

# AN OVERVIEW OF COVENANT THEOLOGY

## RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN “REFORMED” AND “COVENANT THEOLOGY”

- “‘Reformed tradition’ is a term often used by Presbyterians and people in related groups to reflect their theological system. This is a catchall term that reflects all the various facets of theology that arose as part of the Reformation. The ‘Reformed Tradition’ seems to include Calvinism, covenant theology, and amillennialism, as well as the Presbyterian form of church government... It would appear then that the Reformed tradition is not an explicit system of doctrine but a history or development of doctrine. That is, the Reformed tradition is the *historical process of the church clarifying views on specific points of theology by dealing with issues as they arose*. As issues came to the fore, the church, through debate and consultation with the standards of Scripture clarified what was truth and what was heresy.”<sup>1</sup>
- The Key Reformed Doctrinal Distinctives:
  1. Trinitarian Theology – the full deity and uniqueness of Jesus Christ as having 2 distinct but inseparable natures (fully divine, fully human) in 1 person; and the personality and deity of the Holy Spirit
  2. Historicity of (non-evolutionary) creation, prophecy, miracles
  3. Reality of everlasting damnation as a judgment upon man’s guilt
  4. The 5 *solas* of the Reformation: a) Sola Scripture (Scripture alone); b) Sola Gratia (Grace alone); c) Sola Fide (Faith alone); d) Solus Christus (Christ Alone); e) Soli Deo Gloria (for the glory of God alone)
  5. Rejection of: Mary’s intercession, treasury of merit, prayers to the saints, confessional, penance, purgatory, indulgences as well as papal infallibility and apostolic succession
  6. Priesthood of every believer
  7. The sovereignty of God and his foreordination of every event (yet which does not preclude man’s freedom and responsibility)
  8. Salvation in which regeneration is solely by the Holy Spirit, apart from man’s cooperation (monergism not synergism); reflected in the 5 points of Calvinism: a) Total Depravity; b) Unconditional Election; c) Limited Atonement; d) Irresistible Grace; e) Perseverance of the Saints
  9. Necessity of sanctification (growth in holiness) for those who are saved
  10. Impossibility of moral perfection in this life, prior to glorification
  11. Rejection of mystical means of sanctification and charismatic revelations today
  12. Affirmation of the state, just war, and private property
  13. Rejection of the physical presence of Christ in or around the communion elements (transubstantiation, consubstantiation)
  14. Regulative principle of worship (whatever is not commanded is forbidden) – thus the rejection of superstitious rites, icons, human liturgical innovations
  15. Presbyterian church government (multiple elders, no monarchical bishops)
  16. Necessity of church discipline
  17. Underlying unity of all Biblical covenants, supplementing each other and all centered on Jesus Christ (i.e. the unifying feature of the Bible is God’s grace)
  18. Unity of God’s people in all ages (the church is the “new Israel”)
  19. Baptism of believers’ infants as included in the covenant of grace today
  20. Baptism by pouring (sprinkling); immersion is not Biblically required
  21. Amillennialism (the millennium is during the church age and is followed immediately by Christ’s return, a general resurrection of saved and lost, and then final judgment); results in a denial of a rule of Christ upon the earth for a literal thousand years following the rapture
- \* Note: While we would hold to many/most of the tenets of the Reformed tradition, we do not hold to the

<sup>1</sup> Michael Harbin, “The Hermeneutics of Covenant Theology” in *Vital Prophetic Issues*, ed. Roy Zuck, 32.

latter tenets (#17-21) which are specifically associated with covenant theology

\* Thus, strong advocates of Reformed theology do not always necessarily hold to Covenant Theology

- “Covenant theology is a system of interpreting the Scriptures on the basis of two covenants: the covenant of works and the covenants of grace. Some covenant theologians specify three covenants: works, redemption, and grace. Covenant theology teaches that God initially made a covenant of works with Adam, promising eternal life for obedience and death for disobedience. Adam failed, and death entered the human race. God, however, moved to resolve man’s dilemma by entering into a covenant of grace through which the problem of sin and death would be overcome. Christ is the ultimate mediator of God’s covenant of grace.”<sup>2</sup>
- In CT, the various covenants described in Scripture (e.g., the covenants made with Noah, Abraham, Moses, David and the New Covenant) are seen as outworkings of either the covenant of works or the covenant of grace

## HISTORY OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF COVENANT THEOLOGY

- It was primarily a system that was developed in Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> centuries
- CT found a mature form in the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1646 which is often viewed as a primary expression of CT

### Westminster Confession Chapter 7 – Of God’s Covenant With Man

I. The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto Him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of Him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which He has been pleased to express by way of covenant

II. The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.

III. Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace; wherein He freely offers unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ; requiring of them faith in Him, that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life His Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe.

