



# COVENANT THEOLOGY





*'Dr Peter Golding is son of a pastor and became a pastor himself with a notable ministry of thirty years in Hayes Town Chapel, Middlesex. Not for him a country parsonage with quiet decades to reflect on the great Scriptural themes. In an area of London near Heathrow Airport which became the centre for 100,000 Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims, Dr Golding's preaching, pastoring and those profound studies resulting in this book were all pursued as his service to God. Having sat at the feet of Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones in Westminster Chapel he was given a love for historic Christianity. In this book he shares his understanding of the great thinkers in the church with the reader as the continuance of his Christian ministry.*

*A grasp of covenant theology is indispensable to knowing such essential themes as the Christian and the law of God, baptism, the relationship of old covenant with new, our relationship with Adam and with Christ, the dynamics of the history of redemption, the light cast on the Bible by archaeology and ancient Near-East treaties. The ordinances, the evangelism of children, confessions of faith, the rise of denominations within Protestantism, and even the ministries of John Bunyan and Charles Haddon Spurgeon cannot be appreciated without a grasp of the momentum of covenant theology.*

*Peter Golding has performed an inestimable service in surveying this whole field of theology in such a safe and fascinating manner. One feels one's own ministry has been superficial compared to this gripping and profound introduction to Covenant Theology. We are thankful to God for the book and expect to see its widespread use all over the world.'*

**Rev Geoffrey Thomas, Aberystwyth, Wales**





PETER GOLDING

# COVENANT THEOLOGY

THE KEY OF THEOLOGY IN REFORMED  
THOUGHT AND TRADITION



MENTOR





To Hilary, Covenant helpmeet nonpareil

And to Rachel, Liz and Paul,  
True children of the Covenant



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In memory of D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones

Father-in-God – Mentor





## Preface

This book had its more recent origins in a thesis submitted in 1993 to Greenwich School of Theology, located in the United Kingdom, and now linked with Potchefstroom University, South Africa. However, its pedigree goes much further back, virtually to my conversion at Westminster Chapel in the early 1950s. That set a train of theological interest going, which was accelerated by different friends who encouraged me to read theology. In this connection, two friendships in particular influenced me in ways that were to prove formative. I owe a great debt to Mr. Peter Collins, esteemed Presbyterian layman, who wisely started me off on Loraine Boettner's writings, which are so readable, and A.A. Hodge's exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith. My sense of gratitude is no less to Robert Josey, formerly minister of Resolis Free Church of Scotland from 1971 to 1991, and now retired. The two of us met at Westminster Chapel, and besides giving me Louis Berkhof's *Systematic Theology* for Easter, 1956, I well remember a walk from Westminster Chapel to Victoria Station during which I received my first lesson on the covenants. Robert Josey is a Lewisman – I need say no more! The subject has had a fascination for me ever since, so that when the opportunity came to write a thesis on it, I took it – with no thought of future publication at the time. This has come as much of a surprise to me, as doubtless it has to my friends also!

The study makes no pretensions to originality of thought or scholarship. It is a modest attempt at survey, analysis and critique of the main streams of Reformed thinking on the Covenant-concept in Scripture. It is therefore a synthesis of historical, biblical and systematic theologies on the subject, which I hope will not be too confusing. The several disciplines are at least distinguished, and in general confined to the section concerned. If ever the saying was true – 'of making many books there is no end' (Eccl. 12:12) – it is surely in the English-speaking Christian world of today, and my only excuse for writing one more volume can only be that as an overview of its theme, it may provide help and information to students of the Covenant – as in

7



principle all Christians should be – and be an incentive to further and deeper consideration.

All that remains is for me to state my sincere gratitude to a number of people without whose help and stimulus this book would never have seen the light of day. To the late, lamented Dr. Richard ('Dick') Alderson, I am grateful for the time he spent in reading the original manuscripts, correcting the grammar and syntax, and after making numerous helpful suggestions, preparing the original text for submission to the examiners. The Revd. Geoffrey Thomas gave a paper on Covenant Theology at the 1972 Westminster Conference, and this proved seminal in opening up many fruitful lines of thought for subsequent investigation. I am also indebted to the Revd. Prof. Dr. D. Byron Evans, Dean of Greenwich University, and to the External Examiner, the Revd. Prof. Dr. Ben Rees, both of whom were a great encouragement to me in pursuing these studies in the midst of a busy pastorate. For the support and patience of my erstwhile long-suffering flock at Hayes Town Chapel, Middlesex, I would also express my deep thanks. Furthermore, I owe a great deal to Dr. Sinclair Ferguson, at whose suggestion I submitted the manuscripts to Christian Focus, and whose encouragement has been unfailing. The same applies to Mr. Malcolm Maclean, editor of the Mentor imprint of Christian Focus, for his kindness and patience in accommodating an author who did not use a computer and whose work was never put on disk! Above all, my thanks to my wife Hilary, who gladly suffered my absence on many evenings whilst I pursued the studies which formed the substance of this now published work.

In expressing my gratitude to these various friends and colleagues, it is necessary to say that I take full responsibility for any mistakes and inadequacies in the book. I have sought always to give due acknowledgement to the sources from which I have quoted. For any omissions in this matter, I offer my unreserved apologies. It is sent forth with the prayer that the Triune God of the Covenant will add his blessing, being mindful of the words of the Psalmist: 'The LORD confides in those who fear him; he makes his covenant known to them' (Psalm 25:14).

