

UNDERSTANDING COVENANT THEOLOGY

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What Is Covenant Theology?

The Importance of Covenant Theology

- Not just vague Christian or Reformed jargon!
- “The doctrine of the covenants is the key of theology” – Charles Haddon Spurgeon
- “The term ‘covenant’ is a biblical one, and any theology which regards the Bible as its canon of faith must inevitably recognize the frequency with which the divine provision of salvation is construed in covenantal forms.” – Peter Golding
- “The covenant idea provides the key to understanding the unity and diversity found in Scripture... It is the divine initiatives represented in the covenants of Scripture that structure biblical history.” – O. Palmer Robertson

What is Covenant Theology?

- An understanding of the Bible in terms of God's covenants with man.
- The Bible's own system of organization, structuring both unity and diversity in Scripture.
- Usually contrasted with Dispensational Theology.
 - Differ especially in terms of the relevance of the OT to Christians, and the relationship of OT Israel to NT Church.
- Relates God's promises and commands to us in terms of the covenants.
- The Bible's way of sealing our assurance of salvation blessing (Heb. 6:17-20).

Where Did Covenant Theology Come From?

- The Bible

- *Gen. 17:7*: I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you
- *Ex. 2:24; 3:6*: “God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob... “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”
- *Luke 1:68, 72*: “Blessed be the God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people... to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant.”
- *Hebrews 13:20*, “Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant...”

Where Did Covenant Theology Come From?

- The Early Church
 - *Epistle of Barnabas* (early 2nd c. A.D.): “[the old] covenant was broken, in order that the covenant of the beloved Jesus might be sealed upon our heart.”
 - *Justin Martyr* (100-165 A.D.): Argued that Jesus was the promised Messiah of the OT; noted the difference between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace.
 - *Iraanaeus of Lyons* (mid 2nd c. A.D.): Employed covenants to structure his theology; divided the Scriptures into Old Testament & New Testament (Latin – *testamentum*; Greek – *diatheke*; English – *covenant*); wrote *Demonstration of the Apostolic Witness*, outlining covenant theology.
 - This perspective was neglected shortly after the patristic era.

Where Did Covenant Theology Come From?

- The Protestant Reformation
 - *Martin Luther* (1483-1546): Law-gospel dichotomy.
 - *Huldreich Zwingli* (1484-1531): Contrasted federal headship of Adam and Christ (Rom. 5:12-21).
 - *Heinrich Bullinger* (1504-75): Advanced Zwingli's covenant theology; emphasized Gen. 17 as the covenant of our salvation.
 - *John Calvin* (1509-64): Trinity, not covenant, key to his theology; saw covenant as the key to salvation history; emphasized God's sovereignty in covenant theology.
 - *Caspar Olevianus* (1536-87): Applied covenant outside of redemption; introduced idea of cov. of works and external administration of the covenant.

Where Did Covenant Theology Come From?

- Dutch and Puritan Theology
 - Emphasized bi-covenantal system (works and grace) and federal representation.
 - *Robert Rollock* (1555-99): Doctrine of covenant of works.
 - James Ussher, William Perkins, William Ames (late 16th & early 17th c.): Bi-covenantal system made explicit (*Irish Articles*, 1615).
 - *Johannes Cocceius* (1603-69): Fully developed covenant theology (*The Doctrine of the Covenant and Testament of God*, 1648).
 - *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1642-47): Covenant theology as overarching framework.

What is a Covenant?

- “A covenant is a *bond in blood sovereignly administered*” – O. Palmer Robertson.
- Covenant as a *Bond*:
 - Parity covenants (mutual compacts) in the Bible: Genesis 21:27, “So Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two men made a covenant.”
 - God’s covenants with man are *not* mutual compacts.
 - Legal, relational, or both? The example of marriage.

What is a Covenant?

- Covenant as *bond*, cont.:
 - Covenant as *pact* or *oath-bond*.
 - Gen. 22:17: “I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore” (Gen. 22:17).
 - Ex. 24:3: “All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do” (Ex. 24:3).
 - James Boice: a covenant is “a solemn promise confirmed by an oath or sign.”
 - *Royal Grant covenants*: Gen. 9:11: “I will establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” (see also Gen. 15; 2 Sam. 7:1-17).
 - *Suzereign-Vassal covenants*: Mosaic Covenant – “I solemnly warned your fathers when I brought them up out of the land of Egypt, warning them persistently, even to this day, saying, Obey my voice. Yet they did not obey” (Jer. 11:7-8).

What is a Covenant?

- Covenant as a bond *in blood*:
 - Issues of life and death (Gen. 2:16-17; Gen. 15:17).
 - Promises of blessing; obligations of obedience.
 - *Cutting* a covenant.
 - Eternal life the ultimate covenant blessing.
 - Death the penalty for breaking God's covenant: Heb. 9:22: "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins." Mt. 14:24: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many."

What is a Covenant?

- Covenant as *sovereignly administered*:
 - *Not* negotiated contracts: imposed by the sovereign King.
 - Many covenants are bi-lateral in their functioning, but they are all unilateral in initiative.
 - Covenant-making as a function of Lordship.

What does it all mean?

- To be in covenant with God is *to benefit from the covenant (or federal) representation and headship of another*.
 - Through covenant theology, the Bible teaches not merely what is our obligation to God, but more centrally what God has done for our salvation, and how sinners are reconciled by God to Himself.
- To be in saving covenant with God is *to be the recipient of God's oath-bound promises*.
 - God has not only given his promises, but he has sovereignly bound himself with a covenant oath. Hebrews 6:17-19 tells us that God bound himself not to ensure his own faithfulness – which is hardly needed – but so that “we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul.”

What does it all mean?

- To be in covenant with God is *to have received obligations from God as His people*.
 - “He has now reconciled [you] in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel” (Col. 1:22-23).
- To be in saving covenant with God is *to enter an eternal relationship of love with God in Christ*.
 - “Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go” (Gen. 28:15).
 - “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:25-27).
 - “As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you” (Isa. 62:5).

Suggested Reading

