The earlier and lower is excluded by the later and higher. Does this not happen in Vos's own system? Vos finds the second thread in liberal Biblical Theology wanting because its transcendent, archetypical, "objective verities" cannot be known by man, but only the immanent ectypical "phenomena" may be known. The lower realm and the upper realm are utterly antithetical to each other. Does not Vos end in precisely the same construction? He says: "In distinction from the O.T. point of view the structure of Paul's eschatology appears antithetical....Through a conceptual retroversion the end will be seen to give birth to the beginning in the emergence of truth."<sup>97</sup>

I believe Vos himself would be *strongly* sympathetic to my critique, because it is his own critique of liberal Biblical Theology. In this I know that his concerns and mine are

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<sup>97</sup>Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology*, 10-11. Cf. pp. 60-61.

fundamentally the same; we are not enemies, but friends. Let us all have the humility to let our followers correct our errors, and yet still profit greatly from the advances in faithfulness the Lord has enabled us to make. Let us more and more glorify Him, and not enshrine our fallible theology.

I regret that I do not have time to deal more carefully with some other places where the Freedom-Nature construction appears in Vos's thought, as well as to more carefully refine the discussion of the places which I *was* able to address. However, I expect that the reader gets the idea at this point and can investigate the problem on his own, with the help perhaps of the initial list which I offered at the beginning of this section.

### **3. Summary**

In order to explain the central problem of Vos's system a bit more clearly, I must say that this imperfect fit between the supposed continuity and the supposed discontinuity, between progress and the 2 ages, between unity and diversity, between "identity and flux," heaven and earth, is clearly rooted in Vos's assumption that the historicistic method of understanding history is correct. Historicism drives Vos to look at the "facts" or "events" of history, and this makes him focus on the relatively physical and particular aspects of the covenant. As a result, he misses the central and unifying structures of the covenant which provide the true substance and structure of Biblical religion. Historicism also drives Vos to search for a unity between these events in terms of its *progress toward a goal*. This allows him to interpret all of the progress of Biblical history in light of the goal which is supposedly perfectly revealed at the close of Scripture. The 2-age construction in its dialectical antithesis provides the goal, which is heaven and its heavenly realities. Heaven transcends and negates the earthly realities, and thus *they cannot be allowed to continue from the OT to the NT, from the one age to the next, from the earlier "form" to the later "form" of religion*. In light of this apparent view of the earlier as something which must be

*escaped*, it appears that Vos did not fully escape the influence of evolutionary philosophy. The critical thesis of this project has, then, been established. 19th Century Historicism is the beginning and basic structure of the central problem in Vos's thought, and the modern Freedom-Nature dialectic is the final thorny thistle which grows malignantly out of its soil.

As something of an anticlimactical comment (sorry about that--if it bothers you, you can always read the previous paragraph again ☺ ), the reader may be interested in discovering how it is that Vos picked up the problematic aspects of the two main emphases of his thought. It appears to the present author that the most probable source of these patterns of thinking was Vos's intimate interaction with the writings of the liberal scholars whose unbelieving interpretations of Scripture he was constantly attempting to disprove. This is the best guess I have, based on his writings and especially his declarations of intent in the first chapter of *Biblical Theology* and of the *Shorter Writings*. To reiterate what was stated earlier, Vos was attempting to save the discipline of Biblical Theology, as well as orthodox hermeneutics, from the destructive influence of liberalism. As such it is not a great surprise that even in his general success Vos was not able to remove all of the traces of the thinking of liberalism. In the time and space remaining I hope to present a Biblical revision of Vos's thought which attempts to cling more fully to God's revelation of His covenant, as well as to the display of the full-orbed glory of God, and thereby to rid itself of the dialectical problems which appear to remain in Vos's thinking.

#### **IV. Reconstruction: The Covenant**

It appears to the present author that the dialectical antithesis between the future and transcendent "heavenly realities" and the past/present immanent "earthly realities" which is found in Vos's view ends in the cumulative effect of stifling and smothering the fullness of the

covenant. This became apparent in the way that Vos's system would not allow the substance of earlier (Biblical) religion to enter into the substance of later religion. My central reconstructive goal, then, is to demonstrate the way in which God has made the covenant in such a way that its substance *does* grow and change over time and throughout the various dispensations of covenantal history, but yet also *does not* destroy the substance and structure which it had in its earlier stages but rather *fully incorporates* that earlier substance and structure as the core of the later substance and structure. I will attempt to show how this is true in Scripture as well as the implications it has for hermeneutics. This should serve to open up the applicability of Scripture in ways not possible from within Vos's view of Scripture and of the proper method of interpreting it. This presentation of a more Biblical view of Scripture should prove of value eventually to the theologian and the pastor, the sociologist and the counselor, as well as any student of and participant in God's covenant in Scripture and creation. The aim will be to keep God central in all His glory, so that this project will flow from Him, be dependent upon Him, and will result in His glorification.

### **A. Problematic Hermeneutical Results of Vos's View**

While many of the implications of Vos's view of Scripture have already been mentioned, we must understand the way in which it forms one's understanding of particular passages. In this regard we will address the subjects of "Typology" and the "Fuller-Meaning" (also called *sensus plenior*). Vos's view focuses more on typology than on the fuller meaning, but because the former essentially entails the latter, we will address both. This discussion will be relatively brief. I have written some other thoughts down concerning the fuller-meaning method in a very rough form and included them in the appendix.

#### **1. Typology**

Basically, typology has to do with the interrelationship between an OT covenantal "entity" and a NT covenantal "entity." What is indicated by the term "entity" here are the various events, people, offices, laws, promises, places, objects, animals, etc., which are described in Scripture. The typological relationship is only attributed to two such "entities" when the earlier one is understood to be an analogical reflection of the later one, and the later one is understood to be the *real substance* or "reality" of which the earlier one was simply a reflection. This is the kind of relationship Vos believed existed between the sacrifices of the OT and the death of Christ on the cross in the NT. Christ's death is truly effective for the forgiveness of sins, and the OT sacrifices were simply a reflection of Christ's work on the cross. Inherent in typology is the belief that the OT people did not know nearly as much as we do today about the way in which the types were always intended to point to and be rooted in the NT "realities."

## **2. Fuller Meaning**

The fuller meaning view of Scripture's nature is a direct result of the belief in typological relationships. The fuller meaning view of Scripture is basically that the later revelation found in the later parts of Scripture sheds a clarifying light on the earlier revelation in such a way that what was formerly unclear to the reader in the earlier parts of Scripture is more fully understood through the interpretive glasses of the later parts of Scripture. E.g., while originally it may have been unclear what the OT passages were getting at when they presented the laws concerning sacrifice, in the light of the NT teaching about Christ we understand clearly that the OT passages do not teach us that the sacrifices were actually absorbing and neutralizing God's wrath, but rather those passages teach us that the sacrifices were types or symbols of Christ's final atoning sacrifice. Often the supporting argument is made that although the original human authors of the OT could not have known the fullness of what we now see communicated through their words, and although the OT believers could not see what we see either, God Himself intended the OT

author's words to take on a fuller meaning in the later context of later revelation, and thus we are justified in finding the fuller meaning in the OT passage. Generally the fuller meaning is not described (by those who hold to this view of Scripture) as a *reinterpretation* of the OT, but rather as either an internally-originated growth of the meaning of the OT passages in interaction with the fuller context within which it has found itself due to later revelation or a better understanding of earlier revelation on the part of the reader who has been allowed to see the bigger picture through later revelation.

### 3. Problems in These Two Hermeneutical Positions

It appears to the present author that there are dangerous and irresolvable problems in these two hermeneutical positions. Perhaps in the future a more systematic and full-fledged explanation of these problems will have to be written, and perhaps one already has by someone other than myself, but for the present the following will have to suffice.

The central problem with both of these methods is the way in which they seek to redefine and reinterpret the past according to what develops in the future. While this retrospective revision<sup>98</sup> may be appropriate in the development of human thought which is attempting to escape by the grace of God from the errors into which it has fallen due to sin,<sup>99</sup> this kind of reinterpretation of the past is not appropriate in our understanding of the development of the covenant which God presents<sup>100</sup> to us--neither in its deed aspect (typology) nor in its word aspect (fuller meaning).

First, both methods are not fully honest in the way they claim that the new meaning ascribed to the old "entity" or passage comes out of that old entity or passage itself. If one pays

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<sup>98</sup>Vos terms it a "conceptual retroversion." "Through a conceptual retroversion the end will be seen to give birth to the beginning in the emergence of truth." Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology*, 11.

<sup>99</sup>In regard to man's guilty responsibility in receiving the covenant, Hegel has an insight. Man deceives himself; suppresses the truth in unrighteousness.

<sup>100</sup>In regard to God's sovereign administration of the covenant, Hegel is wrong. God does not lie.

close attention to the process by which the new meaning is realized by the individual reader of Scripture, one will inevitably realize that the place from which the new meaning comes is *the later entity/revelation*, not the earlier. Rather than *coming from* the earlier entity/revelation, it is retrospectively *added to* the earlier entity/revelation.

Second, a careful analysis of the two methods will show that there can be only *one* direction in which meaning flows in regard to the earlier and later texts.<sup>101</sup> (We will restrict our focus to *texts* from this point onward, because our central concern is the proper view of Scripture.) Authoritative meaning either ultimately comes from the later text, or it comes from the earlier text. If the later text is allowed to add *anything* to the earlier text by changing our perspective concerning that earlier text, it must by definition follow a standard by which such additions may be made. This standard is what makes the additions authoritative. The later text either has to follow the absolutely binding standards for the addition of meaning which were already found in the *earlier* text, or it has to follow the absolutely binding standards for the addition of meaning which are newly given in the *later* revelation. If one argues that there is a third option in that both the later and the earlier text share the same standard which has never changed from the outset, then one may as well say that the later text follows the standard of the earlier text. If one argues that there is a third option in that the standard of the earlier text is incomplete until the addition of a later text and its fuller standard, it would appear that there is no

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<sup>101</sup>Vos basically argues that the being and meaning--the reality and the revelation of it--of the final consummate eschatological state is what gave all earlier and lower stages of history their respective being and meaning. The end is proleptically present at every earlier stage. There are a good number of texts to support this idea, notably Paul's language of "firstfruits," as well as the NT teaching that the end of the ages has come upon us. I'm not denying that the present is substantively a foretaste, the firstfruits, the beginning of what will be greater and fuller in the future; rather, I'm trying to maintain the biblical teaching that what is not yet truly is not yet. What we have now--the firstfruits--grows into the fuller reality that already exists in God's plan for the future consummate state, or that already exists in Christ's exalted state but has not yet been applied in the experience of the individual believer as an *ordo salutis* blessing, but that fuller consummate reality does not yet exist in its application to the life experience of the believer. As such, we shouldn't claim that the being and meaning of the eschaton can really flow backward through history, but rather, we should maintain that the being and meaning of the covenant flows forward, growing ever greater until its glorified reality appears at the end. "But the path of the righteous *is* like the shining sun, that shines ever brighter unto the perfect day." (Prov. 4:18) A firstfruit is only a firstfruit so long as the whole harvest has not yet been brought in. The *rest* of the harvest remains in some real sense still *potential*, and not yet actual.

universally binding standard for such additions, but rather the standard is constantly in flux. This would not truly be a "standard." As such it would ultimately be the later text which defines the standard. At this point it becomes clear that if the standard of the earlier revelation is raised up as the defining one, the 1) limits and 2) nature of the later additions to its own meaning are defined to be 1) that which does not contradict the original meaning of the text and 2) that which agrees perfectly with, expresses, and fits within or around the original meaning of the text. As such it is clear that the later text is the source of the new meaning, and it is superfluous to attempt to say that the new meaning comes from the earlier text. If on the other hand the standard of the *later* revelation is raised up as the defining one, the conclusion appears inescapable that the standard is constantly changing and ultimately unpredictable. This presents a problem in that one does not know how far the reinterpretation of the earlier may be allowed to go. Perhaps the standard tomorrow will be that the sumtotal of the meaning of the earlier text may be fully contradicted and replaced with the meaning of the later text. And in fact this unpredictability of the relationship between the later text and the earlier text requires that we place all of our faith only in what the later text tells us. This is essentially what Hegel believed to occur in the process of the development of philosophy. Or, if we realize that each later text will possibly be revamped to its core by an even later text, we will be forced to suspend all belief in any text which comes to us.

