

COVENANT THEOLOGY

Theology is a study of the teaching of the Bible. Covenant Theology considers the teaching of the Bible through the lens of covenant. Everything in the Bible can be, and ought to be, thought of as connected with covenant.

What is a covenant? When two persons, or two groups enter into a covenant with each other, it is a solemn and binding relationship with mutual obligations. On a human level there is the covenant Jonathan made with David (1 Samuel 18:3, 20:16, 23:18, see 20:8, 22:8). Jonathan promised to reveal everything his father Saul planned against David, and pleaded with David to similarly preserve his life. David wanted Jonathan to promise to deal kindly with him, and not like his father. At the time Jonathan was the most powerful of the two, the heir to the throne, and David was a fugitive. Nations through their leaders also made covenants, which today we would call a treaty (e.g. 2 Chronicles 16:3). It was very common for a conquering nation, such as the Assyrians, to impose a covenant on another nation instead of destroying it. Deuteronomy is in the form of such a covenant document, first stating what the Lord has done for Israel, then laying out what the Lord promises to do for them and the obligations of Israel if a peaceful relationship is to continue. So the covenant relationship was a very well known one.

The word 'covenant' is used over 300 times in the Bible. It must be emphasized that the actual word 'covenant' does not have to be used for there to be a covenant. When God entered into a covenant with David in 2 Samuel 7, for example, the word covenant is not recorded in the passage. But elsewhere in the Bible the relationship is termed a covenant (Psalm 89:3, Jeremiah 33:21). What is necessary is that the features of a covenant are clearly seen.

Theology, through the lens of covenant theology, teaches three great covenants which include all the dealings of God with His people, from eternity to eternity.

1. The Covenant of Redemption

This covenant is between the three Persons of the Trinity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It was established in eternity and consists of the plan of redemption. The words, 'covenant of redemption', are nowhere to be found in the Bible. Why do we believe there is such a covenant? The Bible makes it clear that in eternity God had a plan, we call it His 'decree'. *"From all eternity God decreed all that should happen in time, and this He did freely and unalterably, consulting only His own wise and holy will"* (1689 Confession, 3/1). Part of that decree is found in Psalm 2:7-8. It is "the decree the Father made with the Son to resurrect and enthrone Him to an exalted kingly status. Then the Father speaks and promises the Son a great heritage of souls from among the nations and the ends of the earth" (Blackburn, p. 141). Isaiah 42:5-7 reveals that God's servant (Jesus) will be upheld by God and given as a covenant to the people.

In the New Testament Jesus often refers to those "the Father had given Me" (see John 6:37,39, 10:29, 17:2,9,11,12,24). It had been decreed before the foundation of the world

(Ephesians 1:4) that the Lord would come into the world to save these who had been given to Him. In the same way all that Jesus said and did had been determined by the Father beforehand (see John 5:36, 12:49, 17:4,8, and Luke 22:22, 1 Peter 1:18-19, Revelation 13:8). So Paul writes about “the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Ephesians 3:11).

Why is this called a ‘covenant’? Because the features of a covenant are all present.

- The parties. The Father gives the Son a work to do and He comes in to the world to do it. The Spirit acts on behalf of the Father and the Son.
- The requirements. The Son must take a human nature to Himself and be under the law to redeem those for whom He came (see Galatians 4:4-5).
- The promises. The Father promised the Son the Holy Spirit to support Him in His work; to raise Him from death and exalt Him to His right hand; and to send the Holy Spirit to complete the work of redemption in the lives of those for whom Jesus came.
- The rewards. Those who the Father had given Him would be preserved for eternal glory to be with Him. They will be from “every tribe and language and people and nation”.

2. The Covenant of Works

This covenant is between God and Adam as the representative head of all mankind. There is nowhere in the Bible that this phrase, ‘Covenant of Works’, is used. It refers to the specific instructions given by God to Adam as recorded in Genesis 2:15-17. Even here the word ‘covenant’ is not used. Are we correct to label this arrangement as a covenant and call it a covenant of works?

