

# The Doctrine of the End Times

## WEEK 2: Overview of Covenant Theology

### INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

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- The word “eschatology” comes from the Greek adjective ἐσχατος (“last”) and refers to the study of “last things” or “end times.”
- More specifically, it refers to the study of biblical prophecy about the future events surrounding the end of the age when the Lord Jesus Christ returns to earth to bring about the restoration of all things.
- The study of the end times has brought with it much debate on the timing and the means by which biblical prophecy will be fulfilled. Topics such as the timing of the rapture, the understanding of the Millennial Kingdom, Dispensationalism, and Covenant Theology are all connected to eschatology.
- Because of this, we will take time over the next six weeks to unpack some of the major end times issues, as well as the implications of those in how we approach and interpret Scripture.
- Our schedule will look like this:
  - Week 1: Introduction to the Doctrine of the End Times
  - **Week 2: Overview of Covenant Theology**
  - Week 3: Overview of Dispensationalism
  - Week 4: Views on the Millennial Kingdom
  - Week 5: Why There Needs to be a Millennial Kingdom
  - Week 6: What is the Day of the Lord?

### INTRODUCTION

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- As mentioned last week, this class will be focusing in on some of the key end times issues, looking to discern the truth biblically, through faithful hermeneutical principles and rooted in exegesis.
- Specifically, over the next two weeks, we are going to be looking at two theological systems that have developed to try and understand how God has been working throughout redemptive history, detailing:
  - The key eschatological implications of these systems
  - The main tenets and distinctions between them
  - Key passages used to defend these systems
  - Biblical critiques of each system

- Put simply, as we come to these theological systems, we want to have the mindset of the Bereans, “*examining the Scriptures to see whether these things [are] so.*” (Acts 17:11)
- Today, we will be unpacking and seeking to understand Covenant Theology.

## WHAT IS COVENANT THEOLOGY?

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- As stated earlier, Covenant Theology is a theological system developed in the 16<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> Century to discern how God has been working throughout redemptive history, as well as the purpose.
- “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>1</sup>
- This system does not ignore the biblical covenants (Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, New), however they view these as an outworking, or progression, of these theological covenants (works, grace).

## WHAT ARE THE KEY TENETS OF COVENANT THEOLOGY?

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- Let’s examine the key distinctives of Covenant Theology, as well as the Scriptural support for this system.

### I. The “Covenants” of Covenant Theology

- The foundation of Covenant Theology are the *theological* covenants that the system is built upon. These are the covenants of works, grace, and redemption.

#### 1. The Covenant of Works

- The covenant of works is the covenant said to be in operation from the creation of Adam through the Fall in Genesis 3. (sometimes called the covenant of creation)
- This covenant was made with Adam, as the representative/head of all mankind, before the Fall and promised him (and his descendants) eternal life if they obeyed the Lord and death is they disobeyed.
- This covenant consists of three things:
  - A promise of eternal life upon the condition of perfect obedience throughout a probationary period.
  - The threat of death upon disobedience.
  - The sacrament of the tree of life.

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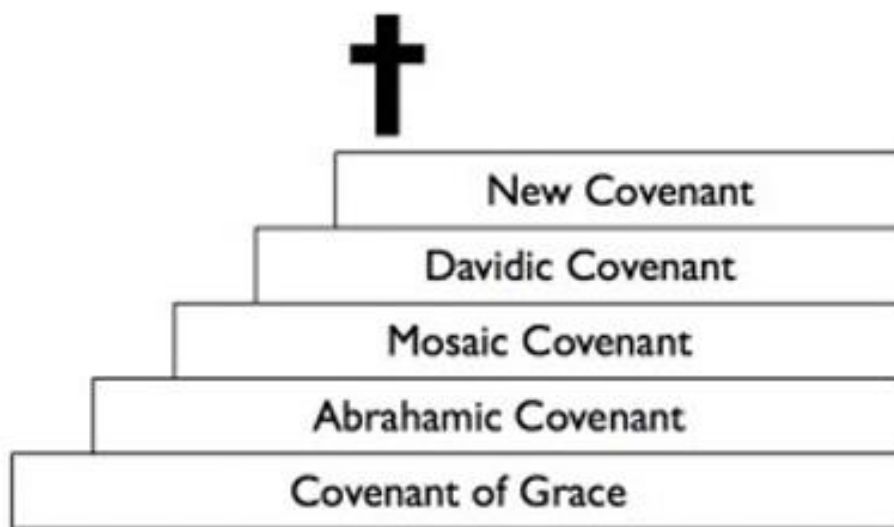
<sup>1</sup> Paul Enns, The Moody Handbook of Theology, 503.

