

God of Promise

The Beauty of Covenant Theology

Part 1 - Introduction

Acts chapter two records Peter's sermon in Jerusalem on Pentecost. It was a moment of profound importance. The promised Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles through the proclamation of the gospel the first church was formed. At the end of his sermon Peter declared:

[36] Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified."

[37] Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" [38] And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. [39] **For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.**" (Acts 2:36-39, emphasis mine)



Peter proclaims the death of Jesus for sinners and salvation for all who repent and believe as the fulfillment of "the promise" (vs. 39). He does not define or explain what this "promise" is. He does not need to. Peter's hearers were Jews. They knew full well what the promise was to which Peter referred. It was the promise which had formed the bedrock of their faith. It was the promise which encapsulated their hope. The promise which was for them and their children and for all whom the Lord God would gather to himself was, and remains the covenant made with Abraham (Genesis 12, 15, 17).

The Apostle Peter understood that the covenant God had made with Abraham so long ago was not a relic of a bygone dispensation. Rather, God's covenant with Abraham was the same promise that multitude gathered on Pentecost heard proclaimed in all its fulfillment. It is the same promise we depend upon today as we look in faith to Jesus Christ for our salvation.

What is a Covenant?

Covenant is a word that sounds familiar to most Christians yet may be lost in the ether of theological or religious jargon. Nevertheless, covenant is a word and concept that is given a place of special prominence in the Bible. If you have spent much time in the Bible then you have no doubt seen references to God's covenants with Noah or Abraham or David. You have probably heard about the covenant signs of the rainbow or circumcision or baptism. You have almost certainly read in the New Testament about the new covenant in Christ. But have you ever been taught the meaning and significance of covenant itself?

Covenant is not a solely biblical concept. Covenants were known throughout the Ancient Near East. Those covenants could be between kings and vassals, landowners and peasants, husbands and wives, or neighbors.

In the most general sense a covenant may be understood as ***a formal relationship bound by oath and enforced through legal authority***. It was not uncommon for covenants to be ratified by way of a formal ceremony. At times covenants were further weighted with a visible sign of some sort.

The concern of this study is with the covenants that God made with his people: the divine covenants.

One writer helpfully defines a divine covenant as “An agreement between God and humankind, where God promises blessings if the conditions are kept and threatens curses if the conditions are broken.”¹ Perhaps the simplest definition comes to us from O. Palmer Robertson who defines covenant as “a bond in blood sovereignly administered.”² Robertson continues:

“The phrase ‘bond in blood’ or bond of life and death expresses the ultimacy of the commitment between God and man in the covenant context. By initiating covenants, God never enters into a casual or informal relationship with man. Instead, the implications of his bonds extend to the ultimate issues of life and death...”³

“Both biblical and extra-biblical evidence point to the unilateral form of covenantal establishment. No such thing as bargaining, bartering, or contracting characterizes the divine covenants of Scripture. The sovereign Lord of heaven and earth dictates the terms of his covenant.”⁴

Some Christians resist the language of covenant because it seems to have the chill of a legal arrangement rather than the warmth of relationship. But this is an unfortunate misunderstanding. Contrary to the sentiments of contemporary evangelicalism, people do not get to define the terms of a relationship with God. People corrupted by their own sin cannot greasily sidle up to God and make him their forever friend. God is holy. People are sinful. And sinners require mediation before the Almighty. That God has made a covenant with his people is proof not only of his holiness but also of his love. So God made a covenant with his people to which he has attached mutual obligations and binding promises which he has pledged to keep.

Think of it this way: the fact that marriage is sealed through a legal process does not diminish the warmth of the bond between husband and wife. I would argue the opposite. The legal formality connected to marriage adds great weight to the bond. It ratifies the pledge in the sight of witnesses. Therefore the legal formality intensifies the commitment by adding binding promises.⁵

It is by way of covenant that we are saved by God and joined to the company of his people. Covenant is also the key interpretive motif or organizing principle of the Bible. That is not to say that one has to be Reformed or a covenant theologian to love Jesus or know that Jesus died to save sinners. However, a proper understanding of the continuity of the Bible and the depth of Christ’s redemptive accomplishments depend upon a basic grasp of the divine covenants.



¹ Rhodes, Jonty, *Covenants Made Simple* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), 18.