It is this final conclusion of utter uncertainty that Vos attempted to avoid by deflecting the direction of the progress of revelation from its straight *horizontal* "succession" to its *vertical* "transcendence." By claiming that the NT reveals to us the heavenly realities which have been unchanging from the beginning until the present, he attempts to say that there is an unchanging standard of interpretation which cannot be modified after the closing of the NT canon. However, he did not fully escape the horizontal succession, because he had to admit that although the final

age with its heavenly realities has "Already" arrived in the present by virtue of Christ's work and our union with Him, our experience of that final age and its heavenly realities is "Not Yet" complete, and its arrival has "Not Yet" occurred in its fullness. He had to admit that there would be a further revelation at the time of the Second Coming,<sup>102</sup> and that there could conceivably be a continued progressive development of revelation within the "final" heavenly existence.<sup>103</sup> As with all views which define the earlier in terms of the later, and thereby lose their foundation in the absolute standard of the earlier, Vos's system is open to the criticism that it cannot claim to know the past revelation correctly, that neither can it know the present revelation correctly, and neither can it trust any predictions in the present concerning the future. The particulars of the not-yet remain unknown, and are essential to the grounding of the meaning of the already. Thus even the already's revelation of the not-yet is not yet grounded, and not yet interpretable. Freedom eludes Nature, Nature cannot speak of Freedom. (Mutual exclusion.) Yet, the already *is* the already because it is *not* the not-yet. (Mutual presupposition.)

The ultimate practical result of these methods which define the earlier in light of the later is that they lead the reader of Scripture to ignore the central teaching of the earlier text in favor of an ever-more-mysterious and "deep" search for the way in which the earlier text subtly points the reader toward the final goal, however the reader decides to define that final goal. The focus on the goal draws the attention away from the central teaching of the earlier text, and causes the reader to have no need for the earlier revelation as the foundation of the later revelation. If the earlier only tells us to look at the later which is so much more clear and full than the earlier, there

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<sup>102</sup>This problem surfaces in Vos's discussion of the divisions within the NT epoch, but it is not fully brought to light or dealt with, on pp. 326-327 of *Biblical Theology*. It must be dealt with by the careful student who wishes to gain insight from Vos, however.

<sup>103</sup>"Hence the word [hope] becomes suggestive of still ulterior vistas of realization within the final state." Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology*, footnote 37, p. 29. The whole footnote has to do with this admission. I find Vos's footnote fascinating in the way it contradicts the tendency of some Vosians; it deserves FAR more than a footnote here. This footnote by Vos indicates he himself recognized a tension within his system, the same tension which this paper demonstrates ultimately destroys Vos's system.

is ultimately no reason for us to look at the earlier. Similarly, in terms of the typological view, the New Covenant Christian ultimately has no need for the OT types when he is allowed to believe that he lives in the presence and knowledge of the final state of the covenant, and that the earlier covenants are no longer present in the structure and substance of the present covenant. This is the danger of such systems of thought. To the extent that they are consistent with their absolutization of the interpretive standard of later revelation, they draw one away from the careful study and reception of the earlier parts of God's word, and thus are a threat to the life and well-being of the individual believer and the church at large.

What is needed by these systems of thought--which define progress in terms of the goal which can be fully understood only at the end of that progress--is a root and foundation in the living and eternal God, who was before all worlds, who at the beginning of His covenant with man revealed Himself understandably, definitively, and without need of retrospective reinterpretation, and who has progressively built upon that beginning according to the principles which He laid out at the beginning. Only this systematic root in and acceptance of the original covenantal (manifestation and) revelation of God will save a hermeneutical system from the dialectical problems into which it will fall to the extent it rejects the centrality and fullness of the glory of God in all of life. While true worship of God looks forward to the future blessings and aspects of the covenant relationship with God according to God's promises, it understands that future as well as the past according to the original standards of covenantal development which God laid out at the beginning of the covenant.

### **B. Needed correction: Understand Covenant in its Progressive Development**

Vos's hermeneutical system needs a more focused and explicit description of the nature and progressive building of the substance of the covenant. The following summary of the

covenant in its nature and progressive development will attempt to weed out the dialectical problems from Vos's thought by presenting the most Biblical understanding of the covenant to which the present author has been able to come.

## **1. Broader Description: The General Aspects of the Covenant**

### i) Preliminary Note: General Nature of God's Covenant(s) with Man

As a preliminary note, the general nature of God's covenants with man should be briefly outlined.

#### **a) Basic Essence**

In their basic essence, they are interpersonal bond-relationships between God and man.<sup>104</sup>

#### 1) Parties

As should be obvious, the covenant has two "ends" which it binds together: God and man. The covenant is binding upon both God and man as the *parties* of the covenant.

#### **b) Detailed Description**

#### 1) Metaphysical Composition: Two Components<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> This point can be further qualified later. See Dr. Krabbendam's doctrine notes.

<sup>105</sup> Perhaps it would be better to say that "*Relatively* Metaphysical Composition" here, and to add "Relatively" to the other section titles "Epistemological Expression" and "Ethical Functioning." Our concern at this point is the metaphysical nature of the covenant, not so much the epistemological understanding of the covenant or the ethical activity within the covenant. Thus within the scope of the metaphysical nature of the covenant we are concerned with the relatively metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical aspects of that nature. I myself am not perfectly certain that this is the best way to approach the issue, nor do I expect that I have defined the aspects of the covenant beyond the possibility of further clarification, but at present this is the clearest way in which I can lay out the aspects of the nature of the covenant.

In their (metaphysically structural) composition, they have two primary components, namely, law and promise.<sup>106</sup> There is a perfect harmony between the law and promise.<sup>107</sup>

(i) *Law*

The law is the standard of what is morally right and wrong, and the law can be obeyed or disobeyed.

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<sup>106</sup>These two components, "law" and "promise," I have since in subsequent papers renamed "requirement" and "commitment," respectively. Further, I have reversed their order.

In traditional covenant theology, the law and promise are talked about very commonly as if they are the primary components of the covenant. That's why I used these terms originally. But since then I've come to see that the law and promise are really the outward communicative expression of God's (or man's) underlying commitment or requirement within the covenant relationship. The relationship is made what it is *metaphysically*--in its *being*--more by the fundamental personal commitment and requirement involved than by their respective external expressions. Hence the renaming.

The reordering was necessary because my reflection on the priority of God's initiative in the pre-fall covenant with Adam pushed me to realize that God's commitment to sustain creation or any relationship must be primary relative to His requirement for that entity or relation to exist. It is difficult for me to prove this intuition, but I believe it resolves many problems in theology, and sets up the foundational pattern for many of the doctrines we hold dear. For example, faith (in the promise which expresses God's commitment) is primary relative to obedience (to the law which expresses God's requirement). Faith is more a matter of words; obedience more a matter of deeds. Confer with my papers on the structure of the covenant found at [www.alwaysreformed.com/publicdocs/studies\\_in\\_theology](http://www.alwaysreformed.com/publicdocs/studies_in_theology) for more thinking along these lines. Those papers attempt to extend the project begun in this paper, by taking up the aspect of the reconstruction which tries to develop a better systematic doctrine of the covenant.

The rationale for moving from this project on Vos to work on the systematic structure of the covenant is far more complex than this, but here is part of it--if people can become convinced that my systematic outline of the structure of the covenant is correct, then my hope is that by recognizing that systematic structure of the covenant in exegesis, and by tracing throughout scripture the historical progress of that understanding of the covenant, they will in the end come to my understanding of the historical progress of the covenant as well (on the points of "inclusion" and the full reality of protology), and end with the concomitant hermeneutics I attempt to promote in this paper. In my experience, people who emphasize an exclusively teleological hermeneutic--a teleology that excludes the biblical protology--balk too quickly at a protological hermeneutic. But if they recognize the value of the systematic structure of the covenant which is essential to that protological hermeneutic, they may more readily reappropriate the biblical protology to which they had previously been opposed. I am interested in clarifying the central structures of systematic theology, and of redemptive-historical hermeneutics as well, both in full accord with the central lines of the reformed tradition. It seems strange to believe this, but I keep getting the impression that many who promote the redemptive-historical hermeneutic identify its exclusively teleological expression as the core of the reformed tradition, perhaps because they were not introduced to the reformed tradition through the common older route of learning Calvinistic soteriology (TULIP, solas) and prolegomena (revelation/scripture) before moving on to eschatology and hermeneutics. I feel they are not truly as rooted in the reformed tradition as they think they are. I do not desire to use an *ad hominem* line of argument, but I have to wonder when I look around me and learn that many of these redemptive-historical proponents not too long ago were Baptists, Dispensationalists, Arminians, or mainline liberals. By contrast, I grew up in the CRC with its deep conservative roots in the Dutch reformed tradition, under parents who were raised in the OPC, whose respective fathers were an OPC elder and a pastor. The thought that there could be any tension whatsoever between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility never occurred to me until someone introduced me to the possibility; I have been absolutely contented with the Calvinistic doctrine of concursus for as long as I can remember. It boggles my mind that some would use their modern understanding of an absolutized teleology to drive the Reformed tradition out of the church, and yet claim that they are maintaining the reformed tradition. But I praise the Lord that by His grace I can believe better things of many men. That has given me the confidence to write this paper. I know that those who share both Vos's and Van Til's deep appreciation for

(ii) *Promise*

The promise defines and results in the blessings God will give upon obedience to the law, and the curses God will give upon disobedience to the law.

(iii) *Perfect Harmony*

The promised blessing is a given, and will only be replaced with the curse if one does not obey the law. This shows the dynamic interaction of the law and promise.

The law requires what amounts to the reception of the blessing, the gift of the blessing amounts to the fulfillment of the law. The chief end of man is to glorify God and thereby to enjoy Him forever! This shows the more static integration of the law and promise.

2) Epistemological Expression: Two Modes

In their (epistemologically modal) expression, they have two modes, following the two modes of God's self-disclosure. There is a perfect harmony between the two modes of expression.

(i) *Word*

The covenants are revealed (defined/communicated<sup>108</sup>) in Divine and human *words*.

(ii) *Deed*

The covenants are manifested<sup>109</sup> in Divine and human *deeds*.

(iii) *Perfect Harmony*

The words describe and are used to convey the deeds, the deeds perform what is communicatively expressed in the words.

3) Ethical Functioning: Two Dynamics

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the reformed tradition--whether they learned from Vos and Van Til or not--will sincerely appreciate the contribution this paper makes. Others, I know, will utterly reject the paper. And I fear that.

<sup>107</sup>Cf. Krabbendam, *Christian Doctrine syllabus*, 70.

<sup>108</sup>It's true that communication occurs in the deeds as well; deeds done by a person communicate, when taken in conjunction with that person's or someone else's interpretive words.

<sup>109</sup>See the footnote on manifestation and revelation in ch. 1 of the Westminster Confession.

In their (ethically dynamic) functioning, they are sovereignly administered by God and (ir)responsibly received<sup>110</sup> by man. There is a perfect harmony between God's sovereign administration and man's responsible reception of the covenant.

(i) *God's Administration*

(a) *The Promise*

God promises the *blessing* of abundant life and gives that blessing by means of faith and obedience.

God promises the *curse* of death--the loss of life--upon disobedience to the law.

(b) *The Law*

God requires conformity/obedience to His law.

God discerns or judges people's conformity to His law.

(ii) *Man's Reception<sup>111</sup>*

Man can responsibly receive the promise by faith and keep the law by obedience.

Man can *ir*responsibly reject the promise by unbelief and break the law by disobedience.

(iii) *Perfect Harmony*

(a) *Faith-Obedience-Blessing*

The gift of faith is sufficient for man to receive the blessing, the gift of obedience is necessary to retain the blessing. Thus God continues to bless man by means of man's continued faith and within the continued context of obedience to God's law.

(b) *Unbelief-Disobedience-Cursing*

Man's unbelief and disobedience is due to God's sovereign direction of all that comes to pass, but man is fully active and choosing to disbelieve and disobey, and thus is held responsible

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<sup>110</sup>"Responded to" is better than "received," in some ways. This may need to be changed throughout the paper later.