- While the term “covenant” is not used in Genesis 1-2, those that hold to Covenant Theology would claim that the existence of a covenant is implied in Genesis 2.
  - **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.”*
  - With the conditional nature between God and Adam (disobedience = death, and, by implication, obedience = life), covenant theologians would see this as representing terms for the covenant.
- 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 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).
- Covenant theologians would see support for this in other passages of Scripture:
  - **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.
  - **Isaiah 24:5-6** - *The earth is also polluted by its inhabitants, for they transgressed laws, violated statutes, broke the everlasting covenant. Therefore, a curse devours the earth, and those who live in it are held guilty. Therefore, the inhabitants of the earth are burned, and few men are left.*
    - It is argued that this passage looks to consequences of the referenced covenant being broken as a call to the covenant with Adam being broken, resulting in sin entering the world.
  - **Romans 5:12-21** – *Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned... Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come...But the free gift is not like the transgression. For if by the transgression of the one the many died, much more did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many... For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.*
    - It is argued that Paul sees both Adam and Christ as representative heads, and that Christ functions as covenant representative in a way analogous with Adam.

## 2. The Covenant of Grace

- According to Covenant Theology, Adam, as 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.
  - It is held that God made a covenant of grace with His people, pledging to save them in Christ. In turn, believers respond in faith, trusting Jesus alone for salvation, which results in faith bearing fruit in a life of faith and obedience.
- Key elements of this covenant:
  - The covenant of grace is first announced in Gen 3:15, where God promises to crush the serpent who introduced sin into the world, and it will be in effect until at least the 2nd coming of Christ.
  - It stands as God's great purpose and the theme of Scripture: the salvation of the elect.
  - Each of the biblical covenants (Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and New) are simply another stage of the progressive revelation of the nature of the covenant of grace throughout history
    - Because of this, there is significant continuity between the covenants of Scripture since they are all part of the alleged covenant of grace.

## Covenant Theology



- Those who, through faith, become part of this covenant form one, and only one, people of God known as the church, or true Israel.

- All of Scripture is to be interpreted through this paradigm.
  - In other words, Covenant Theology views both history and prophecy through the lens of the covenant of grace.
- So, whereas the covenant of works exists as its own covenant to Adam, the covenant of grace is essentially the thread connecting all of the biblical covenants.
  - Uniquely, the covenant of grace is unfolded in the history of salvation in a series of covenants that make God's promises to His people clearer and point to the coming of the Savior.<sup>2</sup>
- Because of this, Scriptural support for this covenant is tied to those passages that speak of salvation by grace and the giving of the New Covenant (seen as the ultimate fulfillment of the covenant of grace)
  - **Jer 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."*
  - **Jer 32:38-40** - *They shall be My people, and I will be their God; 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. 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.*
  - **Ezek 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. 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. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances. You will live in the land that I gave to your forefathers; so you will be My people, and I will be your God.*

### 3. The Covenant of Redemption

- The covenant of redemption refers to the covenant made in eternity past between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to redeem a people for the glory of God and the eternal good of His people.
- According to the terms of this covenant, 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 chose/elected a people to save
  - The Son agreed to redeem this people through His life, death, and resurrection
  - The Holy Spirit consented to apply the redeeming work of the Son to those whom the Father had chosen

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ligonier.org/guides/covenant-theology>

- Thus, Covenant Theology affirms that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit covenanted together for the redemption of the human race, with:
  - The Father commissioning the Son to be the Savior, and
  - The Son, accepting the commission, becoming the redeemer and head of the elect and agreeing to fulfill all righteousness by obeying the law of God (Matt 3:15).
- Some Scriptural support for the covenant of redemption:
  - **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.*
- In essence, it's taking the doctrine of election and implying a covenant of redemption through this (cf. Eph 1:3-14)

### **THE THEOLOGICAL COVENANTS**

COVENANT OF REDEMPTION	COVENANT OF WORKS	COVENANT OF GRACE	
ETERNITY PAST	BEFORE THE FALL	Old Dispensation	New Dispensation
		ISRAEL = CHURCH	

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- With all of this, we need to ask: **Are these covenants biblical and legitimate?**
  - While Covenantalists would claim these to be the framework for understanding Scripture, they 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 (Rom 5:12-21) without believing in a covenant of works.

<sup>3</sup> Paul N. Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy: A Comprehensive Approach*, 80.

- Is there a covenant of grace?
  - Although passages like Gen 3:15, Jer 31:31-34, and Heb 8:10 are used to support a covenant of grace, 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?
  - Concerning the biblical covenants as the outworking of a central covenant of grace focused on the redemption of the elect is never implicitly or explicitly stated.
    - In fact, they include many elements other than those pertaining to salvation and God’s efforts to redeem the elect (land, seed, a King ruling on David’s throne)
    - Furthermore, the Mosaic Covenant was not a grace covenant. Rather, it was a temporary, conditional covenant.
- Is there a covenant of redemption?
  - It is difficult to see any Biblical support for a specific ‘covenant of redemption’. In fact, the existence of this covenant is debated amongst Covenantalists.
- This seems to indicate that the covenants of Covenant Theology are the products of Covenant Theology’s theological system rather than the product of sound exegesis.