(1) God gave Adam freedom to eat of every tree in the garden except one, that one named ‘the tree of the knowledge of good and evil’. He was prohibited from eating from this tree, and the penalty for disobedience would be death. May we call this a ‘covenant’? Hosea 6:7a may be properly translated, “But like Adam they transgressed the covenant, ...” This is clear evidence that in the garden and before the fall into sin Adam was under a covenant relationship with God. As with all such covenantal dealings of God with His creatures it has the following features:

- It was sovereignly imposed on Adam by God; not something that Adam sought.
- The prohibition against eating of the one tree was designed by God to be a test of Adam’s obedience. Would he refuse to eat just because His God had spoken?
- This arrangement was not for Adam alone. Romans 5:12-19 and 1 Corinthians 15:22 make it very clear that Adam represented all his descendants by birth. When he sinned all were made guilty. It was not just Adam who was expelled from the garden. None of his descendants could go back there.
- The punishment of disobedience was death, both physical and spiritual. The implied promise for obedience was life, a quality of life not yet experienced, symbolized by the tree of life in the midst of the garden (2:9). He had not yet eaten of this tree, and if he would he would be confirmed in that state for ever (see 3:22-23). There was a goal to creation: there were seasonal changes, life was to multiply, Adam was to subdue the earth, the Sabbath pointed to an eternal rest. Adam disobeyed, but Christ obeyed and merited life for His people (Romans 5:17-18).

(2) May we call this a 'covenant of works'? It is so called in our 1689 Confession of Faith 20/1: *"As the covenant of works was broken by man's sin and was unable to confer life, God in His mercy promised to send Christ."* The covenant promise of life would only be attained by perfect obedience to God's command not to eat. It is absolutely essential for the gospel to understand this. Adam was condemned because his works were not perfect before God – he had broken God's command and we all are condemned because of him. In precisely the same, but opposite way, Christ perfectly obeyed because He kept the law of God, and so all who are in Christ are justified. The work of Christ is a work of obedience, fulfilling the covenant of works that Adam had broken. See the contrasts in Romans 5:18 "one trespass ... condemnation, ... one act of righteousness ... justification and life;" and 5:19 "one man's disobedience ... sinners, one man's obedience ... righteous." Justification is possible only by the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer, as Adam's disobedience was imputed to all his posterity. This brings us to the covenant of grace the counterpart to the covenant of works.

3. The Covenant of Grace

This covenant is between God and His people, through Jesus Christ the mediator. Once again the words, 'covenant of grace', are not found in the Bible. However, after Adam's fall into sin, God establishes many covenants until finally there is a new and eternal covenant. This is how the whole of history from eternity to eternity fits together. Before the world was created God had a plan to save a multitude of sinners, the covenant of redemption. God established the covenant of works with the first man Adam, but he broke it, and did not receive the promised blessing. Over the period between Adam and Christ, God promised He would fulfil this covenant of redemption, revealing it in successive covenant administrations. This is the way God chose to reveal and fulfil His eternal promises of redemption, which is why we talk of Covenant Theology.

(1) Adam (Genesis 3:15). Satan through the serpent had been victorious, but now his defeat is proclaimed in what is known as the 'proto-evangelion' or first gospel promise. God Himself will put enmity/hatred between the offspring of the serpent and of the woman. One of the woman's offspring would deal the decisive blow to the head of the serpent, but would be injured in the process. This one offspring is Jesus, for it is He who defeated Satan (e.g. Colossians 2:14). It is not named a covenant but it is the first revelation of the greatest of all promises, the coming of the Redeemer, and His triumph over the enemy. Why did God make this promise? First, because He is a gracious God. Adam and Eve had done absolutely nothing to warrant such a glorious promise. They had not even humbled themselves when God came to meet them in the garden. Second, because His showing grace to sinners was an eternal purpose, not plan B because plan A had failed. Remember the covenant of redemption and read 2 Timothy 1:9.

(2) Noah (Genesis 6:18, 8:20-9:17). Over the succeeding millenia sin multiplied until mankind was ripe for the great judgement of the Flood. Noah alone found favour in the eyes of the Lord (6:8). When Noah emerged after the Flood, what assurance was there that the promise of Genesis 3:15 would be fulfilled, and the world not be totally engulfed? God established His covenant with Noah and all living things as a guarantee that there would be no more flood to

destroy the earth. The rainbow was to be a sign of this. This was necessary if the promised Redeemer were to come, the offspring of the woman.