IV. This covenant of grace is frequently set forth in scripture by the name of a testament, in reference to the death of Jesus Christ the Testator, and to the everlasting inheritance, with all things belonging to it, therein bequeathed.

V. This covenant was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the Gospel: under the law it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all foreshadowing Christ to come; which were, for that time, sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation; and is called the Old Testament.

VI. Under the Gospel, when Christ, the substance, was exhibited, the ordinances in which this covenant is dispensed are the preaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper: which, though fewer in number, and administered with more simplicity, and less outward glory, yet, in them, it is held forth in more fullness, evidence, and spiritual efficacy, to all nations, both Jews and Gentiles; and is called the New Testament. There are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations.

- Johannes Cocceius (1603-1669) was a leader in the development of CT and the one who first systematized it
- In his 1648 work, *Doctrine of the Covenant and Testaments of God*, Cocceius expounded the concepts of two covenants—the covenants of works and grace

<sup>2</sup> Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, 503.

- He made these covenants the basis and background of all God’s dealings with man and made the idea of “covenant” the governing category of Scripture
- Herman Witsius (1636-1708) gave further clarification to CT
- He was responsible for extending the covenant of grace concept back into eternity
- This linking of the covenant of grace with the eternal decrees of the Godhead led to the introduction of a third covenant – the covenant of redemption
- CT came to America via the Puritans and the writings of Francis Turretin and John Cotton
- The concept of CT came to full development in America by the Princeton theologians Charles Hodge, A.A. Hodge, B.B Warfield, Geerhardus Vos, and J. Gresham Machen
- Some well known Covenant theologians today include: R.C. Sproul, Ligon Duncan, Vern Poythress, Michael Horton, Greg Bahnsen, J. I. Packer, and O. Palmer Robertson

## THE “COVENANTS” OF COVENANT THEOLOGY

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- The covenants studied to this point (AC, MC, DC, NC) are all biblical covenants and they provide the foundation for our understanding of the end times
- However, the covenants which CT depends upon are not necessarily these covenants
- Rather, the covenants of CT are theological ones, suggested by theologians

### Covenant of Works

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- This covenant is said to be in operation from the creation of Adam through the Fall
- It was made with Adam before the Fall and promised him (and his descendants) eternal life if they obeyed the Lord and death is they disobeyed
- It consisted of 3 things:
  1. A promise of eternal life upon the condition of perfect obedience throughout a probationary period
  2. The threat of death upon disobedience
  3. The sacrament of the tree of life
- Although there is no specific mention of a covenant in the early chapters of Genesis, the existence of a covenant is implied in Genesis 2:16-17

**Genesis 2:16-17** ~ The LORD God commanded the man, saying, “From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.”

- In God’s promise of punishment for disobedience there is an implicit promise of blessing for obedience
- This blessing would be the opposite of death...namely, it would involve physical life that would not end and spiritual life in terms of a relationship with God that would go on forever
- The presence of the tree of life in the garden (Gen 2:9; 3:22, 24) also signified the promise of eternal life with God if Adam and Eve had met the conditions of a covenant relationship by obeying God completely until he decided that their time of testing was finished
- After Adam sinned, God removed him from the Garden so that he would not be able to eat from the tree and live forever (Gen 3:22)
- Further Scriptural support for this covenant is said to be found in the following passages:  
**Hosea 6:7** ~ But like Adam they have transgressed the covenant; There they have dealt treacherously against Me.