## **II. Hermeneutics of Covenant Theology**

- While Covenantalists would affirm a historical-grammatical hermeneutic in many areas of Scripture, they believe that typological and even spiritual hermeneutics need to be applied to some areas of Scripture.
- “[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>4</sup>
- With this hermeneutical framework, it has led Covenantalists to see the New Testament as having priority over the Old Testament.
  - This means that the New Testament is viewed as the interpreter of the Old Testament.
  - 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 church composed of both Jews and Gentiles. (Replacement Theology)
  - Thus, according to Covenant Theology, 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.

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Harbin, “The Hermeneutics of Covenant Theology” in Vital Prophetic Issues, ed. Roy Zuck, 37.

- Why is this?
  - Remember the definition for 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. Therefore, they adjust their interpretation to fit their system.
  - ““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...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>5</sup>

### III. Theological Beliefs of Covenant Theology

#### 1. Redemption as the Main Theme of Scripture

- Because all of Scripture is interpreted through three covenants with a focus on the redemption of the elect, this becomes the central theme of Scripture for Covenantalists.
- 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.”<sup>6</sup>

#### 2. Continuity Between Israel and the Church

- Because the covenant of grace started in the garden, and stands as a covenant between God and the elect, there is no distinction made between Israel and the church.
- Therefore, Covenant Theology emphasizes continuity between Israel and the Church by affirming that the latter is either the replacement, continuation, or fulfillment of the former.
  - With this, any of the Old Testament promises to national Israel that weren’t fulfilled to them will find spiritual fulfillment in the church through Christ.

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<sup>5</sup> Paul N. Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy: A Comprehensive Approach*, 80.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 82.



- Christ exists as the “true Israel” and all believers, including Gentiles, when united with Christ, exist as the “Israel of God” (Gal 6:16).
- The problem with this, however, is that the Bible does not present the New Testament church as the new Israel that becomes the sole heir of national Israel’s covenants and promises.
- Nowhere does the New Testament identify the church as Israel, including Gal 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
  - However, 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 New Testament affirms the Old Testament expectation of a salvation and restoration of national Israel (c.f. Romans 9-11)
  - **Matt 19:28** - *And Jesus said to them, “Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”*
  - **Acts 1:6** - *So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, “Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?”*
- Because of this, we must recognize Israel and the church as distinct.

### 3. Infant Baptism

- Another implication of a continuationist view of Israel and the church is understanding baptism as a replacement for circumcision as entrance into the covenant community.
- According to Covenant Theology, if the Israel of the Old Testament used circumcision on its children, then the new Israel – the church – should use baptism on its children.
  - They would base this on the household baptisms in Acts, assuming children were a part of them (Acts 10:1-48, 16:15, 31-34, 18:8), however these are arguments from silence.
  - They would also lean on passages that seem to compare the promise associated with baptism (Acts 2:39) to that of Abraham (Gen 17:1-8).
- However, this is not what baptism in the New Testament signifies.
  - It is not an entrance into a covenant community, it is a step of obedience for those who are already saved. (Acts 2:41, 8:12-13, 36-38, 18:8, 19:5, 22:16; 1 Cor 1:16).

# ESCHATOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF COVENANT THEOLOGY

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- With all of this in view, how does this affect our eschatology?

## 1. There is No Future for Ethnic Israel

- Because of the spiritualized nature of interpretation when it comes to prophetic passages given to Israel, and the foundation of the covenant of grace giving continuity between Israel and the church, all of the Old Testament promises to national Israel are fulfilled spiritually to the church.
- Israel failed as God's covenant people because of their disobedience and thus, they have been replaced by the church.
  - Therefore, even the physical promises found in the biblical covenants (i.e. land) are spiritually fulfilled through Christ to the church.
- The implications of this are massive, as it delves into the area of God's character, namely, His faithfulness to fulfill His promises to His people.
  - **Genesis 12:7** - *"I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you."*
  - **Judges 2:1** - *Now the angel of the LORD came up from Gilgal to Bochim. And he said, "I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land which I have sworn to your fathers; and I said, 'I will never break My covenant with you.'"*
- It also must be asked, if God fulfilled portions of the physical blessings to Israel **literally** (i.e. seed to Abraham, giving of the land, throne of David, etc.), why would there not be an expectation of physical fulfillment to Israel.

## 2. There is No Need for a Millennial Kingdom (Amillennialist View)

- For most Covenantalists, Jesus' Davidic/Millennial reign and the reign of the saints is occurring from heaven now.
  - Therefore, we are currently in Jesus' messianic kingdom. Also, covenant promises from the Old Testament are mostly being fulfilled now.
  - Thus, there is no need of a future, earthly reign of Jesus since this age is the era of fulfillment and reigning.
- However, this is coming from an inconsistent hermeneutic and it relies on allegorizing large portions of prophetic text, including the book of Revelation.
  - We will look at this further in weeks 5 and 6, but it is another reminder of the need to be pulling meaning **from** the text, rather than interpreting a theological system **into** the text.