

Issues in Reformed Theology

Covenant Theology

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A covenant is a promise or agreement. As such, promises are significant, particularly when they involve God. God is faithful and cannot break a promise that He has made. Furthermore, if we misunderstand the promises of God it can affect our lives in significant ways. Many claim things that God never said and when it does not come to pass are tempted to be disappointed with God. Likewise, some people will claim Bible verses that were not spoken to them. Also, being unaware of God's promises will rob us of spiritual blessing. God's promises, or covenants, are important.

Covenant Theology is a system of understanding the Bible that attempts to develop a historical understanding of God's work among man through three covenants. It forms the basis for Reformed Theology and its perspective permeates our areas of disagreement.

The significance of this system of theology will be increasingly observed as our series on Issues in Reformed Theology progresses. We are addressing this philosophy of understanding the Bible early on in our series in order to build a basis for why Reformed thinkers argue for the positions they hold.

1. Biblical Covenants

Warning, do not be confused! Covenant Theology has nothing to do with the biblical covenants found in the Bible. We see several covenants, or promises, made by God to man in the Bible. Some of these have been given titles by man but some have been given titles in the Scripture itself, such as the New Covenant (Luke 22:20). Following is a brief summary of these biblical covenants that have nothing to do with Covenant Theology:

- a. The Noahic Covenant: God's unilateral promise to never flood the earth again.
- b. The Abrahamic Covenant: God's unilateral promise to provide Abraham with land, descendants, and to bless him (Genesis 12:1-3).
- c. The Mosaic Covenant: God's conditional promise to Israel to bless them for obedience and curse them for disobedience (Exodus 19-24). It is the basis for the Law of Moses.
- c. The Palestinian Covenant: God's unilateral promise to provide land to the nation of Israel (Deuteronomy 30:1-10). The fulfillment of this is the millennial kingdom.

d. The Davidic Covenant: God's unilateral promise to provide the descendants of David a kingdom forever (2 Samuel 7:12-16). The fulfillment of this is Christ's rule over believing Israel in the millennium.

e. The New Covenant: God's unilateral promise to bless Israel with forgiveness (Jeremiah 31:31-34). The fulfillment of this is Christ's substitutionary death for sin and the full blessing will be realized in the millennium as well.

These covenants are direct commitments by God in the Bible. The promises of God in the Abrahamic Covenant of land, descendants and blessing are manifested more specifically in the Palestinian, Davidic and New Covenants. These Covenants were given to the people of Israel and the promise of blessing to all the families of the earth (Genesis 12:3) is extended to the Church in the New Covenant.

2. Covenant Theology Described

After the Reformation came the rise of a system of theology known as Covenant Theology. Covenant theologians see God working through three covenants, the Covenant of Works the Covenant of Grace, and the Covenant of Redemption. The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) was the first formal confession to refer to this.

a. The Covenant of Works

According to Covenant Theology, the Covenant of Works is what God established with Adam upon creation until the fall of man as a representative of the human race. God required from Adam perfect obedience in return for eternal life. Adam, as the head of all people, was required to obey God and if he failed he and all his descendants would suffer physical and spiritual death.

b. The Covenant of Grace

According to Covenant Theology, God established the Covenant of Grace after Adam broke the Covenant of Works. The Covenant of Grace promises eternal life to all those who would be chosen by God for belief through the atoning sacrifice of Christ. According to Reformed scholar Louis Berkhof it is "that gracious agreement between the offended God and the offending but elect sinner, in which God promises salvation through faith in Christ, and the sinner accepts this believingly, promising a life of faith and obedience."

c. The Covenant of Redemption

Most Covenant Theologians hold to a third covenant, known as the Covenant of Redemption. This is described as the covenant in eternity past that God the Father made with the Son to be the Redeemer of the elect. In return, the Son voluntarily agreed to take the place of those whom the Father had given Him. It is viewed as the foundation by which the Covenant of Grace was established and executed. Some fold this covenant into the Covenant of Grace.

3. Covenant Theology Evaluated

It is tempting to conclude “so what?” regarding Covenant Theology. Does the idea of these covenants even matter?

