

Preface

Why Study Covenant Theology?

There are some things in life that make other things possible. When I use my computer or cell phone, I only worry about what I need to know to operate them. I have very little understanding of the operating systems that run my electronic devices. I do not need to know how the system runs because, if I have problems, I know where to find help. I can get by without knowing the complexities of what runs my computer or cell phone. Many times, we are dependent on things that we do not really understand. On the other hand, if we are going to learn a language, there are grammatical rules that we need to know. For example, the normal English word order is subject, verb, and then object, but that is not the order followed by every language. The better you understand the rules of grammar for a language the better you will be able to speak, write, or read it. We learn the language of our childhood by being immersed in it without always knowing the specific grammatical rules for it. I teach students to read ancient Hebrew so they can read the Old Testament in the original language. They learn (or relearn) many grammatical principles so they can understand Hebrew. The better the students know Hebrew grammar, the better they will be able to understand Hebrew.

Many Christians have read their Bibles all their lives. They understand many things about the Bible. But the Bible is a complex book. It has sixty-six different books with many different authors composed over a 1,500-year period. It is difficult to grasp the make up and message of such a diverse book. Covenant theology will help you better understand the Bible because it gives structure to the whole Bible, and it is the language in which the Bible is written. The more you understand the structure of the Bible the better you will understand the major message of the Bible and see how everything fits together.

There is a unity to the message of the Bible centered around covenant theology related to God's plan to restore broken human beings who have rebelled against him. Covenant theology explains how we became broken and how God plans to save us.

Covenant theology is a pervasive concept that occurs all throughout Scripture.

The more one understands it, the more one will understand the language of Scripture. The Bible uses many ideas that are better understood in the context of covenant theology. The following ideas are related to it even if people might not see the connection at first: Old Testament/New Testament, the blood of the covenant sprinkled on the people followed by a meal (Exod. 24:6, 11), mediators, laws, blessings and curses, the statement 'this cup is the new covenant in my blood' (Lord's Supper), God's promise 'I will be their God and they will be

Point of Interest

Although the Bible was written by many human authors over a long period of time, the ultimate author of the Bible is God, who worked with the personalities and gifts of the various human authors to produce the very words of Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16–17; 2 Pet. 1:20–21). Because the Bible ultimately has one divine author, there is unity to the message of the whole Bible.

my people,' and God's dwelling with his people are just a few of the many concepts that are better understood in the context of covenant theology. As will become clear, the gospel itself is dependent on the covenantal framework of Scripture. The covenants explain the work of Christ and the covenant signs of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Covenants also give assurance to God's people because we see that God is faithful to his covenant promises. We can be confident that our relationship with God is secure.

In summary, the main benefit of covenant theology is that it will help you understand the Bible better. You will be able to see connections between different parts of the Bible and understand how the OT lays the foundation of the NT. You will come to see the great unity to God's plan of redemption and how God is working out that plan in history. No longer will the OT be just a series of unconnected stories or miscellaneous parts. Abraham and Moses and David, along with many others, all have their role to play in the unfolding of God's purposes that will be fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

The goal of this brief book is to explain covenant theology as it is expressed in the Westminster Standards (the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms).^{*} This Confession was produced at the Westminster Assembly in 1646 as an attempt to reform the structures, worship, and teaching of the church. It is a summary of Christian theology in

^{*} Throughout the rest of this book, the Westminster Confession of Faith will be abbreviated WCF, the Westminster Larger Catechism WLC, and the Westminster Shorter Catechism WSC. This pocket guide has a limited number of footnotes. For a more in-depth discussion of covenant theology with full documentation see Richard P. Belcher, Jr., *The Fulfillment of the Promises of God: An Explanation of Covenant Theology* (Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2020). For a more comprehensive analysis of covenant theology see *Covenant Theology: Biblical, Theological, and Historical Perspectives*, eds. Guy P. Waters, J. Nicholas Reid, and John R. Muether (Crossway, 2020). There is also a list of Suggested Reading at the end of the book that includes a wide variety of views of covenant theology.

the Reformation tradition. The doctrine of the covenant is one of its distinctive features because the covenant is central to its system of theology. It was the first confessional standard to use the terms Covenant of Works and Covenant of Grace. It greatly affected the churches of England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland. It was also adopted by conservative Presbyterian denominations all over the world. One of the purposes of this pocket guide is to engage seminary students and elders but specially to help lay people understand covenant theology. Even if you are not part of a denomination that subscribes to the WCF, understanding its view of covenant will give you a foundation to understand the basic concepts of covenant theology and help you see where you might differ. The next chapter will define a covenant, then the overall structure of covenant theology in Scripture will be laid out before examining each of the major covenants and how they are fulfilled in the new covenant.

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Some of the Presbyterian denominations that have adopted the Westminster Standards in the U.S.A. include the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the Presbyterian Church in America, and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. Many other Presbyterian denominations around the world have also adopted it, including the Free Church of Scotland, the International Presbyterian Church, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of England and Wales, the Presbyterian Church of Australia, the Presbyterian Church of Brazil, and the National Presbyterian Church in Mexico, among others. Some Baptists have adopted the Second London Confession of 1689, which is like the WCF but with Baptist distinctives. There are other denominations, such as the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, that formally adopted the Westminster Standards but don't functionally adhere to them.

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What Is a Covenant?

