

God of Promise

The Beauty of Covenant Theology

Part 2 – The Covenants of Redemption and Works

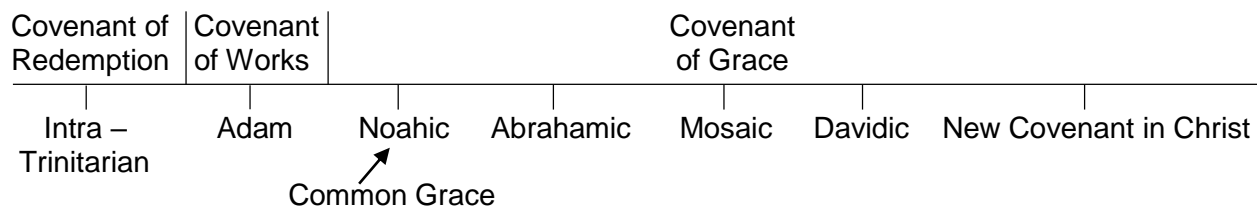
Covenant Defined

- A formal relationship bound by oath and enforced through legal authority.
- “An agreement between God and humankind, where God promises blessings if the conditions are kept and threatens curses if the conditions are broken.”¹
- “A bond in blood sovereignly administered.”²



The Divine Covenants Charted

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.



The Covenant of Redemption

*I will tell of the decree:
 The LORD said to me, “You are my Son;
 today I have begotten you.
 Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
 and the ends of the earth your possession.
 You shall break them with a rod of iron
 and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel. (Psalm 2:7-9)*

Louis Berkhof defines the Covenant of Redemption as, “the agreement between the Father giving the Son as head and redeemer of all the elect and the Son voluntarily taking the place of those

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

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

whom the Father has given Him.” The Father, foreseeing the fall, in His grace effects a covenant with the Son in which He gives the elect to the Son and the Son offers himself up for their salvation.

Where does Covenant Theology get this idea?

Certainly, we believe that the covenant of redemption is taught quite clearly in the Bible such as in the Messianic Psalms like Psalm 2, 40, and 89. It is also picked up in Hebrews 10:5-7. In the Gospels Jesus emphasizes at various points that he has work to do. Specifically, he alludes to the work that the Father has given him to do. This is not to suggest that the Son is subordinate to the Father. Rather it points to Jesus’ voluntary (and temporary) state of humility in human flesh where he even takes on a human will. That Jesus comes to do the will of the Father is also indicative of the Covenant of Redemption whereby the Son fulfills his role in the intra-Trinitarian covenant to redeem the elect.

Prior to the creation of the world a plan had already been sovereignly set in motion by God to redeem fallen man through the sending and sacrifice of the Son. What makes the covenant of redemption unique is that it was enacted before time and sealed among the Persons of the Trinity. Though the term “covenant of redemption” is not used in the Bible, the concept is present. The covenant of redemption reminds us that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus was not a Plan B enacted by God following man’s failure in the garden. Rather the redemptive work of the Son was planned and sealed before the foundations of the world (John 6:37-40; 17:1-5; Acts 10:18; Eph. 1:3-14; 3:8-12; 2 Tim. 1:9; Rev. 13:8).

The Covenant of Works

Human history as it is unfolded in the pages of the Bible may be divided into two covenants: the “covenant of works” and the “covenant of grace.” The covenant of works is that arrangement by which God chose to relate to Adam and Eve in paradise. The account is recorded for us in the opening chapters of Genesis. God made the man and the woman and placed them in the garden. He gave to them the great responsibility to exercise dominion over the rest of the created order and to fill the earth with offspring. This is often times referred to as the creation mandate.

The covenant of works was rather simple. Adam and Eve were given access to everything in the garden save one tree. They were not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God told Adam that if he and his wife obeyed this command they would live. However, if they transgressed the command and took from the forbidden tree they would die.

The Westminster Confession of Faith 7:2 states: “The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.” This is followed in 19:1 which states: “God gave to Adam a law, as a covenant of works, by which he bound him and all his posterity to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience, promised life upon fulfilling, and threatened death upon the breach of it, and endued him with power and ability to keep it.”

In his seven-volume commentary on Hebrews the 17th century Puritan theologian John Owen writes: “Man in his creation was constituted under a covenant.”³ That is, God created Adam and established relationship with him by way of a covenant; the covenant of works. By God’s design,

³ Owen, John, *Works* (London: Banner of Truth, 1967) Vol. 10, 354.

Adam was the divinely appointed representative head for all mankind. That means that Adam's faithfulness to the covenant or lack thereof would be credited to his posterity.

Originally the man and the woman were without sin and thus enjoyed unbroken fellowship with God. And although they bore the image of God there was nevertheless a radical distinction between them and their Creator. As such it was vital for Adam and Eve to understand their proper place in creation. They needed to know how they, as created beings were to properly relate to their Maker and Lord. Thus God established a boundary which they were not to transgress. This was to teach them the virtues of obedience and reverence.



Adam and Eve needed to understand that they were not gods. One can imagine their temptation toward self-deification. They alone bore the image of God. They possessed a status which placed them above all things within the created order. There was literally nothing else in all the world like the man and woman. Placing a prohibition upon them, therefore, was gracious of God for only calamity follows when the creature grasps for the status of the Creator.

Tragically Adam and Eve broke the terms of the covenant of works by doing that which God had forbidden (Genesis 3). At the prompting of the serpent they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In that moment Adam and Eve became sinners. What is more, since Adam was the representative head of humanity all of his descendants, the entire human race, would be born sinners.

The explanation to the questions, "How did mankind fall?" and "Why is sin universal?" is found in man's failure to keep the covenant of works.

The sad history of humanity proves the doctrine of original sin. Who can convincingly argue that any of us are born sinless? So pervasive are the effects of sin in the world that some have suggested that the doctrine of original sin is the most historically verifiable doctrine in the Bible. What parents have ever had to teach their child to sin? Since the sin of Adam, our father in the flesh, all humanity has been born, in the words of Augustine *Non Posse Non Peccare*: "not able not to sin." Because of this fallen state humanity could no longer enjoy access to the holy God. He would no longer walk with God in paradise. The covenant had been broken. All was lost. Or so it seemed.