

COVENANT THEOLOGY

(Our study in 2 Peter 2:1, 10-7-08)

Michael A. Harbin:

Covenant theology is a system developed by two men, Johannes Cocceius (1603–1669) and Hermann Witsius (1636-1708). It was an attempt to tie the Old and New Testaments together by two covenants. The first was called the covenant of works, defined as the covenant instituted by God with Adam after creation. This was abrogated by the Fall and was replaced by the covenant of grace. The covenant of grace is the covenant of salvation, a single covenant for all men after the Fall. Thus the unifying feature of the Bible in this system is God's grace.

Covenant theology is built on a weak hermeneutical base which consists of theological constructs. These constructs were established during the 17th century by serious scholars who no doubt genuinely sought to understand God's Word and how it fits together. But it was done without sufficient evaluation of the basic issue of authority and hermeneutical foundations. Conversely dispensationalism is built on the strong hermeneutical base of literal interpretation. As such it has a strong external authority and a consistent method. Since Scripture is the believer's authority, dispensationalism is concluded to be a more effective hermeneutical system.

Dallas Theological Seminary, *Bibliotheca Sacra* Volume 143 (Dallas Theological Seminary, 1986; 2002), 143:257-258.

Charles Fred Lincoln

There is in the Holy Scriptures a distinctive Biblical doctrine of the Covenants. There is also in the writings of a large number of devout and honored theologians a system of doctrine called "The Covenant Theory," or "Covenant Theology." A great difference exists between the Scriptural doctrine and the theological concept. The latter is nowhere constructively taught in the Scripture and was not set forth in a system of teaching until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of the Christian era. Its conception of God's purposes, His present divine program, and His future plans respecting the nation Israel are at notable variance with the doctrine of the Covenants as revealed in the Scriptures. The misuse of the word *covenant* in connection with the theory in question is most unfortunate. Scripture knows nothing of the names: *Covenant of Redemption*, *Covenant of Works*, and *Covenant of Grace*, and the unwarranted and artificial use of the word by the covenantists serves only to misconstrue, divert from, and bedim the real teaching of Scripture regarding the true Covenants.

Dallas Theological Seminary, *Bibliotheca Sacra* Volume 100 (Dallas Theological Seminary, 1943; 2002), 100:309.

John F. Walvoord

The Divine record shows that all the major covenants have been made with the nation Israel or with individuals of that race for the benefit of the nation. Every one of the thirty-three places where the word *covenant* (διαθήκη) is used in the New Testament, there is a reference to and a discussion of the covenant relationships existing between Israel and God as set forth in the Old Testament Scriptures.

This declaration is made with the understanding that the New Covenant was first of all given to Israel, *Jeremiah 31:31–40*, etc., and that the believer of the present age enters into the blessings of that covenant because he is united to Christ who is the mediator of the New Covenant. (Cf. *Matthew 26:28*; *Mark 14:24*; *Luke 22:20*; *1 Corinthians 11:25*; and *2 Corinthians 3:6*). Moreover, twenty-one of these thirty-three New Testament references are found in the epistle to the Hebrews. One major conflict of covenant theology with dispensationalism is Covenant theology regards all dispensations as phases of the one purpose of God expressed in the covenant of grace.

Dallas Theological Seminary, *Bibliotheca Sacra* Volume 107 (Dallas Theological Seminary, 1950; 2002), 107:286.

John F. Walvoord

The entire Old Testament constitutes under covenant theology a progressive revelation of one covenant, the covenant of grace, and all the Biblical covenants are phases or developments of it. The final revelation is given in the New Testament. This in effect declares that God has one central purpose, the salvation of the elect, and that all the dispensations are essentially the fulfillment of this purpose.

By contrast, the premillennial and dispensational interpretation of Scripture builds upon the successive Biblical covenants which are expressly revealed in the Bible, interprets them literally, and conditions the form and responsibility of life in successive dispensations according to the covenants which apply.

Covenant theology is built upon a spiritualizing method of interpreting the Scriptures. In order to make the various covenants of the Old Testament conform to the pattern of the covenant of grace it is necessary to interpret them in other than their literal sense. This is illustrated in the promises given to Abraham and to Israel which are interpreted as promises to the New Testament church.

Berkhof states, in regard to the covenant of grace, "The main promise of God, which includes all other promises, is contained in the oft-repeated words, 'I will be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.' Gen 17:7." The promise was intended to be applied to Abraham's physical seed and to Abraham himself. It is characteristic of covenant theology to appropriate these promises as belonging to all who receive grace under the covenant of grace. The covenant theory allows no place for literal fulfillment of Israel's national and racial promises and either cancels them on the ground that Israel failed to meet the necessary conditions, or transfers them to the saints in general. From the dispensational and literal standpoint, this is misappropriation of Scriptural promises.

A serious objection to the covenant of grace is that it is nowhere directly stated in Scripture in the form claimed by the amillenarian covenant theologians. The concept of an eternal covenant of grace was never seriously advanced until the post-Reformation period when it was proposed by Witsius. It is not contained in the historic creeds of the church as an eternal covenant.

One of the serious errors of the covenant theologians is their disregard of the essentially, legal and non-gracious rule provided by the Mosaic Covenant. The New Testament in no uncertain terms describes it as a ministry of death and condemnation, and it is never described as a way of salvation.