First of all, these theological covenants espoused by Reformed theologians are not directly stated in the Bible. Berkhof understood that no such promise of the Covenant of Works is found in the Bible but noted “the threatened penalty clearly implies such a promise.” While the Covenant of Grace encompasses the plan of salvation, the idea of the Covenant of Redemption is purely speculative, without any specific biblical text for support.

It is important to build our theology around what the Bible says, rather than what is speculative or even things that might make logical sense but are not stated. These deductions and extrapolations are at best unnecessary or they would be stated in the Scripture. But worse, they actually serve to mislead us in thinking through what the Bible does say.

Secondly, the Covenant of Grace wraps the entire history of God’s work with man into one promise. It makes little distinction between God’s work during the different eras of biblical history, and in particular fails to see the issue of God’s promises in the biblical covenants.

Reformed theologians acknowledge the biblical covenants exist and group them together under the Covenant of Grace. However, under the Reformed system there is no clear distinction between the unilateral promises of God and the conditional promises found in the Bible. By folding the conditional Mosaic Covenant into one Covenant of Grace along with the other unconditional covenants, notably the New Covenant, they blur the fact that the Law was given through Moses and grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ (John 1:17).

God’s promises and commands found in the Law of Moses are specific to Israel and do not completely transfer over to the church. This is why there is an Old Testament (covenant) and a New Testament (covenant). Clearly many Old Testament Laws have been specifically discontinued, for example, circumcision (Acts 15; Galatians 5:2-3), the dietary laws (Mark 7:19; Acts 11:8-9; 1 Timothy 4:3) and the Sabbath (Romans 14:1-5; Colossians 2:16).

Covenant Theology fails to accept that Christians are not under the Mosaic Law but wish to read the Old Testament into the New Testament. This inconsistency is unnecessary because the New Testament teaches that we are released from the entire Old Testament Law (Romans 7:1-6; Romans 10:4; cf. 2 Corinthians 3:1-11; Hebrews 7:12; 1 Corinthians 9:19-23). We serve under the Law of Christ (1 Corinthians 9:21), which is “love your neighbor as yourself” (James 2:8; Galatians 6:2). This is the New Covenant with the Law on our hearts (Hebrews 8:10; cf. Jeremiah 31:33) and we walk according to the principles taught in the New Testament.

4. Dispensationalism

The alternative to Covenant Theology has been Dispensationalism. Whereas Covenant Theology holds to a continuity through the Old and New Testament, Dispensationalism views the Church as distinct from Israel.

Much like the word “fundamentalism,” which used to refer to people who believed in the essential core tenets of the Gospel but came to be a pejorative term of ridicule for those holding a strict religious view, Dispensationalism has fallen on hard times. An increasing number of people who are essentially Dispensationalists are reluctant to accept this designation for several reasons:

- a. Some early Dispensationalists from a hundred years ago on occasion used sloppy terminology such as two ways of salvation and two kingdoms and some argued about the number of dispensations with detailed and confusing charts. This made for easy criticism of certain details without addressing the main premise of a distinction between the church and Israel.
- b. Some Dispensationalists in the twentieth century went to great lengths to find prophecy being fulfilled in current events. Books like *The Late Great Planet Earth* by Hal Lindsey and *Left Behind* by Tim LaHaye were among the best selling books of the twentieth century. The prophetic analysis of certain Bible teachers who were Dispensational in their theology embarrassed the church as world events changed.
- c. Many Dispensationalists have propagated a non-Lordship view of salvation. The issue of the role of repentance in salvation has no direct connection to Dispensational beliefs per se and many Dispensationalists believe in Lordship Salvation. Yet some will view this as a negative toward Dispensationalism.
- d. Some Reformed teachers have aggressively denounced Dispensationalism to such a degree that it has become hard for some with Dispensational beliefs to align themselves with it.

While the essential element throughout all versions of Dispensationalism is the distinction between the Church and Israel, the use of the term is optional.