² O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 7

⁴ *Ibid.*, 15

⁵ Brown, Michael & Zach Keele, *Sacred Bond* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Fellowship Inc, 2012), 12.

Covenant Is The Key

Take a look at any Christian Bible and you will see that it is divided into two large sections or testaments. This structure is based upon the understanding that God relates to his people by means of covenant.

Michael Horton likens covenant to an architectural structure which gives shape to the Scriptures. The Bible was composed over a period of about 1500 years by dozens of authors writing in a variety of literary genre. And yet from Genesis to Revelation the Bible tells the single story of God redeeming his people through Christ the Lord.

Like many evangelicals I grew up with a strong emphasis on having “a personal relationship with Jesus.” I do not mean to denigrate that. Certainly God relates to his people as individuals to a certain degree. Each person is accountable before God for repentance and faith. However, I rarely heard about how God relates to his *people* which is the clear emphasis in Scripture. The weight of instruction I received was placed exclusively on my having a personal relationship with Jesus. Had I “prayed the prayer?” Did I mean it enough? Should I pray the prayer again? If so, I need to be baptized again because this time I really meant it. Many of those reading these words no doubt had similar experiences. What I did not learn in my Baptist upbringing was the significance of covenant as related to understanding the Bible, the character of God, the nature of salvation, and the accomplishments of Christ.



It is my contention that covenant is the key to understanding the Bible and the redemptive work of God through Jesus Christ. Covenant is also the key to understanding baptism: what it is and who should receive it.

J.I. Packer writes of the importance of covenant in the Bible:

*First, the gospel of God is not properly understood till it is viewed within a covenantal frame...Second, the Word of God is not properly understood till it is viewed within a covenantal frame...Third, the reality of God is not properly understood till it is viewed within a covenantal frame.*⁶

The great Reformed theologian Francis Turretin (1623-1687) wrote:

Since [covenant] is of the greatest importance in theology (being as it were the center and bond of all religion, consisting in the communion of god with man and embracing in its compass all the benefits of God towards man and his duties towards God), our highest interest lies in rightly knowing and observing it. Hence the discussion of it demands peculiar accuracy, that the truth may be confirmed against the errors by which Satan has endeavored in almost every age to obscure and corrupt this saving doctrine.⁷

The divine covenants presented in Scripture reveal the majesty, holiness, and sovereignty of God and humanity’s accountability to him. They also reveal God’s grace toward his people as he moves deliberately toward them in their sin and mercifully crafts their salvation. We also learn

⁶ From Packer’s introduction to Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man*, available online at http://gospelpedlar.com/articles/Bible/cov_theo.html.

⁷ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elentic Theology*, ed. James T Dennison (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1994), 2:169.

from the divine covenants how God constitutes his people and seals them to himself through the sign of baptism.

The word covenant is used over 300 times in the Bible. It is used in both Testaments to describe God's relationship with his people. Specifically it is used to describe the means by which God saves his people. It was by means of an "everlasting covenant" that God established his promise of salvation with Abraham and his offspring (Gen 12, 15, 17). The prophets foretold that it would be through a gracious covenant that God would have a people for his own possession (Jer 31:31-34). Anticipating the birth of Jesus, Zechariah said that God was going to "show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant the oath that he swore to our father Abraham" (Lk. 1:72-73). At the last supper Jesus called the cup "the new covenant in my blood" (Lk. 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25). Christians are referred to as "heirs to the promise" God made to Abraham (Gal. 3:29; Heb. 6:17; 11:9)

One point where there has been some debate deals with the number of divine covenants. The Bible refers to an old covenant and a new covenant. There are also references to covenants God made with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David. The new covenant in Christ was prophesied directly by Jeremiah (chp 31) and later affirmed by Jesus (Lk. 22:20). You may also have heard reference to the covenant of redemption which refers to the eternal intra-Trinitarian plan to redeem the elect. So how do we sort through all of this? How many covenants are there and how do they fit together?

Historically, Reformed Christians have understood that there are three overarching divine covenants revealed in Scripture: *The Covenant of Redemption*, *The Covenant of Works*, and *The Covenant of Grace*. The Covenant of Grace has five different "administrations": Noahic (properly described as a covenant of common grace, it is nevertheless an expression of special grace toward the elect), Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and the New Covenant in Christ.