The dispensational view of Scripture taken as a whole is far more satisfactory as it allows for the literal and natural interpretation of the great covenants of Scripture, in particular those with Abraham, Moses, David, and with Israel as a whole, and explains them in the light of their own historical and prophetic context without attempting to conform them to a theological concept to which they are mostly unsuited.

Covenant theology, in a word, conceives the purpose of God as essentially soteriological, or concerned with the salvation of the elect. The unfolding of the successive ages of God's dealings with men is, then, the fulfillment of the divine purpose supposedly embraced in an eternal covenant within the Godhead. This normally issues in a merging of Israel and the church and the point of view which considers the Old Testament, the present age, and the future millennium essentially parts of one progressive purpose. The strongest proponents of covenant theology today are Reformed churches still adhering clearly to Calvin and conservative theology. These are usually amillennial rather than premillennial and are opposed to dispensational theology.

Dallas Theological Seminary, *Bibliotheca Sacra* Volume 110 (Dallas Theological Seminary, 1953; 2002), 110:290.

William G. Bellshaw

The kingdom of God is regarded as the embrative term including the church in the present age and the millennium in the future. Like covenant theology, however, it tends to identify the kingdom as soteriological rather than governmental.

Amillennialism is dominated by Covenant Theology, which theology teaches that God has dealt with man since the Fall on the basis of a covenant of grace; that is, it is God's sole purpose to save the elect in every period of history. Is this God's basic purpose? The Bible in Ephesians 1:4–14 clearly indicates that salvation is not an end product. Rather it is a means to an end, that is, the glory of the Father. Therefore, those who say that the preaching of the gospel is the only thing that matters do not understand the uniform teaching of God's Word. They are reflecting the emphasis of Covenant Theology. They fail to recognize or admit that God has a special purpose for Israel, for the Gentiles, and for the church of God. Negatively it might be mentioned that if Covenant Theology is right, then God has no purpose for angelic beings, since God's purpose for them cannot be soteriological.

Of necessity they must minimize or eliminate any distinctions between such things as the period of the law and the period of grace. This, however, would not be consistent with the teachings of the Apostle Paul, as a simple reading of Romans and Galatians indicates. While premillennialists agree with conservative amillennialists on the plan of salvation, they cannot agree with their view that God's only purpose is a soteriological purpose. Nor should any consistent premillennialist fail to see this ramification of his system of theology.

Dallas Theological Seminary, *Bibliotheca Sacra* Volume 121 (Dallas Theological Seminary, 1964; 2002), 121:161-162.

Gordon R. Lewis

The major unifying concept of Scripture, according to covenant theology, is not divine dispensations, but divine covenants. And the covenants stressed are two: the covenant of works and the covenant of grace (sometimes differently named). The essential elements of the covenants may be seen in the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. Under the covenant of works, God and Adam are the parties involved. The condition for righteousness is obedience, and the reward for disobedience is death. God and Christ for sinners are the parties involved in the execution of the covenant of grace. The condition is faith in Christ for which the reward is eternal life.

Subsumed under the covenant of grace are numerous subordinate covenants, such as those with Abraham and David. The true seed of Abraham are so not by birth, but by faith (Rom 9:8; Gal 3:26, 29). [Compare *Gen. 12:3, 22:18, Gal. 3:14, 16, 26, *29*]

The major emphasis of covenant theology falls upon the one basis of salvation for sinners of all times in Christ. Old Testament people of God exercised the same faith (Heb 11), accepted the same promises (Rom 4:13), and shared the same spiritual life as illustrated by the one olive tree (Rom 11). Therefore, Old and New Testament believers compose one spiritual temple built on one foundation (Eph 2:11–22).

Because of this spiritual unity, covenant theologians generally think they are justified in interpreting all the promises to Israel as fulfilled in the church, and often do not anticipate a historical millennium. In so stressing similarities, covenant theologians tend to overlook important differences. Granting but one plan of individual salvation in all ages, the differences between national Israel and institutional churches are not duly acknowledged.

Dallas Theological Seminary, *Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 125* (Dallas Theological Seminary, 1968; 2002), 125:131.

Charles C. Ryrie

In covenant theology the principle is the covenant of grace. This is the covenant which it is alleged the Lord made with man after the fall in which He offered salvation through Jesus Christ. In short, the covenant of grace is God's plan of salvation, and therefore the unifying principle of covenant theology is soteriological. In dispensationalism the principle is theological or perhaps better eschatological, for the differing dispensations reveal the glory of God as He shows off His character in the differing stewardships [dispensations] culminating in history with the millennial glory.

Dallas Theological Seminary, *Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 114* (Dallas Theological Seminary, 1957; 2002), 114:248.

John A. Witmer

The first criticism of covenant theology is that its "ultimate goal of history is too limited or narrow." For covenant theology the ultimate goal of history is soteriological—"the redemption of the elect." As revealed in Scripture, God is doing more in the world than saving the elect, important as that is. God has other plans and programs all focused on displaying the infinite glory of God. God's ultimate purpose, consequently, is theocentric and doxological.

Second, "Covenant Theology denies or weakens some of the distinctions...in the Bible" such as that between the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants, that between Israel and the church. Somewhat related to this is covenant theology's insistence that all the biblical covenants are merely continuations and new phases of the Covenant of Grace. In addition, "Covenant Theology's Covenant of Grace as its unifying principle is too limited or narrow."

Dallas Theological Seminary, *Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 141* (Dallas Theological Seminary, 1984; 2002), 141:171.