5. Antinomianism

Antinomianism is a term that simply means “against the law.” There are various meanings of this term but it is used by Covenant Theologians pejoratively to deride those who do not believe the Christian is obligated to the Law of Moses or the Ten Commandments. Since people do not want to be thought of as having no moral obligations, they join in with opposing Antinomianism without clarity of what it may actually refer to. To be clear, the New Testament does not teach that there are no moral obligations, but it does release us from the Law of Moses in its entirety.

6. The Result of Covenant Theology

a. The use of the Old Testament Law for the Christian life

Because the Covenant of Grace includes the Law of Moses, Covenant theology incorporates the Old Testament Law into the Christian life. Following Calvin, it sees three uses for the Law: (1) as a mirror showing us sin, (2) to restrain evil in the society, and (3) to reveal how to please God by obeying it. Calvin saw this third use of the Law as the primary purpose.

Reformed thinkers certainly do not believe that the Law justifies but they affirm its role in sanctification. For example, in answering the question “how does the Old Testament Law relate to my life?” R. C. Sproul writes, “We are justified, not because of our obedience to the law, but in order that we may become obedient to God’s law.”

Obviously, there are Old Testament Laws that are recognized as wrong to obey (e.g. requiring circumcision, requiring dietary laws). The nineteenth chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith provides the means by which some of the Mosaic Law can be considered no longer applicable by distinguishing between the moral, ceremonial and judicial laws. The moral law is considered that which is required of all people at all times. The ceremonial law is that which involves worship and prefigures Christ and has been abrogated.

This is an artificial dichotomy of the Old Testament Law since all of the Old Testament Law was required. It results in murky questions as to what is “moral” and what is “ceremonial.” For example, is the Sabbath moral or ceremonial, since it was a sign of the Lord’s covenant with Moses (Exodus 31:12-17)? Nearly all Reformed thinkers view it as moral, with application to Sunday. But the question of what is permissible divides them. Is recreation permissible or forbidden? What jobs, if any, are allowable? This answer ends up solely in the mind of the Reformed theologian.

The Sabbath question is particularly difficult because it is part of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:6-11), which has been specifically described as that which we no longer serve (2 Corinthians 3:5-11; cf. Colossians 3:16, Romans 14:5). Yet Christians are led to obligation toward keeping one day holy under Reformed theology. And this is but one example of taking an Old Testament command for Israel and applying it to the church, with the Sabbath turning into the “Lord’s Day” with a similar burden.

This is only one example of selecting an Old Testament Law for the Church but there are many others, with tithing being the most commonly taught in churches. In the end, the governing rule is those Laws that seem subjectively proper are considered the Moral Law and the more difficult ones are considered the Ceremonial Law. There is no denying that the character of God includes a moral code. For example, God cannot lie (Titus 1:2). But this moral code is manifested in the New Testament, along with other commands that are for the church age, such as baptism and the Lord’s Supper. We ought not to confuse God’s directives for Israel with God’s directives for the Church.

b. The use of the Old Testament Law for the civil life

A subset of Reformed leaders, view the Old Testament civil law as applicable to modern nations. This is known as Theonomy or Reconstruction. It is a minority position but is nevertheless influential in Reformed circles.

When the nineteenth chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith divided the Old Testament Law into the moral, ceremonial and judicial laws, it regarded the judicial laws as expired with the political entity of Israel no “further than the general equity thereof may require.” Many have taken statement to mean the governmental aspects of the Mosaic Law is no longer mandated for God’s people.

However, how the Law is to be used in the general equity, or fairness, to the society as a whole is something that some people view as important. They will view the practice of the Law and punishments on society for evil behavior as the “may require” part of the Confession. Added to a Postmillennial eschatology, there can be eagerness to see an application of the Old Testament judicial Law to nations today, thus fulfilling the millennial age prior to Christ’s return.

c. The use of Old Testament promises to Israel

Reformed Theology views the Covenant of Grace as extending through every biblical covenant so that each is a continuation and newer phase of that one covenant. The Church is viewed as existing in the Old Testament and Israel as continuing in the Church. This is in spite of Jesus’ words in Matthew 16:18 of building His church in the future. Also, in Acts 11:15 Peter specifically referred to the beginning of the church occurring when the Holy Spirit came at the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2). When we do not understand the Church as beginning in Acts 2 and confuse the Church and Israel, it leads to an inability to distinguish between promises to Israel and promises to the Church.