- It is argued that this passage views Adam as existing in a covenant relationship that he then transgressed in the garden of Eden

#### Romans 5:12-21

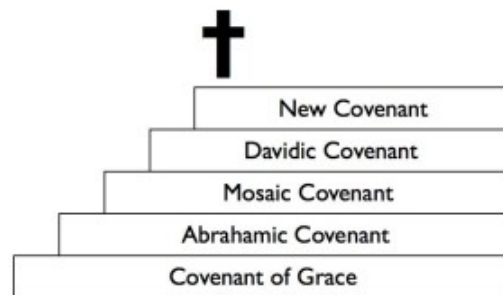
- It is argued that Paul sees both Adam and Christ as representative heads, something that is entirely consistent with the idea of Adam being in a covenant before the Fall

### Covenant of Grace

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- According to CT, Adam, the federal head of the human race, failed the covenant of works
- As a result, God then instituted another covenant, the covenant of grace in order to bring salvation through Christ
- This allegedly is a covenant made between God and the elect after the Fall in which salvation is given to those who trust in Christ by faith
- It is the gracious agreement after the fall between God and the elect sinner, in which God promises salvation through faith in Christ
- Key elements of this covenant:
  1. It began with Abraham (or perhaps Adam) and goes on until at least the 2<sup>nd</sup> coming of Christ
  2. It is operating now such that God's great purpose is the salvation of the elect
  3. Each covenant named in the Bible (such as the Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and New covenants) is simply another stage of the progressive revelation of the nature of the covenant of grace throughout history; thus, there is significant continuity between the covenants of Scripture since they are all outworkings of the alleged covenant of grace
  4. Those who through faith become part of this covenant form one, and only one, people of God known as the church, or true Israel
  5. All of Scripture is to be interpreted through this paradigm; in other words, CT views both history and prophecy through the lens of the covenant of grace and this directs their interpretation of Scripture

### Covenant Theology



- The Scriptural support for this “covenant” is given from the various passages that speak of salvation by grace and the various passages that speak of the New Covenant

**Jeremiah 31:33** ~ “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the LORD, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

**Jeremiah 32:38-40** ~ They shall be My people, and I will be their God; 39 and I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear Me always, for their own good and for the good of their children after them. 40 I will make an everlasting covenant with them that I will not turn away from them, to do them good; and I will put the fear of Me in their hearts so that they will not turn away from Me.

**Ezekiel 36:25-28** ~ Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. 26 Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances. 28 You will live in the land that I gave to your forefathers; so you will be My people, and I will be your God.

**Hebrews 8:10** ~ FOR THIS IS THE COVENANT THAT I WILL MAKE WITH THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL AFTER THOSE DAYS, SAYS THE LORD: I WILL PUT MY LAWS INTO THEIR MINDS, AND I WILL WRITE THEM ON THEIR HEARTS. AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE.

## **Covenant of Redemption**

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- Many Covenant theologians affirm a third covenant, the covenant of redemption
- This is a covenant that supposedly took place in eternity past between the members of the Trinity
- The persons of the Trinity entered into a solemn covenant in eternity past wherein each person of the Godhead assumed a part in the plan of salvation
  - The Father would plan the redemption through election and predestination
  - The Son would offer Himself to the Father as a perfect vicarious sacrifice
  - The Holy Spirit would agree to administer the plan of salvation by regenerating and sealing believers
- Thus, CT affirms that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit covenanted together for the redemption of the human race
- According to CT, the Father commissioned the Son to be the Savior, and the Son accepted the commission, becoming the redeemer and head of the elect and agreeing to fulfill all righteousness by obeying the law of God
- Scriptural support this covenant is given in:

**Luke 22:29** ~ and just as My Father has granted Me a kingdom, I grant you

**John 10:18** ~ No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father.”

**John 17:4** ~ I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do.

**Ephesians 1:3-14**

### **THE THEOLOGICAL COVENANTS**

<b>COVENANT OF REDEMPTION</b>	<b>COVENANT OF WORKS</b>	<b>COVENANT OF GRACE</b>	
<i>ETERNITY PAST</i>	<i>BEFORE THE FALL</i>	<i>Old Dispensation</i>	<i>New Dispensation</i>
		<b>ISRAEL = CHURCH</b>	

\*Taken from Paul Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy*, 80.