<sup>111</sup>"Response" is better than "Reception." The emphasis on the passive aspect of the response is profitable in order to emphasize God's sovereignty, but it is more proper to emphasize God's sovereignty under "God's Administration."

for his sins committed toward God and man in violation of God's law. Upon such disobedience God brings the curse of the covenant.

c) **Contextual Functioning**<sup>112</sup>

1) Distinction: General Unity / Specific Diversity

Each covenant has a *general* unified structure of laws, promises, words, deeds, administration, reception, etc., which does not change over time, and there also exists an unchanging context (on the most general level: the (covenant of) creation) within which the covenant functions. However, the more specific ways in which this general structure fits into its more specific contexts evidence a certain variability due to the variance between one context and the next.

2) Kinds of Specific and Diverse Contexts

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<sup>112</sup>Somewhere here I should show how Vos's kind of typology should be corrected such that the substance of the covenant is seen to be present in the types themselves. The sacraments are a visible promise; they embody the promise not only by signifying but also by sealing--by *conveying*--the thing signified. The outward elements used in circumcision or baptism do not save, but the promise extended by means of the elements, when received by faith, does save. That is why Paul says, "Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not the removal of dirt from the body but the answer of a good conscience toward God, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" in 1 Pet. 3:21. Such is true for all other "types" which may be found in the OT, or even in the NT. Just as the sacraments are truly means of grace, so are all types means of grace in a similar fashion. That is to say, there is a *general covenantal function* being fulfilled *in the type itself*, by the type. This general covenantal function is *applied* in the use of *specific means*, which means are called the external elements of the "type." The means used can change in relation to the changes of the covenant's context, but the general covenantal function remains the same.

An explanation of typology which follows this line of thought avoids the problem of emptying the OT covenant both of any spiritual, salvific substance, and of any substantive continuity with the particulars of the NT covenant, salvation, even religion. Only one religion is taught in the bible. There is only one faith, one hope, one baptism; one God and Father of us all. (Eph. 4:4-6) The OT "Christ," "commonwealth of Israel," "covenants of promise," "hope," and "God" of Eph. 2:12 are fully included in the covenant God has made with His church through Christ, because now Gentiles are no longer separated, alienated from, strangers to these substantive salvation blessings, but are brought into the continuation of the Old Covenant. "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. <sup>14</sup> For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility <sup>15</sup> by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, <sup>16</sup> and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility." (Ephesians 2:13-16) The church replaces the Old Covenant community, but yet is fully its *substantive continuation*. Thus in combination these two passages from Ephesians teach that the Christ, faith, hope, commonwealth, baptism, God and Father shared by NT Jews and Gentiles are likewise shared with the OC Jew, because on the general level there is only one covenant, which is because there is only one God and Father of us all. God's unity is the reason for the unity of His covenant, and for the unity of the general features of His covenant throughout all the temporal changes of its application. It is because there is only one true God, that there is only one true religion.

I expect that the kinds of specific contexts into which the covenant fits could be multiplied to infinity by someone with the mind of God. The kinds of contexts I have in mind which are diverse from one another are the different cultures, different periods of history or of time, different individual persons and their lives, and most importantly for the section on the "Historical Interrelationship" of the covenants, the different covenants themselves.

### 3) Unity and Diversity of Function in Context

There is, then, both a unity and diversity of function in the covenant(s).

#### *(i) The Law*

To illustrate this concept, notice that the laws are binding in their unchanging general requirement forever, but are binding in one particular manner in one particular context, and in a different particular manner in a different context. For instance, God commanded Adam and Eve to "be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth." This commandment cannot be revoked in its general unified structure--i.e., it must always apply in the way in which it was intended to apply. However, in order to understand the way in which it applies in this general and unified manner, we must admit that it was intended to apply to Adam and Eve's children as well. This is assumed in the text, but is not made explicit. The only explicit context within which the commandment applies is the earth and the life of Adam and Eve. The children of Adam and Eve are a particular context to which the unified structure was always intended to be applied. The application of the law in the life of Adam and Eve's children was precisely the same as it was in the life of Adam and Eve in terms of its general unity, but that same application became diverse in its particular functioning when the law was applied to the particular context of the life of Adam and Eve's children. The diversity of particular application is this: while the law originally applied only in the context of Adam and Eve's life, later it

applied in their children's lives. There is a unity of application which extends throughout a diversity of contexts, due to the way in which the covenant itself has a nature which includes both unity and diversity. This reasoning will be especially important in regard to the law of the Mosaic Covenant.

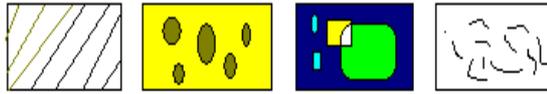
*(ii) The Other Parts/Aspects of the Covenant*

This same kind of reasoning is appropriate not only in regard to the law, but also to the promises of the covenant, the word and the deed of the covenant, and the administration and reception of the covenant. Due to time constraints and the hope that the reader can see this point without a great deal of help we will forgo a discussion of the unity and diversity of the function of those other parts/aspects of the covenant.

**d) Historical Interrelationship: Later Includes Earlier**

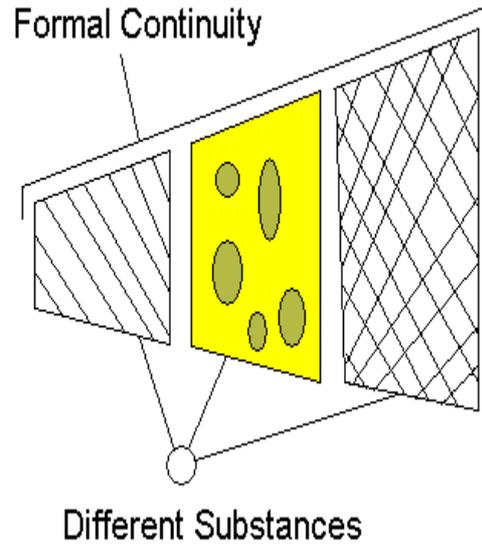
In their (historically progressive) interrelationship with each other, each successive covenant fully incorporates the previous covenant into its structure, but also fleshes out and builds on the previous covenant. This aspect of *inclusion* is represented in Fig. 2, in comparison to Vos's construction of the covenants and the view of dispensationalism. Further, the later covenants seem to be a natural outworking of the promises of the earlier covenants. This perfect unity but also perfect diversity between the covenants is due to the way in which the earlier covenants were initially constructed in such a way that they could fit perfectly into the structure of the later covenants. To use the terminology of the previous section, the earlier covenants are intended to fit into the context of the later covenants, and the later covenantal additions (which justify us saying that the later covenants are truly distinct from the earlier covenants) are intended to fit into the context of the earlier covenants. Thus a definite unity exists between the various covenants of Scripture, but there also exists a definite diversity between the covenants.

**Fig. 2**                      Dispensationalism

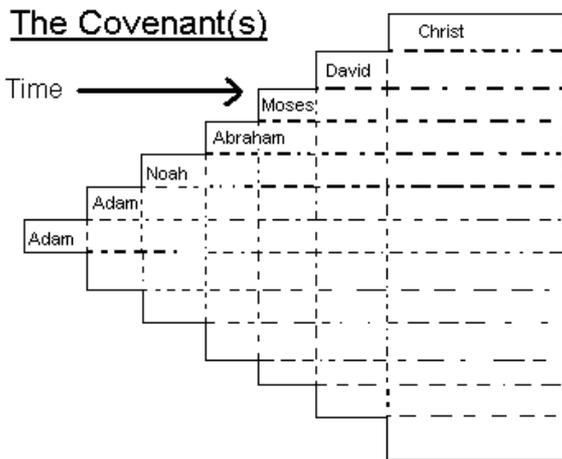


--Substantive Difference  
--No Formal Continuity

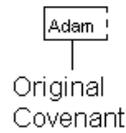
Vos



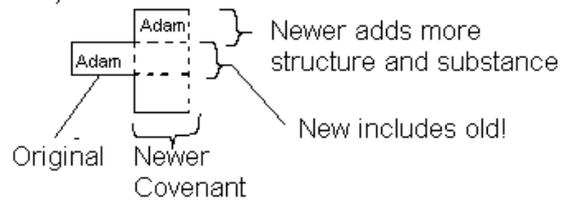
**Fig. 2, continued**



a)



b)



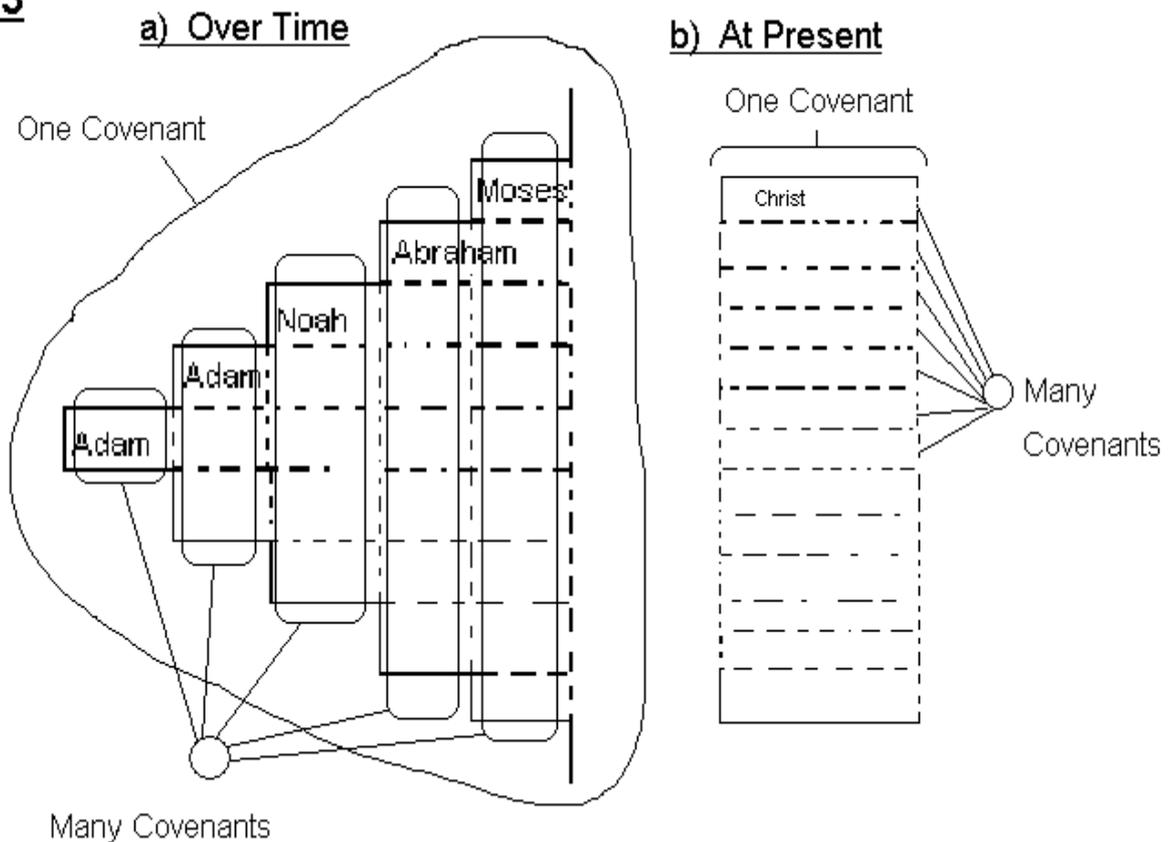
As will be shown in the following, this relationship of the later incorporating the earlier into the essence of the later appears to be true of the covenants of God with man. I am not quite certain that it is proper to say that God's covenant within Himself is included into the later covenants, or that God's covenant with creation is included into the later covenants with man. However, as long as the distinctions between God and creation, as well as between man as

human and the rest of creation as not human, are maintained, it does not appear improper to say that the later covenants of God with man both are built upon and include into the center of their functioning the earlier covenants (within God and between God and creation.) Regardless, the way in which all covenants between God and *man* manifest this pattern of inclusion of the earlier covenants is undeniable and will be demonstrated in summary fashion in the following summary of the covenants.