Most of us are familiar with a contract. It is a formal and legally binding agreement between two or more parties that sets forth the responsibilities that each party is obligated by law to fulfill. It is usually a written document signed by all the parties involved. Contracts usually deal with financial agreements, business agreements, employment agreements, and rental agreements. A breach of contract can be very serious because there are legal consequences for breaking it. A covenant is like a contract because they both structure relationships that have a legal aspect to them that bind the parties to the terms of the agreement with consequences if either party fails to fulfill their obligations.

DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF A COVENANT RELATIONSHIP

A covenant is also very different from a contract. A covenant has broader implications because the legal aspect is tied to personal and corporate aspects that are typically not present in contracts. When I sign a loan agreement with a bank, I normally do not personally know the people with whom I am dealing. The contract normally deals only with me and my spouse unless it is a situation where a cosigner is

involved. A covenant is much broader. There are personal and corporate aspects of a covenant that affect the legal aspect of the covenant. These three aspects of a covenant are intertwined and operate together.

Marriage is a good example of how a covenant works. There is a legal aspect to a marriage that is expressed in the promises (vows) the couple make to each other. There is also a ring that is exchanged that acts as a sign pointing to the existence of the promises that were made. It is a binding relationship that lasts until death and there are legal consequences if one party breaks the promises. There is also a personal relationship in marriage where the couple express their love for each other. Sadly, many times the love between a couple may diminish because of difficulties in the relationship. It is possible for there to be a legal marriage between two people even though they are no longer in love with each other. Couples may decide to stay legally married even though they are no longer in love for a variety of reasons (finances, children, appearances). Finally, there are corporate dimensions to a marriage covenant. Marriage does not just involve the union of two individuals, but each spouse also must navigate the relationships with the in-laws and the prospect of children that might develop from the marriage. A marriage covenant that has legal, personal, and corporate aspects is much broader than a contract.

The covenants in the Bible, especially the covenants that God makes with his people, also have legal, personal, and corporate aspects to them. God makes a covenant to establish personal relationships with his people. He would regularly come down to the Garden of Eden to have fellowship with Adam and Eve. Their disobedience to God's command broke the personal relationship that had been established and then he came into the garden in judgment to confront them for their rebellion (Gen. 3:8). In his grace, God provided a way to

restore the broken relationship through a series of covenants that culminated in the New Covenant. God initiated this covenant with Adam after his disobedience in Genesis 3, then he established a covenant with Noah, Abraham, Israel as mediated through Moses, David, and finally the New Covenant in Christ. The essence of this covenant relationship is expressed in the recurring phrase, 'I shall be your God and you shall be my people.' This phrase, or something very similar to it, is found in each of the covenants: Genesis 17:7 (Abraham); Exodus 6:6–7 (Israel); 2 Kings 11:17 (Davidic); Ezekiel 37:26–28 (promise of the New Covenant), and Revelation 21:3 (consummation of the New Covenant). The promise of a relationship with God is manifested in God's dwelling amid his people in the tabernacle (Exod. 25:8; 29:42–45), then the temple (1 Kings 8:10), culminating in Jesus Christ as God with us (John 1:14). God desires to dwell with his people in a gracious relationship of fellowship.*

The corporate aspect of the covenant has several angles to it. At the heart of a covenant relationship is the representative principle. The disobedience of Adam affected not only himself, but also all his descendants because he was their representative acting on their behalf. We see the consequences of his sin in his life (Gen. 3) and in the lives of his sons (Gen. 4). In the various covenants in the Old Testament, God will use an individual to begin the covenant relationship so that the promises and terms of the covenant can be stated. This explains why many of the covenants are called by the name of the person with whom God established the covenant (Noah, Abraham, Moses, David). Another corporate aspect of the covenant is that all the covenants include the descendants of the person with whom

* O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (P&R Publishing, 1980), pp. 46–51. For an emphasis on the theme of God dwelling with his people see Michael L. Morales, *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord? A biblical theology of the book of Leviticus* (InterVarsity Press, 2015).

God makes the covenant. Not only did Adam's disobedience affect his descendants, but the enmity of Genesis 3:15 will be worked out through the descendants of the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. This will culminate in a final representative who will defeat Satan and win the victory for the seed of the woman. The corporate principle will be discussed in each of the covenants to see how the covenant promises affect the descendants, who are always included in the terms of the covenant. All the promises will culminate in Jesus Christ, our representative, who fulfills the covenant promises in his life and death as he establishes the New Covenant.

Finally, there is a legal aspect to the covenant relationship that is foundational to the administration of the covenant. This aspect can include oaths and rituals, like sacrifices, that confirm the covenant relationship and make clear the terms of the relationship. How is the covenant administered? How is it passed on to future generations? What consequences are there if the terms of the covenant are broken? The ideal is that the legal, personal, and corporate aspects of the covenant work together to bring about a harmonious relationship between God and his people. The presence of disobedience breaks the covenant and results in covenant judgment where some members of the covenant may be cut off from the blessings of the covenant. This means that not everyone who is a member of the covenant has a saving relationship with the God of the covenant. Christ brings together the legal, personal, and corporate aspects of the covenant in the New Covenant, which will have implications for how we understand the nature and function of his body, the church, in this age and in the age to come.

DEFINITION AND ELEMENTS OF A COVENANT

A covenant can be defined as a legal agreement between two parties that is ratified by oaths and certain rituals that