## **OTHER COMMON ELEMENTS OF COVENANT THEOLOGY**

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## **Key Hermeneutical Beliefs**

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- A spiritualizing approach to Scripture when it comes to prophetic passages
- “[T]he interpretation of figurative speech requires something other than an explicit, straightforward, dictionary meaning of the word. A figure, in whatever sense, requires recognition of the fact that it is a figure, and that its interpretation transcends the explicit word value. This would seem to imply that the interpretation of figurative language is beyond the score of the literal method of interpretation.”<sup>3</sup>
- The NT interprets/reinterprets the OT...it views the NT as having priority over the OT
- This means that the NT is viewed as the interpreter and even reinterpreter of the OT
- For Covenant theologians, the OT-NT relationship is often described as one of ‘type-antitype’ and ‘shadow-reality’ in which the new supersedes the old
- A major implication of this type-antitype understanding of the testaments is the assertion that the nation Israel was a type that has given way to the superior anti-type—the Christian church composed of both Jews and Gentiles
- Thus, according to CT, the true Israel is now the church and the promises to Israel about a land and a temple find a spiritual fulfillment in the church

## **Key Theological Beliefs**

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- Covenant is the overarching theme through which God’s purposes should be understood
- The Davidic/Messianic/Millennial kingdom is in full operation in this age between the two comings of Christ in that Christ is currently ruling his kingdom from David’s throne
- The church is the new/true Israel that supersedes national Israel’s place as the people of God
- The Mosaic Law or aspects of the Mosaic Law are still in effect today
- Belief in infant baptism in which non-saved children of believers are part of God’s covenant community

## **AN CRITIQUE OF COVENANT THEOLOGY**

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### **The Problem of the “Covenants” of Covenant Theology**

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- The covenants of CT, which are claimed to be the framework for understanding the Scripture, are not clear in Scripture
- Is there a covenant of works?
  - Nowhere does Scripture explicitly state that God made a covenant with Adam in Eden
  - While covenant theologians sometimes appeal to Hosea 6:7 and Isaiah 24:5-6 for support for the covenant of works, there is significant question as to the interpretation of those texts in reference to a covenant of works
  - It is possible to believe in the concept of federal headship (see Romans 5:12-21) without believing in a covenant of works
- Is there a covenant of grace?

<sup>3</sup> Michael Harbin, “The Hermeneutics of Covenant Theology” in *Vital Prophetic Issues*, ed. Roy Zuck, 37.

- Although passages like Genesis 3:15, Jeremiahs 31:31-34, and Hebrews 8:10 are used to support a covenant of grace, it must be asked, “Where is this covenant specifically revealed in the Bible?”
- Does the fact that “grace” is an important theme in Scripture mean that there is a “covenant of grace” by which we must interpret the other covenants of the Bible?
- Is there a covenant of redemption?
  - It is difficult to see any Biblical support for a specific ‘covenant of redemption’
- It seems that the covenants of CT are the products of CT’s theological system rather than the product of sound exegesis
- They must rely upon deduction and logic applied to certain Scriptural passages to explain their view
- Thus, how can we build an entire theological system on the foundation of 3 covenants that are not once mentioned or described in any clear passage of Scripture?
- True “covenant theology” should start with the actual biblical covenants

### **The Problem of the Hermeneutics of Covenant Theology**

- CT uses the spiritualizing approach to Scripture
- “‘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...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 has failed to meet the necessary conditions or transfers them to the saints in general.’...those biblical covenants cannot rightly be treated that way. As eternal, unconditional covenants, they require that God fulfill them with the same people that He made the covenant agreement with originally. Spiritualizing tampers with the promises and provisions of those covenants and casts some doubt on the interpretation that is given. It is interesting to remember that covenant theologians generally approach the Scriptures in a literal way (the historical-grammatical method). But when it comes to some prophetic portions, they employ another hermeneutical approach, that of spiritualization. Using this dual hermeneutic weakens their approach considerably.”<sup>4</sup>
- Related to this, it is hermeneutically inappropriate to read the NT back into the OT
- Doing so does not grant justice to the historical-grammatical context of the OT passages
- Using this understanding of Bible interpretation, CT often leads to artificial exegesis and overdependence on figurative language, typology and allegory