**e) The Number of the Covenant(s): One and Many**

Due to this interrelationship in which the former covenants grow naturally into the later covenants, form the basic structure of the later covenants, and are included into the structure of the later covenants, it becomes clear that it is proper to speak both of One covenant and Many covenants. Insofar as there is a true newness in the later covenants, it is proper to speak of many covenants. Insofar as the later covenants are the fuller outworking of the earlier covenants, it is proper to speak of one covenant. This is represented in Fig. 3. Thus we need not make monkeys of ourselves before scripture when we comment on Eph. 2:12 and Rom. 9:4. I expect some have struggled to downplay the "many"-ness of the covenants in their comments on these verses. This is the reasoning behind my usage of the parentheses in the term "covenant(s)."

**Fig. 3**



## 2. Particular Focus: The Covenant(s) of Scripture

### i) The Foundation and Root of All Covenants: God's Covenant within Himself

- a) **This is the bedrock upon which all covenants are based.**
- b) **The parties are the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.**
- c) **God's "covenantalness" is in evidence in both God's nature and His will.**
  - 1) God is faithful (nature), meaning He is faithful to His promises (will).
  - 2) In addition, God is holy (nature), meaning He is holy according to His law (will).
- d) **It Includes God's Blessedness**

As the source of all creational goodness and covenantal blessing, God appears to include within Himself an internal goodness and blessedness.

**e) Its Function in Trinitarian Interaction**

Judging from the way in which God is described in Genesis 1-2, it appears appropriate to assume that this covenant within God has both laws and promises, word and deed, and administration and reception.

To show how this covenant works, for instance, the Father requires the Son to submit. That is the administration of a law. But also, the Father willingly does everything for the Son's good. That is the administration of a promise. This covenant is a bond-relationship between two of the Persons of the Godhead. It binds them together with a common fellowship and communion, a common purpose and common activities. Similar things can be said about the relationships between all three members of the Trinity, both in the Persons' authority-structure hierarchy and in their one-many-structure in regard to their equal essence. Our God, in Himself, is a covenantal God.

So, God has at least one covenantal relationship within Himself. This covenant is *real*, meaning it is part of His nature, and it is also *understood* in that God consciously chooses to engage in it, meaning it is part of His "counsel" or "will."<sup>113</sup> In God's nature, the covenant, along with His holiness (according to His law) and faithfulness (according to His promise), provides the solid metaphysical ground upon which all other covenants have a basis. In God's will, this same covenant, with its laws and its promises, provides the epistemological framework within which and upon which all other covenants can be rationally/logically constructed and understood. As such, epistemologically speaking, this covenantal structure in God is a necessary presupposition for the understanding of any other covenant.

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<sup>113</sup>This not His will of volition, but His will which is His eternal plan which He understands and carries out.

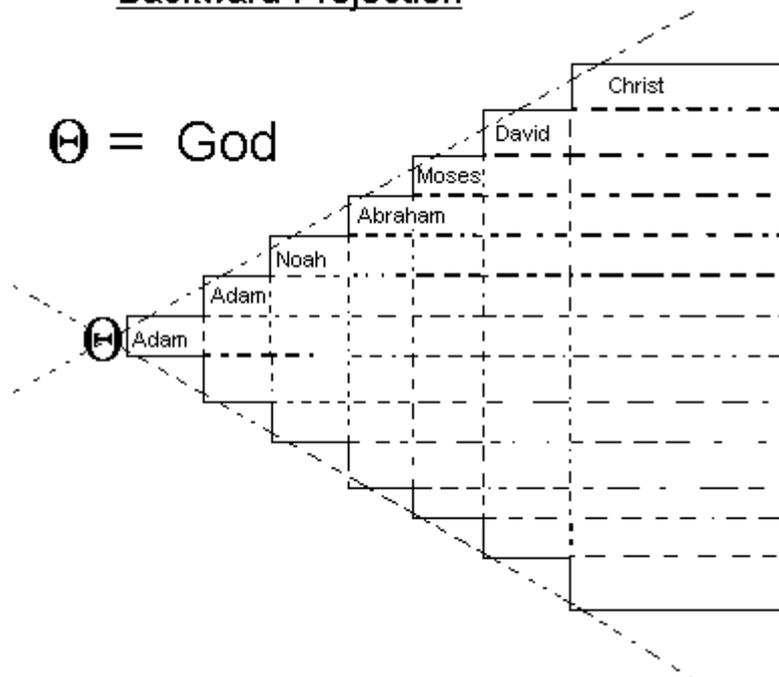
It appears that this covenant is also one of administration and reception, due to the way in which the Persons of the Godhead interact.

**f) Biblical Revelation of this Covenant**

1) Presupposed

God does not seem to be intent on presenting this covenant in a systematic fashion at the beginning of His proclamatory presentation of the covenant to us in Scripture. Due to this lack of a systematic presentation the idea of a covenant within God has been considered an arbitrary theological construction which is not rooted in Scripture. However, although God makes no systematic presentation of this covenant, He *does* seem to presuppose it, and it appears that God's revelation of Himself via His revelation of His covenant with man cannot be understood properly

**Fig. 4**      Backward Projection



unless the audience recognizes in some way that in His covenantalness within Himself He forms the background, foundation, and root of all subsequent covenants. In this way Scripture appears

to project backwards along the line of the development of the covenant the antecedent covenantalness of God, even though it does not address it systematically. See Fig. 4

## 2) Evident in Genesis 1-3

It appears that the complexity of the personal nature of God was evident to Adam and Eve in the Garden, assuming Adam and Eve knew at least as much as Genesis 1-3 tell us about God's revelation of Himself in the covenantal relationship with man. The following observations will attempt to substantiate this claim that God's essential covenantalness was revealed to man from the outset of the history of revelation. Due to time constraints, I cannot refer to the commentaries I wish I could use, and the observations will generally come from the English translations rather than the Hebrew, because I am not yet able to read Hebrew.

First, God is presented in Gen. 1:1 as the Creator of the heavens and the earth. He appears to be a singular unity in comparison to the Creation. However the Hebrew word for "God" is a plural term. Some commentators hold that this connotes His majesty, and some hold that it connotes a plurality of some kind within God Himself. God also is described in v. 2 to have a "Spirit" which is to be distinguished in some way from the unified "God," for it is *of God*. The explicit activity of the Spirit according to the text was that of "hovering over the face of the waters." This seems to imply that the Spirit had the function of being God's immanent *presence* in creation. From that point onward in Gen. 1-2:3 it is clear that God's activity in the creation is that of beautifying the initially "formless and void" creation and endowing it abundantly with good things. This cannot be accomplished, apparently, except through the immanent presence of God Himself (as a unified "God") in creation. However, the means of this presence is God's Spirit, which seems to be distinguished both from being precisely equivalent to God's essential unity as well as from being precisely equivalent to the creation. The Spirit appears to be an extension of God, for it is *of God*, not *of the creation*. In the great distinction between God and

creation, the Spirit falls on God's side but yet is also not to be identified precisely as the unified wholeness which is essential to "God."

Significantly, God is undeniably spoken of by the narrator as a *singular entity* throughout the passage, no doubt due in part to the necessity of the distinction between Him and Creation. However, God Himself reserves forms of speech which explicitly reflect His *personal* nature for late in the creation account--he reserves the personal pronoun for His decree of the creation of *mankind*. Here He describes Himself in a self-reflective manner, calling Himself "Us" and using the term "Our." The text, however, continues to reserve the right to describe God from the narrator's perspective as a *singular* entity. All this appears slightly suggestive of a plurality of persons in the Godhead, but is more probably intended to connote God's majesty.

As God proceeds to create throughout the six days of the creation account which lead to the seventh where the creation becomes finally and pleasingly complete, notice that creation is first introduced as a *simple* unified diversity<sup>114</sup> (heavens and earth) which is primarily to be distinguished from God, and then as an increasingly more and more complex unified diversity due to the developing, molding, and additive work of God. Note also that *both* unity and diversity are present from the beginning, but grow in the complexity of their manifestation as God performs more creative acts. Further, notice that later complexity is built *within* and *upon* the earlier and simpler structure. This appears to be no surprise, perhaps because the unity and diversity of God Himself is evident in the mention of the "Spirit" of v. 2, or more probably due first and foremost to the very nature of the "God" of v. 1 who is unified. What is unity except the unification of diversity? Something that is unified must also be diverse. This diversity within

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<sup>114</sup>Or, "diverse unity;" the terms should be interchangeable. Perhaps it would be more technically precise to say, "unified and diverse, substantially existing entity," but such technicality seems clumsy and unnecessary in this context. I include this footnote for the person who might think that I am placing either unity or diversity as more essential to the nature of Creation. I am not. Both are essential. Elsewhere I use the term "essential unity" in order to protect the fact that both man and woman equally share the image of God, and as such are equally human and equal to each other insofar as they are humans.

God could have been argued in the earlier discussion of v. 1, but for the sake of making the point stick it appeared better to state it explicitly only after reminding the reader that God's diversity appears to be manifested in creation, which is both unified and diverse.

We move now to the creation of man, in order to determine whether man was able to see an *interpersonal* diversity in God. As the express showcase of the nature of God in creation--essentially, the "image of God," man was created both in an essential unity and an interpersonal diversity. Man(kind) was, in terms of his (singular personal pronoun) essential unity, "in the image of God." (I.e., every member of "mankind" is made in the image of God.) But man(kind) was also, in terms of *their* (plural personal pronoun) interpersonal diversity, to be "male and female," and through being male and female evidence some aspect of being in the image of God. This pattern of emphasizing firstly the unity and secondly the diversity of mankind is evident in vv. 26-28 of Gen. 1.<sup>115</sup> Insofar as mankind's essential unity and interpersonal diversity is manifesting the image of the God who is essentially unified but also truly diverse, the text places the general diversity of God and the *interpersonal* diversity of mankind parallel to each other, where it seems that the text may be indicating that the God who is diverse is *interpersonally* diverse. God's own special use of the word "Us" at this point to emphasize His personality as the basis of man's personality makes it seem more likely that the text may be indicating that God Himself includes a plurality of persons.

While I do not feel ready to say that the above points are conclusive, it does appear to me that, if God informed Adam and Eve about the way in which He created the world, and if God also told them about the way in which He created them in His image, due to their close communion with God in the Garden before the Fall they probably would have also known to some extent that God included a diversity (plurality) of persons. It appears to me at present more

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<sup>115</sup>The universals are *primary*, particulars are *secondary*!

probable that they would have been told more and would have known more about the events of Gen. 1-2 than is presented to us in the text, and it appears less probable that they would have known less than we do from our study of the text. While perhaps it is true that the revelation conveyed to us in Gen. 1-2 would have been sufficient for Adam and Eve in their relationship with God, it also appears that they had a close communion with Him before the fall, so much so that after they had sinned, the text presents their action of hiding from God as an *abnormal* thing. I bet that they had at least an inkling of the covenantal complexity found within God Himself. Of course, as a Van-Tillian presuppositionalist, I am also expecting that they did. But even if they were not allowed to understand that God is three in Persons, it may be sufficient to understand that within a single person there is a "covenantalness," where a person obligates himself or makes promises to himself ("I have made a covenant with my eyes; why then should I look upon a young woman?"--Job 31:1). Perhaps even this basic understanding would suffice as the presupposition behind all future covenants. Even if the text of Gen. 1-3 does not indicate clearly the plurality of Persons in the Godhead, this basic understanding of the covenantalness of God undeniably *is* presented in the text of Gen. 1-3 ("Let Us make man in Our own image...").

**g) The Implications of the Covenant within God:**

It appears to me that this understanding of the Covenant within God resolves some of the problems found within covenant theology.

For instance, the "Covenant of Redemption" or "eternal counsel of peace" has long been seen by some covenant theologians as the final justification for the Covenant of Grace which justification and which covenant only comes to light fully or correctly in the NT. However, other covenant as well as dispensational theologians have disagreed, holding that the Covenant of Redemption is an arbitrary theological abstraction, being grounded in neither an historical covenant-making ceremony nor a systematic Scriptural presentation in a particular passage; a

relatively abstract covenant which does not fit into the history of the covenants, is not between God and man *per se* as the other covenants are but rather is between the Father and the Son, and is arguably either an eternal covenant or only a NT Christological phenomenon.

