In recent decades many among the Lord’s people have begun to reinvestigate the details of the gospel. This happy renewal follows a century plagued by inattention and error. To be sure, many errors still vigorously challenge the church’s fidelity to the gospel, but a remnant it seems has awakened. Foremost within this resurgent interest lies a willingness to re-embrace the doctrines of the Reformation. The un-challenged caricatures of Calvinism that previously prevailed are being re-examined and there is a definite shift, especially among younger believers, towards the Calvinistic side of the Calvinistic/Arminian divide. While not universal, the fear of ostracism for being found Calvinistic has diminished. This is not yet true, however, for another element of Reformation theology—that of the old ‘Federal’ or ‘Covenant Theology.’ Yet ultimately these two facets of doctrine should be embraced together because they most clearly summarize the fundamental details of the one Gospel in our one Bible.

Covenant Theology has a simple but profound point of anchor. It finds all of God’s gracious dealings with His people in Christ the Second Adam (Romans 5, 1 Cor. 15). Salvation can be summarized as simply as this: God’s work in bringing believers out of condemnation (with all of its consequences) which they suffer in union with the First Adam, into justification (with all of its consequences) which they graciously receive in union with the Second Adam. This is as true of the first person saved in earth’s history as it will be of the last. While there are changes of outward administration governing the worship of saved people from age to age, the inward spiritual realities present a clear unity to what is called the ‘Covenant of Grace.’ Though some would see at least three different administrations between Eden and Sinai, a remarkable continuity remains between the sacrifices outside the Garden and those of Israel’s Tabernacle and Temple. Significant outward change came when the great Antitype appeared and fulfilled His genuine sacrificial work. After the Second Adam arrived the pictures of the Anticipated One were done away and the completed work of the Crucified One was proclaimed. Light increased from age to age, but greater light was not different light.

Whatever title one chooses for the original arrangement between God and Adam, the ‘Covenant of Works’ resulted in man’s failure and the curse coming upon all creation because its head fell short of perfect obedience (Romans 5:12, 8:22). It is important to realize that the Covenant of Works did not disappear after the Fall. Its
true human nature that Christ rendered perfect obedience unto the Father. ‘Since by man came death, by man
came also the resurrection of the dead' (1 Corinthians 15:21). These texts illuminate
the soul assuring truth that God has not lowered or altered His standard in order to
accept believers. He has honored His law and met its demands in the Person of a
representative. The work of the Incarnate Christ meets the demands of the Law
from both perspectives. Historically these complementary truths are called the
Passive and Active Obedience of Christ. ‘Passive’ refers to His suffering the penalty
of the broken law. ‘Active’ refers to His earning the reward of the same law when
fulfilled. This supplies the very heart of Covenant Theology. The fact that so many
Evangelicals abandoned Covenant Theology in the last century lies behind the
inattention and error that ensued with reference to Justification.

That this vicarious work applies to believers from both testaments clearly
appears in Scripture. NT believers are of the seed of Abraham (Romans 4:16; Gal.
3:29) even though they are Gentiles. The Promise of Israel’s Messiah is the
foundation of the NT Church (Acts 2:39). NT Gentile believers are brought from
their alienated position to come within the one true covenanted people (Ephesians
2:11-13). NT believers are called the ‘Israel of God’ (Gal. 6:16). The list of OT heroes
of the faith concludes with the reminder that they as well as NT believers will come
to completion together (Hebrews 11:40). The gates and foundations of the heavenly
Jerusalem reflect the names of the twelve Tribes and of the twelve Apostles (Rev.
21:12-14). The unity of the Gospel could not be clearer. There is but one Gospel in
our one Bible. One Body of redeemed men is formed—those united to Christ—and if
united Christ, then united to one another in His one Body and as His one Bride.
What a marvel to be received in and as One in whom the Father was ‘well pleased!’