### **The Problem of the Failure to Distinguish Between Israel and the Church**

- The Bible does not present the NT church as the new Israel that becomes the sole heir of national Israel’s covenants and promises
- Nowhere does the NT identify the church as Israel...including Galatians 6:16
  - **Galatians 6:16**~ And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God
    - Covenant theologians says that “and” = “even”; therefore says it says “peace and mercy be upon them (believing Gentiles), *even* upon the Israel of God” thus equating believing Gentiles with Israel
    - But Paul is simply saying that all are saved in the same way, whether Jew or Gentile, because both Jew and Gentile were present in the Galatian church
- Plus, the NT affirms the OT expectation of a salvation and restoration of national Israel (Matt 19:28; 23:37-39; Acts 1:6; 3:19-21; Romans 11)

<sup>4</sup>Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy*, 80.

- Thus, the replacement theology/supersessionism which undergirds CT must be rejected because Israel and the church are distinct!

## 72. A Dispensational Comparison of Israel and the Church

		Israel	Church
<b>SIMILARITIES</b>		—NEITHER REPRESENTS THE TOTALITY OF GOD'S PROGRAM. — BOTH SHARE IN THE LARGER KINGDOM PROGRAM OF GOD. —BOTH ARE DESIGNED TO GLORIFY GOD, THOUGH IN DIFFERENT WAYS. —THERE IS A CONTINUITY BETWEEN THE TWO ENTITIES.	
<b>D I S T I N C T I O N S</b>	<b>Relation</b>	Relationship based on physical birth	Relationship based on spiritual birth
	<b>Headship</b>	Abraham	Christ
	<b>Nationality</b>	One nation	From all nations
	<b>Divine Interaction</b>	National and individual	Individual salvation but relationship in the body of Christ.
	<b>Dispensations</b>	From Abraham on	Restricted to this age only
	<b>Governing Principle</b>	Embodied in the Mosaic covenant (in the future, the new covenant)	A grace system that includes law

\* Taken from Wayne House, *Charts of Christian Theology*

### The Problem of Biblical Covenants as Revelations of the Covenant of Grace

- Nowhere does the Bible explicitly or implicitly state that the biblical covenants are the outworking of one covenant of grace
- They are not various expressions of one covenant between the Father and the elect
- They include many elements other than those pertaining to salvation and God's efforts to redeem the elect (land, seed, King ruling on the earth on David's throne, etc.)
- Furthermore, the Mosaic Covenant was not a grace covenant, but a temporary, conditional covenant
- Thus, the biblical covenants should be defined and differentiated based on how the Bible describes them

### The Problem of the Goal of Covenant Theology Not Being Broad Enough



- While it is true that a major focus of God’s redemptive activity in both the OT and NT is the redemption of the elect, it is not God’s all-inclusive purpose
- The ultimate goal of history has to be large enough to incorporate all of what God is doing, not just part of it
- “God does have varying purposes for the church, Israel, Gentiles, the saved, the unsaved, holy angels, fallen angels, and the universe itself. All these factors cannot be forced into the confines of the theological covenant of grace. Not recognizing the varying purposes of God will often lead to unbiblical eschatological positions, such as that Israel has no future as a national entity.”<sup>5</sup>

### **The Problem of Infant Baptism**

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- According to CT, if the Israel of the OT used circumcision on its children, then the new Israel – the church – should use baptism on its children as well
- However, nothing in the NT indicates that infant baptism has replaced circumcision

### **FINAL THOUGHTS<sup>6</sup>**

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- Here are some final observations relating to those who hold to CT:
  1. Many CT should be considered true brothers/sisters in the Lord
  2. Most CT have a great respect for the authority of God and His Word
  3. Many CT engage in Christ-centered preaching
  4. Most CT possess tremendous awe of God in worship
  5. They also uphold the dignity of the role of pastor
- Yet despite these realities, we must also observe that:
  6. There is a blurring of Bible distinctions within CT
  7. There is hermeneutical confusion within CT
  8. There is a danger to children spiritually because there is no need within CT to press them to trust Christ as Savior

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>6</sup> Adapted from “Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism” in *Voice Magazine*, May/June 2007, 10-11.