This understanding (the one I presented) of the covenant within God makes it clear that the Covenant of Redemption is not a totally arbitrary theological abstraction because there *is* a covenant of loving interaction between the members of the Godhead, in which all manward blessing and thereby all redemptive grace find their ultimate root. There *are* mutual obligations (law/promise) between the members of the Godhead and mutual interactions (blessing/enjoyment). However, this understanding of the Covenant within God does not fall into the problems of the Fuller-Meaning approach which ascribes the revelation of the Covenant of Redemption to the NT alone. The NT need not redefine the OT doctrine concerning the essential nature of the Divine-human covenant in any way; it need not vitiate parts of the OT covenant. Rather, the commitments between the Father and the Son regarding the salvation of the elect through the work of Christ find their root in the eternal covenant of love between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Son does everything for the Father's glory. The Father does everything for the glory of the Son. The plan of redemption and the work of Christ are simply two of the ways in which this covenant within God finds its outworking.

Further, while the plan of redemption is eternal due to the way in which all of God's plan is eternal, it must be subsumed within God's broader and higher plan for the glorification of Himself, and it must even be subsumed within God's purpose for glorifying Himself through the covenant relationship with man. God's glory remains central and primary.<sup>116</sup>

Note also that although covenantal interaction did occur between the Father and the Son during Christ's life and work on earth, it is best to see Christ's work to be first of all the

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<sup>116</sup>That is to say, the order in which we should think of these things is: 1) God's glory, 2) God's glory through the covenant, 3) God's plan of redemption.

production of the salvation common to all the covenant(s) of grace and secondly a part of the presentation in word and deed of the New Covenant in Christ. Further, inasmuch as it brought about the promise of blessing of the first (non-redemptive) covenant between God and man, Christ's work was also a continuation of the proclamation and administration of the first divine-human covenant.<sup>117</sup>

#### **h) Representative Reimplementation of the Covenant of Works**

Further, some views of the Covenant of Redemption consider it to be the reimplementation of the Covenant of Works, whereby Christ earns salvation for us by keeping the law and evidencing meritorious righteousness. Part of the difficulty with this view is that one wonders why the believer in the present life who by virtue of his progressive sanctification does good works does not also earn more blessing *on top of the salvation-blessing obtained by Christ by virtue of His righteousness*. Are we able to merit righteousness in God's eyes, and thereby earn blessing?<sup>118</sup> Or is the Covenant of Works rather in a higher realm where it is beyond the

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<sup>117</sup>That is to say, it is important to draw a line of progression *from* God's covenant internal to Himself, prior to creation and history, *into* God's first covenant with man, *into* the covenant of grace, and from there *into* Christ's New Covenant revelation/production of the salvation applied in all post-fall covenants of grace. It is still significant to trace a line from God in heaven, down to earth, at the time-point of Christ's first coming, to explain the unique nature of the New Covenant, but this cannot be done to the exclusion of the historical development from the beginning of history, which development has prior to it the eternal covenantalness of God internal to Himself. This respects the biblical protology, and resists the absolutization of an eschatological teleology, and the idea that the transcendent, eternal realm breaks in directly from above, with no protological rootedness, with no foundation in the protos of creation, and in the Protos (Rev. 22:13) who stands behind it along the "horizontal" line of creation's development. It would appear in light of Rev. 22:13 that a biblical eschatology that excludes the biblical protology is no eschatology at all, and a biblical teleology that excludes the biblical arche-ology likewise is no biblical teleology. God, as Alpha and Omega, Protos and Eschatos, Arche and Telos, guarantees the equal ultimacy of the historical beginning and end of His covenant, and integral to its historical aspect, God guarantees the logical necessity of its foundation to its goal, as well as of the goal to the foundation. Only by striving more faithfully to live within the biblical protology may we be guaranteed a greater faithfulness as well to the biblical eschatology.

<sup>118</sup>The point of the question is not to suggest precisely that the general believer ("we") can take on the role of the covenant head (Adam/Christ.) Of course we cannot represent the whole covenant community as Adam or Christ did. Rather, the point of the question is to ask whether or not there is *any* unity whatsoever between a supposed works principle under which Adam operated before the fall, and the similar works principle under which some passages appear to indicate the general believer does operate. It is to push the issue of whether Adam before the fall was an Arminian, or whether the general believer after the fall is an Arminian. My Reformed reader will immediately reject the idea that the general believer can operate under an Arminian "works-righteousness," or better, man-originated, salvation, so the question presses the reader to doubt that Adam should be portrayed as an Arminian, and to doubt that the Covenant of "Works" operated on the kind of "works-righteousness" that Paul condemns. Assumed here then is that there is some connection--a unity--between the works principle within the Covenant of Works, and the works principle under which the general believer operates. If this unity is denied, then it becomes a simple matter

reach of the believer, except through Christ's representational headship whereby He lives in the Covenant of Works in our place?<sup>119</sup>

These questions become superfluous when one realizes the implications of the Covenant within God. In our discussion of the "Covenant of Life" below (which will take the place of the "Covenant of Works" in our summary of the covenants) it will become apparent that it is not proper to speak of *earning* God's blessing, due to the way in which Scripture presents the Covenant of Life.<sup>120</sup> Further, assuming the points that are made below concerning the Covenant of Life, it becomes apparent that Christ had no need to *earn* the Father's blessing for the elect through living righteously within the Covenant of Works. Christ was *already* found within the Father's blessing (and the Godhead's eternal blessedness) from before the creation of the world. What Christ did was *retain* the blessing of the Father, and of the Godhead, and then make it possible for the blessing(s) of the covenant(s) to come to man once again.<sup>121</sup> Christ opened the

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for some covenant theologians to portray Adam as if he was an Arminian! But the Reformed reader realizes this is problematic because he knows there must be more unity present than that. But if this unity is real, and present, then the absolute antithesis to the exclusion of all unity between the Covenant of Works and Covenant of Grace may not biblically be maintained; our definitions of both covenants must be revised. It is far better biblically to see *both* unity and diversity between these two covenants. We must describe the unity and diversity of the covenants in their progress over time *biblically* from the outset in order to avoid a dialectical crash at the end.

<sup>119</sup>This could potentially deny the application of scripture or salvation to the general believer, remove creation ordinances from the post-fall creation, and even cast Eve out of the Garden before she fell! (Because she was not the representative head in quite the way Adam was; she was more of a general believer.)

<sup>120</sup>Note that some passages use the language of "payment" or "reward." I don't mean to deny that there is a works principle of sorts even within the application of the Covenant of Grace. But "merit" and resulting blessing not based on God's previous disposition to bless (commitment), and on His ensuing promise to do so, and further not seen as a growing continuation of God's prior original blessing (Adam was blessed with communion with God and the prospect of entering into future glory even before he faced the test at the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil; he didn't have to "prove" that he was already obeying)--such merit and blessing has lost its root in the biblical protology. One could argue its root is exclusively in the biblical eschatology--in the *future*--but I would argue it is rather exclusively a man-generated merit, and as such, sinful, neither flowing from God's original blessing nor unto His final glory. This understanding of pre-fall "merit" would appear to be an anachronistic discovery of a post-fall sinful reality in the pre-fall context. The fallen world cannot set the standard for the pre-fall context; else our hermeneutic approximates the anthropological monergism of the Enlightenment, the modern progress ideal which condemns the past on the basis of man's supposedly more ideal present looking toward the final ideal future--but it all is man's attempt to give something to God, to add to what God provides, even to reject it, when from Him, and through Him, and unto Him are all things. I feel that eschatology which excludes protology derives too much of its doctrine from the imagination of fallen man, from the estate of the fall. Not from eternity future, nor from eternity past. In other words, not from God.

<sup>121</sup>It was never *Christ* who needed to clear His record. Perish the thought! It was not Christ who was destitute, but *us*, you and I.

floodgates of God's blessings to us by taking the wrath of God which was coming upon sinful man according to the curse of the covenant. In His death He accomplished the destruction of the old heart, record, and life of the sinful man, taking the suffering of hell upon His complete blessedness. Only the infinite God Himself could withstand the onslaught of His wrath toward the countless multitude of sinners who are elect to salvation (Rev. 7:9), and only the living God could suffer the human death due man and survive. In His resurrection Christ produced the new heart (regeneration), record (justification), and life (sanctification) of every believer, by virtue of the fullness of the Divine blessedness within Him. Christ removed the curse of the covenant for us as a man, and retained the blessing of the covenant for us as a man, because He was God. The curse being removed, God could once again implement the blessing(s) of the covenant. Christ did not *earn*, but rather *retained*, the blessings of the covenant.<sup>122</sup>

Further, we who live in the continued administration of the initial Covenant of Life cannot *earn* God's blessing through doing good works. Rather, we *retain* God's blessing through continued obedience, and cannot lose God's blessing due to Christ's perfect obedience. As will possibly be worked out later in this paper, it will become clear that the sorrow experienced by the believer is not properly to be considered a loss of God's blessing, but rather the experience of His discipline, at times due to our sinful rejection of the covenant. Discipline may be painful, but nevertheless it remains God's blessing (Heb. 12:3-11, James 1:12-18).

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<sup>122</sup>I do not mean to deny that Christ somehow added to His own glory, and to His Father's glory, and to our blessedness, through His work as our Redeemer. He truly produced salvation; there is something historically new, new within creation especially, about His work. Yet at the same time, God's glory does not change in regard to God's eternal existence. Christ has been *eternally* blessed by His Father, and brings us to share in that unchanging blessing. We must emphasize *both* aspects here--both the newness and the oldness of Christ's work, and of the blessings of salvation. There is both unity and diversity over time. Else, if we must choose the one over the other, we lose both. It is because I have seen the problems which result from exclusively emphasizing the *diversity* between earlier and later in redemptive history that I am attempting to carefully trace the *unity* which is also present. Where there is a biblical diversity to be emphasized, we must be careful to likewise find and emphasize its corresponding biblical unity; else we run the risk of rending the body of Christ.

In this way, the question of the location of the Covenant of Redemption is resolved. It has neither existed as the foundational covenant within the Godhead which was only revealed in the NT (dubiously "gracious" or redemptive), nor as the covenant between the Father and the Son which was made during Christ's work on earth (dubiously eternal). Rather, it is a theological abstraction which has combined aspects of the eternal Covenant within God with aspects of the gracious New Covenant in Christ.

ii) The Context and Components of the Divine-Human Covenants: God's Covenant with Creation

**a) Analogy to Law and Promise**

God *commanded* the world into being, and *committed* Himself to making sure that the world did come into being. (Note the two aspects of God's creation by fiat in Genesis 1: "Let there be" (decree) and "God made" (action).) Thus it appears that the elements of law (command) and promise (commitment) are present even in God's covenant with the impersonal creation, at least in an analogical fashion. This pertains to the whole and all of its parts, to the past, present, and future creation; to every aspect of creation. He continues this relationship today, and thus He and creation are bound together in a covenantal relationship for the present. Man, as part of creation, partakes in this covenant insofar as he is a creature.

**b) Word and Deed**

It is clear that God both spoke and acted, understood the covenant and carried it out. The creation is something to which words may correctly be applied and which is real.

**c) Administration and Reception**

It is clear that God sovereignly administered the covenant of creation (and still is doing so), but because the creation is not essentially a *personal* party in the covenant, its reception is beyond the realm of sinful resistance, and its response is immediate. Note that although God

continually declares by fiat "Let there be," the passage at some points skips over the concomitant activity of God in "making" what He decreed into being. The response of creation to the word of God is immediate and perfect, if it is appropriate to speak of creation responding to God.

**d) General Function: God's Glory, Context and Components of Later Covenants**

God's covenant with creation manifests His glory, and it sets up the context for and provides the elementary components of God's covenant(s) with man. It is inconceivable to us how we could interact with God in a personal manner without the presence of creation which has things which truly exist, things which are able to know, things which can be known, and a means of knowing, things which are right and wrong, things which can either do what is right or do what is wrong, and a standard of right and wrong, etc.