The view of the Church as the New Israel leads to the promises of God to Israel in the Old Testament being fulfilled by the church in the New Testament. Even though the fulfilled prophecy of the Old Testament in the first coming of Christ was fulfilled literally, Reformed Theology views the fulfillment of the remainder of Old Testament prophecy in a figurative sense. The prophesied kingdom of God in the Old Testament is viewed by Reformed Theology as presently existing in Christ’s rule in the hearts of men and deny there is a future reign of Christ on the earth in a physical, literal sense.

The biggest difficulty with this Reformed view is not only their figurative interpretation of the Book of Revelation but their view of the fulfillment of Old Testament promises of God. To spiritualize the promises of the kingdom of God as being fulfilled in only a spiritual sense to the church undermines the meaningfulness of those promises that were specific in regard to what they were and to whom they were given. God promised His kingdom to Israel and He will fulfill what He promised (Romans 9-11).

What confidence can we have of God's actual fulfillment of His future promises if we view so many of them as only fulfilled in a spiritual sense? How can we really know what the Bible means when what it says doesn't mean what it says? How can we comfort one another with Paul's promise of the church being taken up to always be with the Lord if we do not believe it (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18)?

We will give John MacArthur the final word on this issue:

You get your eschatology right when you get Israel right. You get Israel right when you get the Old Testament covenants and promises with Israel right. You get the Old Testament covenants and promises right when you get the interpretation of Scripture right. You get the interpretation of Scripture right when you're faithful to valid rules of interpretation. So you interpret it right and that will allow you to understand the meaning of the Covenants and the future of Israel, and God's integrity is at stake.

d. The use of Old Testament promises for the Christian life

God's people have long appropriated words that God intended for one person or group and wrongly applied them for themselves. We ought to read the Bible in context and understand the audience lest we view God as promising or commanding something He did not. One modern example is the belief that if the church would be humble, repent and pray then God will heal our nation according to 2 Chronicles 7:14. A command to Israel is thus applied to our country incorrectly.

When the Church becomes the New Israel, and when the Church is seen in the Old Testament, then promises that are given specifically to the nation of Israel can become appropriated for the church. This leaves God's promises as unfulfilled in the sense that He gave them to His people.

e. The inclusion of all children of believers as part of the Covenant of Grace

The Covenant of Grace was made between God and the elect sinner. Because Reformed theology views the church as existing in the Old Testament, it views the national identity of the Israelites as corresponding to the Church. What this means is that just as the physical offspring of Abraham are part of the nation of Israel, the physical offspring of the believer is part of the church in a physical sense.

Therefore, the Covenant of Grace includes believers *and their children*. All children of believers are presumed to be believers as part of the Covenant of Grace until the point of their rejection of Christ. While this certainly does not mean that those born outside families in the church are all un-elect or that all children born to church families are elect, it does mean that the children of church families are brought into the "covenant community" of the church.

Reformed leaders certainly acknowledge that it is impossible to determine conclusively whom those elect saints are during this present life. Many will make it clear that the children of believers are not inherently predisposed to faith and that we ought to pray for their salvation, while yet teaching the blessed position in the covenant.

On the surface this may appear semantical since certainly children who are raised by faithful believers are in an advantageous position and are thus set apart in that sense (cf. 1 Corinthians 7:14). But in a practical sense, children are instructed with the full expectation that they are part of the believing community and thus elect.

This explains infant baptism, the inclusion of infants as church members and even in a growing number of churches today participation in communion. This also affects how children are evangelized, taught, schooled, etc. and views a sharp distinction between children of believers and children of unbelievers. This viewpoint has some far-reaching implications for parenting.

7. Conclusion

Covenant Theology's merger of the Old Testament Law into the Church under the Covenant of Grace has many ramifications for the Christian life. It affects what obligations we are responsible to uphold and how churches function in their ministry. As we continue in our series we will see the practical aspects of the problems that arise from Covenant Theology's failure to understand the Church under the New Covenant.