(3) Abraham (Genesis 15:12-21, 17:1-21). God purposed to choose one man and his descendants through whom “all the families of the earth” would “be blessed” (Genesis 12:3). In preparation for the coming of the Redeemer God promised him that his descendants would become a great nation (12:2, 13:16), that he would be blessed and a blessing (12:2-3); that he would have the land between Egypt and the Euphrates (13:14-15, 15:18-21, 17:8); that he would be the father of a multitude of nations (17:4-6). Galatians 3:16 makes it clear that the offspring promised is Christ and all who are in Christ, that is, believers (3:29). He put it in the form of a covenant to guarantee its fulfilment. This is the significance of the smoking pot and flaming torch (both representing God) passing between the pieces of the sacrifices (Genesis 15:7ff.), as if to say, ‘May I be cut in two if I fail to do what I have promised’ (see also Jeremiah 34:18-20 and Hebrews 6:13-20). Again, this covenant is a great display of God’s grace. What large promises God gave! And the fulfilment was dependent upon God alone! He will do it. It was not because Abraham was seeking God when he was in Ur. He and his family were worshippers of other gods (Joshua 24:2). Though he became a man of great faith, he remained a sinner. He lied about his wife twice. He took his servant Hagar and sought to fulfil the promise in his own way. God did not deal with him as his sins deserved.

(4) Israel through Moses (Old) (Exodus 19:1–20:17). Many wrongly believe that this covenant is the republication of the covenant of works, and not a further administration of the covenant of grace. Here is the evidence that when God gave His law to the descendants of Jacob who came out of Egypt, it was an expression of His grace.

- They had already been redeemed out of Egypt in fulfilment of the covenant with Abraham (Exodus 2:24, 6:6-8, Deuteronomy 9:4-6). God had already brought them to Himself, and He was their God (Exodus 19:4, 20:2). At Sinai He formed them into the nation of Israel (19:6) by giving them laws to live by which separated them from the surrounding nations. Because God’s law is “holy, righteous and good” (Romans 7:12), it is an expression of His grace when He gives it to His people.
- The law given later does not cancel the promise but was given to guarantee its fulfilment (Galatians 3:15-19). “It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made” (verse 19). The law kept the Israelites apart from other nations so that truth would be kept alive, and the offspring kept pure until the coming of Christ. Otherwise they would have totally turned away in transgression to idolatry.
- A covenant of works would be doomed to failure from the start. If Adam, who was made in God’s image, fell by disobeying God’s law, how certain that those already fallen would abandon themselves to disobeying the law of God! There is no law that can give life (Galatians 3:21-22), so God could never have given the law for that purpose, so that the law should never be seen as against the promises. Rather the law has a positive purpose with respect to the promise – a “guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith” (verse 24). One great purpose of the law is to show us that we cannot be justified by the law, for the law shows up our sin (Romans 3:20, 7:7-12).

(5) David (2 Samuel 7). As history moves on, so nearer comes the fulfilment of the eternal purpose of God, first revealed in Genesis 3:15. Who will this 'offspring of the woman' be? It will be one born of woman, so the human race must be preserved (Noah). It will be a descendant of Abraham. It will be a member of the nation of Israel. Now we learn he will be a king, a descendant of David. In this covenant God promises David that there would always be one of his sons to sit on the throne of His people (2 Samuel 7:12-16). The genealogies of Jesus in Matthew 1 and Luke 3 show all the links. So Jesus is the Son of David. "And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:32-33). David's response to the covenant shows it is all of God's grace (2 Samuel 7:18-29).

(6) New (Jeremiah 31:31-34). Our Lord came to save His people from their sins (Matthew 1:21). His death establishes a new covenant, the final and full covenant which will last forever. On the night before His death, at the Passover, He proclaimed, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20, see 1 Corinthians 11:25). His death as a sacrifice establishes this new covenant, this permanent relationship between God and His people. Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Hebrews 8 contrast the new covenant with the old, the covenant at Sinai. There was nothing wrong with the old covenant itself. The problem was with the people, "them". It accomplished all God intended it to do, and pointed forward to Christ, but it could not guarantee the blessings of the new covenant. The blood of bulls and goats could never take away sin (Hebrews 10:4), but the blood of Christ, will "purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God" (9:13-14). What is new about the new covenant?

- There are differences of administration. Instead of a physical temple, the gathered people of God are the temple. All believers are priests. There are no more animal sacrifices, only the one and final sacrifice of Christ, etc.
- God's laws are written on the heart, not just externally on stone.
- It cannot be broken, so none in the covenant will ever be lost (Jeremiah 32:40, Ezekiel 36:27).
- All in the covenant know the Lord savingly, not like under the old where only some were the true people of God (see Romans 9:6).

'Covenant' is the word God uses to describe His relationship with His people. It speaks of a close relationship, 'I am your God, and you are My people' (final occurrence in Revelation 21:3). God pledges Himself to us. We have all the benefits of those who God counts as His people. We don't deserve any of it. God established it sovereignly because that is what He wanted. It is all of grace through the work of Christ and Him alone.