Further, it is inconceivable to us how these parts of creation which God uses to interact with us in a personal manner are not themselves thoroughly invested with God's personality, with His personal interaction, even in the sense that He interacts with *Himself* through the creation. It is *His* creation. "Let Us make man in Our own image...." God sees Himself throughout creation ("image"), *everywhere* in creation. As such, He being essentially covenantal, covenantal in His own being, knowledge, and activity, He must interact *with* creation in an accordingly covenantal way, by virtue of the fact that He relates *through* creation, with Himself, in a covenantal way. Therefore He has a covenant with creation.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>123</sup>Gen. 9:13, 16-17 is intentionally parallel to Gen. 1, the account of creation, the description of the animals, seasons, man as ruler, cultivator. If Gen. 9 presents a covenant, so must Gen. 1. Further, it must be essentially the same covenant. I know the argument will arise that this unity for which I'm arguing is contradicted by the diversity the passage emphasizes specifically on a point that involves creation--before the Noahic covenant a flood was possible--God was willing to destroy creation; after the Noahic covenant it would never happen again (so long as God doesn't destroy creation, that is.) Therefore, some would say, the Noahic covenant established a "covenant" with creation which did not exist before; the reason the term "covenant" is used here is to emphasize the stronger nature of God's commitment to preserve creation, and the more external, formal, culturally-specific and temporally-limited nature of the expression of that commitment. But if there is this diversity, what of the unity? Why the comparison? Why are the words of Gen. 1 used? Must typology reduce our hermeneutic to nominalism?

But the passage will not sustain a denial that the referents in Gen. 6-9 and those in Gen. 1 are in some cases identical. V. 6 reads, "for God made man in His own image." The referents are the same as in the creation account;

### iii) God's Covenant of Life, with man

The pre-fall Adamic Covenant sets up the groundwork for the rest of the covenant(s) of life.

#### **a) Primary Components: Law and Promise**

##### 1) Law

###### *(i) Substance*

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that is why the author uses the same words. The language used here--"establish My covenant"--while not used prior to the Noahic covenant, nevertheless is used many times in scripture not to indicate the creation of an utterly *new* covenant, but of the further development of a *previously existing* covenant. Is that not the case here as well? Noah lived in a covenant-relationship with God, *before* God "established" His covenant with Noah. Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord. Noah walked with God. (Gen. 6:8-9) Noah's relation in Gen. 6 was precisely the relation initiated in Gen. 1. This is shown in that Gen. 6:1 says "man" began to "multiply" on the face of the "land" (even, Adam, "the man," *ha adam*, began to multiply on the face of *ha adamah*)--this is the language of Gen. 1, presenting man's multiplication as Adam's multiplication, in precise fulfillment of the covenantal task given to him in Gen. 1:28. Gen. 6:6-7 refers to God's original act of creating man, identifying man with all of creation (metonymically/synechdochally through the creatures), and there God expresses His desire to destroy man along with creation, "for I am sorry that I have made them." It was man's wickedness, his not fulfilling his created purpose in relation with God, which grieved God's heart (vv. 5-6). Man's wickedness within the original created relationship, which continued to Noah's day. It is in this context--the context of the original created relation between God and man, directly referred to in vv. 1-7, that in v. 8 "Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord." It is Noah as a creature, Noah as living in the original pre-fall created relation between God and man, with whom God desires to further solidify that relationship, with whom God says "I will establish my covenant." (Gen. 6:18) That is to say, the Noahic covenant is a continuation of the pre-fall Adamic covenant, the Covenant of Life. Noah lived in the same relation God established with Adam at creation; it is this relation which God calls His "covenant." The Noahic covenant is the pre-fall Adamic covenant. Therefore the Adamic covenant was a covenant.

(Note further that it is Noah's prior obedience within the pre-fall covenant which God states as the reason why He is willing to preserve Noah from the destruction which the rest of mankind's sin warranted. ("Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation." 6:9) This righteousness was temporally *prior* to God's outward, revealed declaration that God would preserve Noah ("Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you are righteous before me in this generation." 7:1) It was an obedience within the Covenant of Works. In the days of Noah, God continues to enact the curses ("I will wipe out the man" - 6:7) and blessings ("But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord" - 6:8) of the Covenant of Life prior to the fall, now expressed through the Covenant of Grace after the fall, soon to be further established in God's Covenant-of-Life-by-Grace-with-Noah-after-the-flood.)

But is the Noahic covenant *with creation* the pre-fall covenant *with creation*? Yes. The Noahic covenant with Noah includes God's Noahic covenant with creation. This is clearly evident in Gen. 6-9. This inclusion is derived from the way in which God's covenant with Adam included His covenant with creation (day 6 combines into the covenant with Adam the context and components created on days 1-5.) The goal of creation was the creation of man, and the covenant with man (because God called it "very good" only after creating man.) Therefore, the goal of God's covenant with creation was God's covenant with man. This was the case in the days of Noah, and it remains so to this day. Just as in Gen. 1:26-30 God gave the animals, plants, and all creation to man, to sustain man's relation with God, and to be the context and components of that relation, so the animals and all creation under man ("*ha adam*") came under God's condemnation in 6:7, and likewise so God preserved the animals in the ark under Noah, gave them again to mankind (9:1-3), and made a covenant with them *under mankind* (9:8-17). The reason for creation's preservation by God in the days of Noah, and God's reason for making a covenant with creation, was to serve the purpose of preserving the original context and components of God's covenant with man, so that God's covenant with man thereby would be preserved. God's covenant with creation under Noah is the *extension* of His covenant with creation under Adam. God interacts with creation in order to interact with man, and interacts with both in order to interact with Himself through man and creation. Therefore, God originally had a personal covenantal interaction with creation; this is implicit in Gen. 1, and explicit in Gen. 6-9.

The full substance of the law, later written as the Ten Commandments, can be understood from the giving of this covenant in the context of life in the Garden of Eden.

E.g., (1) worship God only (symbolized by the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil), (2) worship God in the way that He commands (symbolized by the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil), (3) worship God as active and present in granting favor to man; never associate Him with nothingness ("See, I have given you every herb...for food"), (4) worship God specially on the special day on which your covenant relationship with Him began in Adam, (5) honor the authority structures God has ordained (the man was the pointman/manager, the woman was the helpmate/helper), (6) promote the life of the neighbor (the image of God..."be fruitful and multiply"...tending the garden..."you shall surely die"...this is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh"), (7) honor the neighbor's marriage union (leave, cleave, become one flesh..."this is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh") (8) honor the neighbor's property in the exercise of stewardship (...in the garden *to tend and keep it*), (9) promote true justice for the neighbor ("We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden, but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die'"), (10) love your neighbor by desiring holiness with your whole heart ("Our image"...it was very good..."of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil you shall not eat").<sup>124</sup>

(ii) *Specific Stipulations*

The specific stipulations of the law that rise prominently from the text in the pre-fall Adamic Covenant, however, are (1) that man should "be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it, have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth," (2) that man should accept the blessings of God (the plants for

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<sup>124</sup> This summary adapted from Dr. Krabbendam's Ethics Syllabus and my paper on the Fourth Commandment (included as an appendix).

food), and (3) that man should symbolize his loving submission to God's lordship by keeping himself from eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

2) The promise is as follows:

*(i) Abundant blessings are a given*

God said, "You may eat of any of the trees." The Tree of Life would bring Adam a new state of blessedness in that it would confirm him in his life in such a way that he could not receive the curse of death. If Adam had continued in obedience it seems assumed in the text that he would have eventually eaten of the Tree of Life and would have experienced a continual increase of blessing. This abundance of blessing appears to be implied in the Cultural Mandate's terms as well as in the abundance of blessing toward man already present in the Garden (the trees to eat from, communion and further interaction with God, the creation of Eve). It is also only natural to assume that the God of Genesis 1 would delight in continually adding blessings to man, for God appears to have an abundance within Himself which works out into expression in His activities.

This implies that it is not proper to consider the Covenant of Life to be "probationary." Adam was nowhere near jail, nor was he coming out of it. Rather, he could only expect increasing blessings to continue forever as the norm unless he disobeyed the law. As such, all later covenant additions and all later covenants are properly seen as an outworking of the essential abundance of blessing in God in the structure of the covenant, according to the initial forward-looking structure of the covenant.

*(ii) Blessings will be removed and replaced  
with curses if man ceases to obey*

God said, "...but of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

**b) Expression: Word and Deed**

It is clear from Genesis 1-3 that neither the word of the covenant nor the deed of the covenant is to be seen as more essential or more important to the covenant. The word and the deed brought man to life according to Gen. 1, and man responded in word and deed. Due to the way the creation is described as if it sprung into being immediately upon the decree of God, it may very well be the case that man heard God's word at the precise moment when God's deed was also bringing man to life.<sup>125 126</sup>

**c) Functioning: Administration and Reception**

The functioning of this covenant is precisely what was described in the general summary of the nature of the covenant.

1) God's Administration

(i) *The Promise*

God promises the *blessing* of abundant life and gives that blessing by means of faith and obedience.

God promises the *curse* of death--the loss of life--upon (and by?) disobedience to the law.

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<sup>125</sup>Thus *no* dichotomy may be construed in *any* fashion between the word and deed. Vos elevates the *deed* as earlier and better in the creation account.

<sup>126</sup>Whether man heard God's word "Let Us make man in Our own image..."--and whether that word thereby had a revelatory function--is a paper in itself. It seems best to me to think that God both spoke internally to Himself in His own language, as well as externally to man in man's language, when He said "Let us make man," and that at the instant of man's creation God worked *both* a metaphysical response to His creative word in man's coming into being, *and* the epistemological response of faith and obedience to God's creative-revelatory word which is integral to man's metaphysical composition as a living soul (man's heart is essentially epistemological--it is a knowing, perceiving, thinking, feeling, willing, epistemologically functioning heart from its very beginning). As such, the covenant was epistemologically expressed, and epistemologically received, in both word and deed, from its very beginning at the creation of man.

I would argue this even in the particulars of the way man's body was created first, and his life was breathed into his body second; the distinction between the stages of his creation does not preclude the possibility that God's creative-revelatory word which *preceded* the stages may well have extended *throughout* the stages, guiding, defining, and revealing them, and even continued beyond the stages, being now revealed to us. We might offer further positive support for this by asking, *where* in the text of Gen. 1-2 does God introduce Himself to man, and introduce Himself as man's covenant Lord? There appears to be no formal introduction, unless it is in v. 26 (-28). *Here* is the first mention of man, and *here* is the creation of man. *Here* is the initiation of the relation between God and man. The reason *we* recognize v. 26 (-28) as *our* first direct introduction to the relation between God and man is because the text leads us to take it that way, and the reason the text leads us to receive it that way is that here the text is presenting to us God's first revelation *to Adam* of His covenant relationship with Adam. The text's revelation to us is the extension of God's initial revelation to Adam.

(ii) *The Law*

God requires conformity/obedience to His law.

God discerns or judges people's conformity to His law.

2) Man's Reception

Man can responsibly receive the promise by faith and keep the law by obedience.

Man can *ir*responsibly reject the promise by unbelief and break the law by disobedience.

iv) God's Covenant of Life by means of Grace

The post-fall Adamic Covenant introduces the way in which God can still grant His favor to man in spite of man's sin.

**a) The Term**

It is preferable to call this covenant the Covenant of Life by means of Grace, rather than the Covenant of Grace, in order to emphasize the continuance of the Covenant of Life within the Covenant of Grace, as well as to single out the central factor which distinguishes the second covenant from the first covenant.

**b) Primary Components: Law and Promise**

1) Law

(i) *Substance*

Without a doubt the full substance of the Ten commandments continues to be evident in its obligatory nature, due to the way in which it had been present immediately before the fall.

(ii) *Specific Stipulations*

There are no additional specific stipulations in the initial giving of this covenant relationship with God, other than those which were given before the fall. However, due to the contextual application of those former stipulations, it becomes apparent that after God drove Adam and Eve out of the garden and placed the cherubim at the entrance God did not want Adam

and Eve to re-enter the Garden. Further, there is an implicit obligation placed upon Adam and Eve for them to trust God's promises and predictions concerning the curse which He pronounces upon them and the Serpent. One aspect of that curse which they must believe is the promise that there will be a way of salvation produced through the work of the "Seed."

2) The promise is as follows:

(i) *The Seed*

Central to the production of the salvation spoken of in this covenant is the Seed.<sup>127</sup> The Seed both *represents* the "descendants of Eve" and *is* one of those descendants. These descendants are the *obedient* descendants of Eve, due to the double contrast--they are considered neither the descendants of the evil Serpent nor of the disobedient Adam.