Peter Golding



## Introduction

In April 1891, the great nineteenth-century Baptist preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon, giving the inaugural address at his Pastors College Conference – his so-called ‘Final Manifesto’ – laments over the prevailing ignorance of Christian truth and declares: ‘Our venerable grandsires were at home when conversing upon “the covenants.” I love men who love the covenant of grace, and base their divinity upon it; the doctrine of the covenants is the key of theology.’<sup>1</sup> It is instructive to learn where Spurgeon first had teaching concerning the covenants, and from whom.

It was in August 1849 that the fifteen-year-old Spurgeon became a pupil assistant at a school in Newmarket in Cambridgeshire. There, he says, he had his first lessons in theology from the old lady who was a cook at the school. She was no mean theologian, obviously. Spurgeon says about her: ‘Many a time we have gone over the Covenant of Grace together... and I do believe that I learned more from her than I should have from any six doctors of divinity of the sort we have nowadays.’<sup>2</sup> That picture of a precocious adolescent and a Cambridgeshire domestic discussing the Covenant of Grace is illustrative of the depth of theological awareness and the doctrinal structure of evangelical piety a century and a half ago. It is with the emergence and development of that theology that this thesis is concerned.

It is not difficult to see the reason behind Spurgeon’s assertion that ‘the doctrine of the covenants is the key to theology’. 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. More recent scholarship supports this thesis, as stated by Robertson: ‘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.’<sup>3</sup> In fact, in view of the pervasive scriptural evidence to that effect, it is not claiming too much to say that the idea of covenant is





the principle in terms of which the saving relations of God to men are organised. 'A Covenantal Structure underlies the programme of redemption', says McComiskey.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, a major concern of this volume will be a study of the covenantal development in the Bible, as expounded by writers of the Reformed tradition. Historically, covenant theology has always been a distinguishing feature of that tradition; indeed, 'it was in the Reformed theology that the Covenant theology developed.'<sup>5</sup> In 1891, in his rectoral address at the Theological School of the Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Geerhardus Vos, who was subsequently given the professorship in the newly created chair of biblical theology at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1893, could say without fear of contradiction that 'at present there is a general agreement that the doctrine of the covenants is a peculiarly Reformed doctrine. It emerged in Reformed theology where it was assured of a permanent place and in a way that has also remained confined within these bounds.'<sup>6</sup>

However, although Reformed orthodoxy has been generally looked upon as espousing Covenant theology, and its hermeneutic has endeavoured to do justice to the covenantal structure of the whole of revelation in such a way as to exhibit the underlying unity of the plan of salvation, 'just how central it is, together with its meaning, significance, and goal, remains a subject of intense debate.'<sup>7</sup> A useful discussion of the covenant as it has been understood in the Christian Reformed Church (USA), is found in 'The Christian Reformed Church and the Covenant,' *Perspectives on the Christian Reformed Church: Studies in its History, Theology and Ecumenicity*.<sup>8</sup> Even within Reformed orthodoxy, though, 'discussion of the covenant is anything but a "peaceful kingdom".'<sup>9</sup>

In more critical circles, the debate focuses on the work of Walter Eichrodt, who contends that the theological centre of the Old Testament is found in the covenant.<sup>10</sup> Reaction to Eichrodt has been severe.<sup>11</sup> Compounding the debate for both Reformed orthodoxy and the critical schools have been the archaeological discoveries relating to ancient Near Eastern treaties.<sup>12</sup>



It is a simple matter of fact that, as one modern writer puts it, ‘The role of the covenants in Scripture has not always held the position of prominence in critical biblical scholarship that it does at the present. Only recently has the pivotal position of the covenant concept been recognized in the widest possible circles.’<sup>13</sup>

Although the doctrine of the covenants is inextricably linked to Reformed theology, it is nevertheless true that towards the end of the seventeenth century this doctrine had been taken over by several Lutheran theologians. Diestel, in his *Jahrbücher für Deutsche Theologie*, lists several Lutheran theologians who gave a place to the covenant in their system: Calixtus, Wolfgang Jäger of Tübingen, Caspar, Exner, Reuter and others. With respect to the covenant of grace, the distinctively Lutheran view comes out in the fact that nothing but faith was recognized as the condition of the covenant *stipulatio foederis*. But Reformed theologians also add to this, without hesitation, new obedience, and say that justification is by faith alone, but that the covenant is much broader. ‘The Lutheran brings the “sola fide” from justification to the idea of covenant when he takes up the latter.’<sup>14</sup> However, this ‘take-over’ seems to have taken place more by way of imitation, as the doctrine was ‘unknown within the genuine Lutheran framework’.<sup>15</sup> With the Reformed theologians, though, ‘its emergence occurs in the period of richest development’.<sup>16</sup> The question as to whether covenant theology is Reformed or Lutheran in its origin will be considered at greater length when discussing the covenant in the writings of the sixteenth-century Reformers.

But what is covenant theology? J.I. Packer gives ‘a straightforward, if provocative answer to that question’ in his introduction to the 1990 reprint of Witsius on *The Economy of the Covenants*:

Covenant theology...is what is nowadays called a hermeneutic – that is, a way of reading the whole Bible that is itself part of the overall interpretation of the Bible that it undergirds. A successful hermeneutic is a consistent interpretive procedure yielding a consistent understanding of Scripture that in turn confirms the propriety of the procedure itself.<sup>17</sup>