The Seed is going to keep the pre-fall Adamic Covenant perfectly--instead of disobeying God and giving in to Satan's temptations as Adam did, He will exhibit perfect obedience to God and perfect resistance to Satan--thus the words, "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel." The Seed is something of a "second Adam," then, from the perspective of Gen. 3, who will eat of the Tree of Life and bring the blessings of the Adamic Covenant to the obedient descendants of Eve. Because the Seed represents the descendants of Eve, and because it is (according to the logic of the passage) primarily this representation and only secondarily the obedience of the descendants which functions to bring God's blessing to those descendants, it seems to me that perhaps the passage is even teaching that the obedience of the descendants of Eve, while being a necessary condition of the reception of the blessing, is also itself fully an expression of God's blessing by means of grace, meaning that the descendants' obedience *itself* is a gift of God which is produced through and fully dependent on the redemptive work of the Seed.

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<sup>127</sup> Here I am referring to the singular "Seed," who is not the same as the plural/collective "seed," though He appears to represent the plural/collective "seed," which is bound up in Him in its/their redemption.

This appears to be assumed in Gen. 4:6, 7. God commands the impossible, and *gives* what He commands.

*(ii) If one believes the promise concerning the Seed,  
abundant blessings once again become a given*

Although Adam and Eve had just lost the blessings of the covenant, nevertheless God offers the blessings to them once again through faith in the Seed. It appears that the Seed serves to induct man back into the Covenant of Life. Blessing once more becomes a given. However, it also adds the better aspect of the Covenant of Life by means of Grace, in that the blessings cannot be lost by the one who is saved by faith in the Seed.

*(iii) Blessings will be removed and replaced with curses  
if man ceases to obey*

It remains true that if man ceases to obey that man will incur upon himself the curse of God's wrath toward him. However, due to the addition of the work of the Seed, the curse does not fall on the believer but rather on the Seed.

**c) Expression: Word and Deed**

It remains clear that the covenant continues to be expressed in word and deed. But now it is expressed in word and deed, *by grace*.

**d) Functioning: Administration and Reception**

The functioning of this covenant is precisely what was described in the general summary of the nature of the covenant.

1) God's Administration

*(i) The Promise*

God promises the *blessing* of abundant life and gives that blessing by means of faith and obedience.

God promises the *curse* of death--the loss of life--upon disobedience to the law.

(ii) *The Law*

God requires conformity/obedience to His law, with the addition of the requirement of faith in the Seed.

God discerns or judges people's conformity to His law.

2) Man's Reception

Man can responsibly receive the promise by faith and keep the law by obedience.

Man can *ir*responsibly reject the promise by unbelief and break the law by disobedience.

**e) Interrelation with Covenant of Life**

Here the reader must notice that the Covenant of Life is not destroyed in any way, but rather is built upon, with its structure and substance providing the core of the Covenant of Life through Grace. Time will not permit a further demonstration of this through the aspects of the other covenants (the Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, and the New Covenant in Christ), but this same manner of the inclusion of the earlier covenants without modification of the essential features of those earlier covenants is evident throughout Scripture if one will only search the Scriptures to see if this claim is true.

v) The Mosaic symbolic legislation/dispensation of the Covenant of Life by means of Grace

We can at least address the main contention most rejections of the Old Testament bring up. That is the claim that the OT symbolical laws were abrogated with the advent of the New Covenant.

It is much better to understand that the Mosaic symbolic laws (sacrifice, washings, etc.) were intended to communicate (symbolize) various parts of the covenant which existed in the Mosaic Covenant. Due to the centrality of the work of the Seed who was to come to all covenants of grace from Genesis 3:15 onward, it cannot be claimed that the symbols had no

Christological reference in their OT context. Much to the contrary, they taught about the salvation and the covenant which was understood as given graciously by God through the work of the Seed who was to come. Further, those laws were not "abrogated" when Christ came into the scene of history; rather, they were initially intended as symbols of the salvation produced through Christ, and as a result when Christ Himself appeared with His better and more vivid revelation of the same salvation, the symbols became no longer necessary as immediate representations of the covenant. Thus they are not practiced in the New Covenant. However, this secession of their activity was built into their original function, and thus the law which required them to be practiced in the context before the coming of Christ *still applies today in the same general way in which it did in the OT!* It is only the particular requirements of that law which have evidenced the change of application due to the change of context.

### **C. Inclusion and Its Implications<sup>128</sup>**

As we have seen, the proclamation of the covenant is what organizes Scripture. Neither time (Vos), redemption (too narrow), language (philosophy, grammar), historicism, the dialectic, the Freedom-Nature construction, science (liberalism), nor existentialism or mysticism (Neo-orthodoxy) suffice as full-orbed descriptions of the organizing principle of Scripture. It appears further that part of the way in which the covenant works is through the inclusion of the substance of the former covenant(s) as the core of the later covenants. We will have to notice the implications of this for hermeneutics at this point.

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<sup>128</sup>A comparison of the exegesis of particular passages lying behind relatively *Redemptive-Historical* and relatively *Covenantal* interpretations of those particular passages would prove extremely valuable in demonstrating the truthfulness of the following comments. An analysis of sermons and commentaries would be the best place to start. Of course I can't help but do this analysis informally all the time; I just haven't recorded the observations in order to present them here. I leave this project to the reader to do as well as perhaps myself to work on in the future. For the present it appears beyond the scope of possibility to attempt such a comparison in the present project. This paper is weak in that I haven't done detailed research into Vos's sources, the perspectives and influences of his professors, or recorded the research I've done into the teaching and writing of his followers. But I am fully convinced that those who have done at least as much research as I have into these things will recognize that in the essential points I am correct.

First, this appears to follow Scripture more closely. Later parts of Scripture often seem to reiterate teachings which have been presented in earlier parts of Scripture, though a new twist is always added in the later presentation. This can be due to no other reason than that the earlier covenant is being included into the later covenant, and the later covenant is adding more structure and substance on top of and within the distinctions (word) and structures (deed) of the earlier covenant(s).

Further, it does not depend on the *end* of the process of history in order to discover the central nature of revelation or religion. Rather, it takes Scripture at its word that God's covenant with Adam was very good, and falls right in line with the Scriptural view that the first covenant should set up the pattern for the later additions to it. Thus the later parts of Scripture are illuminated by the beginning of Scripture. All later passages must be taken in the context of the passages which came before them, in order to understand the intention of the human author. They may only be compared with later passages in order to ensure that we have not accidentally misinterpreted the already clear presentation found in the earlier passages.<sup>129</sup>

This exegetical method must even work out into the production of systematic theology. The later shows the limits of the earlier, the earlier provides the background and content of / material for the later. The earlier is *content*-defining, the later is *boundary*-defining.

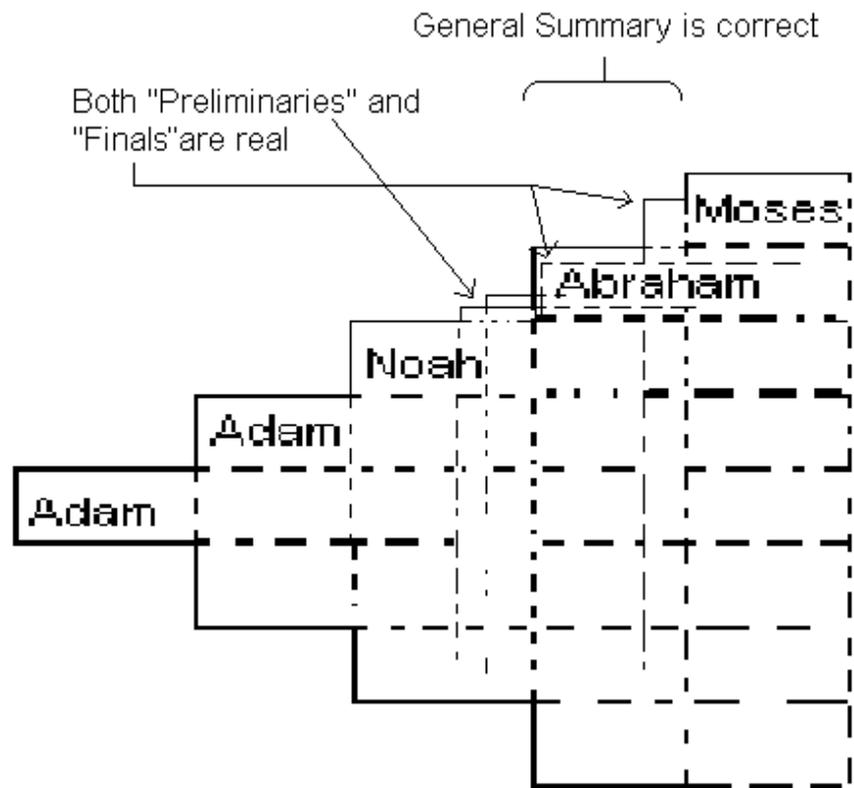
This approach avoids the problems of elevating the promise over the law in the definition of the covenant. It demonstrates the intimate and inseparably interactive functionality of the law and promise. It also avoids the problems of ignoring that the promise includes a promise not only of blessing but also of cursing.

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<sup>129</sup>I recognize now that I need to express more fully the way in which later passages more fully reveal the *goal* toward which the *foundation* provided by earlier passages always was pointing. I'm not trying to exclude the guiding function of the goal. But my general concern to avoid an absolutizing of the goal such that it excludes its foundation remains; we must emphasize the foundation and goal as equally ultimate, and insofar as the foundation is primary, treat it as primary, the goal as secondary. It is on this point I have found much conservative redemptive-historical thought wanting.

This approach allows the text to have a unity of meaning and application which was understood by the original human author, but also allows it to have a diversity of particular implications and applications within the bounds of the unchanging general rules (i.e., the general rules compose the interpretive standard involved with the unity of meaning and application referred to earlier in this sentence) of how it is to be applied in all situations.

**Fig. 5**      Finding the "Beginning" is possible, finding a "Center" is not



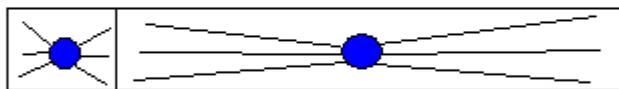
This approach addresses the unity and diversity of the covenant in a near-perfect if not perfect manner. One need not attempt to find the *center* of an "epoch" of redemptive activity, but rather may simply notice the *beginning* of each new aspect of the growth of the covenant while also seeing the perfect continuity of the covenant. This is shown in Fig. 5. Sharp epochal

divisions are unnecessary because the *center* of the epoch is not the concern. Further, there is no difficulty in deciding whether the presentation of (for instance) the covenant with Abraham should be limited to Gen. 12, 15, or 17, but rather a *beginning* is all that need be found, for the covenant with Abraham continues from Gen. 15 until the present. In this regard it is significant that all Christians--participants in the blessings of the New Covenant--are also participants in the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant in that "If [we] are Christ's, then [we] are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." (Gal. 3:29)

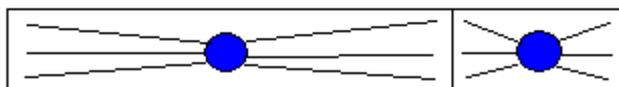
### **Fig. 5, continued**

#### **Epoch's-Center View**

Which is correct:



or



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All of this ultimately serves to preserve the full applicability of Scripture. The word-aspect of the covenant is given full recognition so that the textual organization of the proclamation of the covenant is followed in its outline of major points and sub-points, for the covenant is not simply expressed in *deeds* but also perfectly well in *words*. Thus, it holds neither that Scripture is focused on universal principles to the exclusion of events nor events to the exclusion of principles. This resolves the debate between the Redemptive-Historical method and the Exemplary approach concerning the propriety of preaching about Biblical characters as examples for the present. This has been discussed above. Further, it avoids the limitation of

Scripture's scope of application and concern to merely the "pistic" or "redemptive" aspects of life, as both Dooyeweerd and Vos seem to do.

Most importantly, this view of the nature of Scripture allows us to drink deeply from every passage of Scripture without viewing it as an antique document which does not speak directly but rather only typologically concerning our present life. The way in which this view accomplishes this goal of opening up Scripture to the mind, heart, and life of the believer is that it holds that every section of Scripture is proclaiming the covenant, the covenant whose substance and structure continues to be the core of our present covenant relationship with God, which fills all of life. Genesis 1, 2, 3, etc., from the point in time when Moses composed it until the present, has always been intended to preach the good news of the covenant to regular believers like the reader and myself. This is such a simple point, and is assumed by the believer when he listens with a sincere heart to God speaking through His word. It is because of this inclusion of the earlier covenant(s) into the later ones, and the subsequent proclamation of the good news of this relationship with God to the reader of Scripture, that instruction for all of life may be gained quite directly and immediately from God's word when one catches on to the covenantal structures which God is proclaiming to the reader of His word within the context of his life in the present covenant. While it may take some work and reflection in order to understand the proclamation of Scripture in a particular passage as it applies to one's life, this aspect of the inclusion of the earlier into the later in both the deed aspect of the covenant (= covenantal history) as well as in the word aspect of the covenant (= Scripture) utterly destroys the Kantian problem of the subjective observer who sees a gulf between himself and the supposedly historically-bound and distant text of Scripture and historical events of Scripture. While Vos attempted to bridge this gap by positing the eternal realm of *suprahistorical* heavenly realities, and yet also effectively positing an *historical* antithesis between the earlier and later

parts of the covenant, the understanding of the inclusion of the earlier into the later covenant(s) draws the true organic connection from the eternal God, into creation, into the initial covenant with man, into the present time, and into the future of the covenant in its eventual total perfection of the elect in the New Heavens and the New Earth.<sup>130</sup> We can live in this life with the knowledge of the goodness of the covenant which God has given to us, which includes "heavenly" realities in our "earthly" existence, and which will include earthly realities in the final heavenly existence (note the "New Heavens and the New Earth," as well as the guarantee of the bodily resurrection--1 Cor. 15). God's creation is not deprecated in any way, and the escape we are seeking in this life is not primarily freedom from physical, spatial, temporal existence, but rather the evil, sin, and death which we have allowed into God's good covenantal creation.<sup>131</sup> As was the explicit goal at the beginning of this SIP, so also it is now the accomplished but also continuing goal at the end: God's glory remains central from start to finish.

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<sup>130</sup>In other words, the realities which scripture reveals *are* historical realities. The unity of history is *in history* insofar as it is in the unified *historical* covenant. Heaven and earth, while different realms, are both bound together in the covenant.

Note to self: I would do well to lay out a systematic reconstruction of Vos's doctrine of Heaven and Earth. Some Vosians refer to "heaven" as if it is not distinct from God, and place heaven over against earth such that heaven is not created, but rather eternal, and only earth is created! They say heaven is not part of this creation. Isn't heaven created?! Part of this creation? They must be doing this by accident. But their system drives them to it; perhaps it is intentional. I can see some passages which could lead one to this kind of conclusion, but I still feel that the distinction between God and heaven is more fundamental to Christianity as presented in scripture than is the distinction between heaven and earth. I must not worship the creature, rather than the Creator. The question is whether the identification of God with "heaven" in some passages is absolutely identifying the two, such that heaven is God, or just using their similarity in order to refer to one or the other, or to both together. It is hard to see how anything but the latter options are Christian.

<sup>131</sup>Confer with my paper on the resolution of the disagreement between Vos and neo-Calvinism. The covenant provides such a resolution, allowing the eschaton to retain earthly reality without necessarily retaining all of the particulars of this present life; what remains are the core covenantal structures from this present life, structures which Scripture teaches to include a created metaphysical and even physical context, including in the eschaton that which is called the "New Earth." In this manner creation, whether heavenly creation (Vos's emphasis, though some of his followers accidentally imply that heaven is not created--how is that possible?) or earthly creation (neo-Calvinism's emphasis), does not take the center stage in our eschatology, but rather God, in His glory, manifest in His multifaceted covenant, takes the center stage. Neo-Calvinism focuses on earth, Vos focuses on heaven; neither focuses on the covenant as they ought, and thereby, they focus too much on the creation, and not enough on the Creator. The creation serves the purpose of the covenant, not the other way around. We are not restored to communion first with the New Heavens, nor with the New Earth, but first and foremost, and from beginning to end, our communion is with God. This restructuring of the topics emphasized by biblical theology and neo-Calvinism appears to be more biblical and more systematically perfect, with the result that God's glory is more obviously manifest in all aspects of the covenant which were only more partially treated by Vos and the neo-Calvinists.

## **V. Conclusion**

This project is no doubt incomplete in many ways, in the sense that it can be improved upon and has only given partial answers to many of the questions it has raised. However, it has nonetheless reached its goal within the general parameters which it laid out at the beginning. By way of summary, it appears that the hermeneutics of Geerhardus Vos has two key emphases--the first on the *historical progression* of the history of redemption and the second on the *2 ages* which guide the progress of that history. Christ is central as the one who accomplishes redemption. The problem with this system is that it construes its two poles of the relatively earthly and the relatively heavenly as if they both mutually presuppose and yet simultaneously mutually exclude each other. It falls into this trap, called the dialectic, because it borrowed too much from the patterns of thought of Nineteenth Century Historicism and the Nature-Freedom dialectic of modern philosophy.

The only way out of this trap, it appears, is a return to the view of the glory of God as central to the systematic construction of the covenant--both in its outworking in creation (the deed) and in Scripture (the word). When it comes to systems of thought the focus on God's glory--the grand display of the sumtotal of God's attributes--as the foundational reality and directing presupposition of all of His self-disclosure is essential. This has much to do with understanding correctly the way in which both unity and diversity are both equally ultimate with one another in the being of God, neither mutually excluding the other, and in how God has created both His covenantal word and covenantal work to manifest and proclaim this awesome perfect harmony. When we worship God for all that He is, the true nature of the covenant becomes apparent in that its unity and diversity also exist in a perfect harmony, such that what God wrote down for our blessing in a much different time and place nevertheless speaks to us in

the present as a life-giving stream, a living, powerful, piercing sword, carrying all of the power, meaning, and *life* that it had when the same covenantal word was given at the beginning.

## VI. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Charles Dennison, *Vos and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*. Lecture given on April 18, 1997, in the second-floor lobby of the C. G. Mills Science Building at Covenant College, Lookout Mountain, Georgia. Copies can be obtained from the Covenant library or John Livingston.

Herman Dooyeweerd, *In the Twilight of Western Thought: Studies in the Pretended Autonomy of Philosophical Thought*. Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1960. (His section on the modern worldview, which he calls "Historicism," is revealing. I am borrowing his analysis and critique of the history of philosophy, via Dr. Krabbendam, who borrowed it from Van Til, who borrowed it from Dooyeweerd. I am not, however, borrowing very much of his positive philosophy except insofar as I am concerned to give full emphasis to all of the aspects of reality which are present, a concern partly gained from my interaction with Dr. Krabbendam as well as the Kuyperian influence at Covenant.)

Jochem Douma, *The Ten Commandments: Manual for the Christian Life*. Trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman. Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P& R Publishing Company, 1996. 410 pp.

Sidney Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura: Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts*. Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1970. 251 pp. (Outlines and evaluates the debate between the Redemptive-Historical and Exemplary methods of biblical interpretation in the 1930's and 1940's in the Netherlands.)

Adolf Harnack, *What is Christianity?* Trans. Thomas Bailey Saunders. New York: Harper & Row, 1957. 301 pp.

David E. Holwerda, *Jesus & Israel: One Covenant or Two?* Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 1995. 193 pp.

David Clyde Jones, *Biblical Christian Ethics*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1994. 216 pp.

W. T. Jones, *A History of Western Philosophy*. Second edition. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1969.

\_\_\_\_\_ Vol. III: Hobbes to Hume

\_\_\_\_\_ Vol. IV: Kant and the Nineteenth Century

\_\_\_\_\_ Vol. V: The Twentieth Century to Wittgenstein and Sartre

- Kerux*. Journal of Biblical-Theological sermons and articles. (I have read a large number of sermons and some articles from this journal which were all written from the Redemptive-Historical perspective, although I did not interact directly with them in the writing of this paper.)
- Henry Krabbendam, *Biblical Hermeneutics*. (Unpublished syllabus), 1990. (This helped me more systematically organize my understanding of hermeneutics, and gave me some thoughts on the covenant.)
- Henry Krabbendam, *Christian Apologetics* Syllabus. (Privately published, 1997) 194 pp. (Thoroughgoingly Van Tillian, presuppositional, transcendental. Dr. K.'s forte.)
- Henry Krabbendam, *Christian Doctrine*. (Unpublished syllabus), 1995.
- Henry Krabbendam, *Christian Ethics* Syllabus. ((Privately published: 1997) 140 pp. Appendix is an exegetical outline of Deuteronomy 6-26. (Builds on Van Til)
- Henry Krabbendam, "Hermeneutics and Preaching." In *The Preacher and Preaching: Reviving the Art in the Twentieth Century*. Ed. Samuel T. Logan, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1986) 212-245.
- Henry Krabbendam, *The New Hermeneutic*, in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, & the Bible*. Ed. Earl D. Radmacher and Robert D. Preus. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1984. pp. 535-571. (This gives an excellent presentation of the Freedom-Nature dialectic as it is present in Heideggerian existentialism and the New Hermeneutic.)
- Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth Century Thought*. Trans. David E. Green. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964. pp. 1-50.
- Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1949. pp. 1-19, 52-59, 182-204.
- Maurice Mandelbaum, *History, Man, & Reason: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Thought*. Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971. pp. 41-140.
- Dan McCartney & Charles Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible*. Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1994. 360 pp.
- John Owen, *The Works of John Owen, Vol. IV: The Work of the Spirit: [Book VI., Part II.] Causes, Ways, and Means of Understanding the Mind of God*. Reprint: Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1967. Original printing: Johnstone & Hunter, 1850-53. (pp. 117-234)
- O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*. Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980. 308 pp. (Robertson seems to understand well the importance of fully and equally emphasizing both the unity and diversity of the covenant(s)--more so than other authors--and gives an excellent introduction to the covenants of Scripture.)

Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*. Trans. and ed. Richard Crouter. Cambridge University Press, 1996. 128 pp. (The origin of liberal theology.)

Henry A. Virkler, *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1981. 255 pp.

Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1948. 453 pp.

Geerhardus Vos, *Grace and Glory: Sermons Preached in the Chapel of Princeton Theological Seminary*. Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1994. Pp vii-xii, 67-81, 103-123

Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1930. Pp v-66, 72-93, vii-29, 234-267, 352-360, 400-411.

Geerhardus Vos, *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*. Ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co, 1980. Pp vii-29, 161-267, 352-360, 400-411.

\_\_\_\_\_ *Preface*

\_\_\_\_\_ *Introduction*

\_\_\_\_\_ *The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline*

\_\_\_\_\_ *Eschatology of the New Testament*

\_\_\_\_\_ *Hebrews, the Epistle of the Diatheke*

\_\_\_\_\_ *The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology*

\_\_\_\_\_ *The Idea of "Fulfillment" of Prophecy in the Gospels*

\_\_\_\_\_ *The Theology of Paul*

\_\_\_\_\_ *"Covenant" or "Testament"?*

Geerhardus Vos, *The Self-Disclosure of Jesus: The Modern Debate About The Messianic Consciousness*. Ed. Johannes G. Vos. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954. pp. 13-21.

*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*. Tenth Edition. Ed. Frederick C. Mish. Springfield, Massachusetts: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 1994.

Noel Weeks, *The Sufficiency of Scripture*. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1988. 309 pp.

**Note:** I have read and studied much on related issues, which research cannot adequately be represented in this bibliography. I sat in the redemptive-historical discussion chapel meetings at Covenant College led by Dr. William Dennison nearly every semester there for 4 years, where we read sermons and articles from Vos and Kerux. I took the majority of Dr. Dennison's courses taught at Covenant, and attended lectures and sermons by him and his brother Rev. Charles Dennison. I took Dr. Dan MacDougall's courses at Covenant, and heard a good number of redemptive-historical sermons and lectures from him. I faithfully attended Cornerstone OPC in Chattanooga, TN, during my 6 years at Covenant, and interacted with Covenant's redemptive-historical crowd which primarily attended that church, and was central to the "intelligentsia" folks at Covenant. Likewise, I took nearly all of Dr. Henry Krabbendam's courses at Covenant (Krabbendam inculcated Van Til's methodology in me, a concern for being covenantal, pointed the way for some criticism of Redemptive-Historical hermeneutics, and whose method is more like Bavinck (whom he references a good amount in his systematics) in fully maintaining the biblical protology.)