

God of Promise

The Beauty of Covenant Theology

The Covenant of Grace (3)

“And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.”
- Galatians 3:29

To properly understand covenant theology one must see that the divine covenants made after the fall are unified and grounded in grace. That is, they are all administrations of the one everlasting covenant of grace. Some covenant theologians believe that the covenant with Noah is better understood as separate from the covenant of grace and ought to be seen as a covenant of common grace. While certainly a blessing to all the earth, the covenant with Noah ought to be considered part of God’s everlasting covenant of grace first announced in Genesis 3:15 and formalized with Abraham in Genesis chapters 12, 15, and 17.



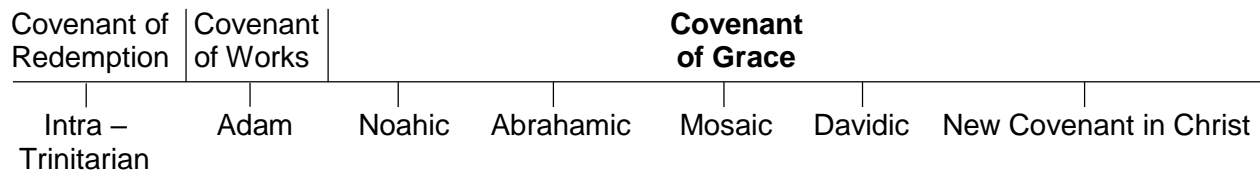
As we will see, there are also some covenant theologians who believe that the covenant with Moses (Mosaic Covenant), since it involves the giving of law, belongs to the covenant of works rather than the covenant of grace. We reject this also for reasons that will be made clear.

The covenant of grace is the one covenant through which all believers are saved. It began in Genesis 3:15 with God’s promise to send a Savior and runs throughout redemptive history until Christ’s second coming. Although it has been administered differently during different epochs of redemptive history, its substance remains the same in all periods. In other words, in both the Old Testament and New Testament the way in which God saves sinners is always the same: by his grace alone, through faith alone, because of Christ alone. Christ is the one Mediator of the one covenant of grace that unifies the one people of God in all periods of redemptive history...¹

The Administrations of the Covenant of Grace:

Because there is only one everlasting covenant of grace we do not refer to the covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus as different covenants but different administrations of the one covenant of grace with Jesus Christ as the ultimate fulfillment and Mediator. These different administrations function in several ways. First, the different administrations function as restatements of God’s promise to his people to be their God. Second, they give further light to the nature of the covenant of grace. That is, the various administrations of the covenant of grace revealed with increasing clarity what the Messiah would accomplish.

¹ Brown & Keele, *Sacred Bond: Covenant Theology Explored*. Reformed Fellowship: Grandville, MI (2012), 58.



1. Noahic

- Genesis 8:20-22; 9:8-17

In identifying the Noahic Covenant with the Covenant of Grace we must keep in mind its place in redemptive history. God's covenant with Noah came long after the fall. It was made with a sinner who nevertheless found favor in the eyes of the Lord (that's grace!). Also, the covenant with Noah was made after the announcement to the serpent that God would save his people, the first announcement of salvation by grace (**Gen. 3:15**). God's dealings with his people after Genesis 3 were all on the basis of grace.

God preserved Noah and his family while judging the rest of the earth's inhabitants. This particularity is a function of redemptive rather than common grace. Like the Exodus still to come, the salvation of Noah's family was paradigmatic of the deliverance from sin that would be accomplished through the dying and rising of Jesus. The deliverance of Noah's family was not an act of "common grace" but saving grace. The fact that this salvific relationship between God and Noah held blessings for the whole of creation does not remove the Noahic Covenant from the broader covenant of grace.

God's covenant with Noah was, in terms of the promise to not destroy the earth with water, a covenant with all the earth. That is, the covenant promise would benefit all the earth's inhabitants. But Noah was the chosen and redeemed covenant partner. He and his progeny were in the redemptive line of Eve (Gen. 3:15).

2. Abrahamic

- Genesis 12, 15, 17

God's covenant with Abraham is where the gracious nature of God's covenant is made clear. God promised to save Abraham and his spiritual line (Jew and Gentile) by grace through faith in the coming Messiah. Therefore, the covenant with Abraham and the covenant of grace are typically used synonymously. The sign attached was that of circumcision. It was a bloody sign signifying the necessity of the shedding of blood for the remission of sin. The Abrahamic Covenant was where God formally instituted the promise made in Genesis 3:15.

3. Mosaic

- Exodus 20:1-20; Deuteronomy 4:13; 7:1-12

I would rather obey God than work miracles. – Martin Luther

Love to God and obedience to God are so completely involved in each other, that anyone of them implies the other two. – F.F. Bruce

There has been some debate among Reformed scholars as to whether God's covenant with Moses should be considered an administration of the covenant of grace since in it God calls his people to obedience to his moral law. It is also with Moses that God gives to the people the various

civil and ceremonial regulations that governed Israel for generations. It is reasoned by some, therefore, that since law and grace are two different things, the Mosaic Covenant must be a kind of restating of the covenant of works. Therefore, the covenant with Moses, like the covenant made with Adam, was fulfilled by Christ who alone obeyed God's law perfectly.

Geerhardus Vos helpfully points out the significance of Christ being the mediator of the covenant in terms of his relationship with the law:

The Son, who as a divine Person stood above the law, placed Himself in His assumed nature under the law, that is to say, not only under the natural relationship under which man stands toward God, but under the relationship of the covenant of works, so that by active obedience He might merit eternal life. Considered in this light, the work of Christ was a fulfillment of what Adam had not fulfilled, a carrying out of the demand of the covenant of works.²

But calls for obedience should never be understood as a negation of grace. And while it is true that only Jesus would fulfill all of the law given through Moses, this does not mean that the covenant with Moses is not an administration of the covenant of grace. Indeed, the preamble to the Ten Commandments sets the giving of the law in the context of God's prior work of salvation by grace.

And God spoke all these words, saying,

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exodus 20:1-20).

Vos points out that Israel's treatment of the Mosaic Covenant as a covenant of works was a misuse; a "Hagarite covenant" (**Gal. 4:24**). That is, because Israel viewed the covenant with Moses as a self-willed covenant of works, they did not see the grace it proclaimed. They misunderstood the ceremonies of the Mosaic covenant. Rather than seeing types which proclaimed the gospel, they viewed the ceremonial regulations as means for their self-justification.

The covenant with Israel [Mosaic Covenant] had a ceremonial and a typical ministry, fixed in its details. That was also already so in part for the earlier administration of the covenant of grace. But to the degree that it now came about, that ceremonial ministry was something new. *A formal gospel preaching was offered continually by symbols and types.* A priestly class came into existence. Earlier, every father of a family was a priest. Now, particular persons are separated and consecrated for this function. One must consider all these types and symbols from two points of view: 1) as demands of God on the people; 2) as a proclamation of God to the people. God had appointed them to serve in both respects. But the Jews overlooked the latter aspect more and more, and made the types and symbols exclusively serve the former purpose. That is to say, they used them only as additions to a self-willed covenant of works, and *misunderstood the ministering significance they had for the covenant of grace.* So the opinion arose that righteousness had to be obtained by keeping that law in the broadest sense of the word, including the ceremonial law. And by this misuse, *the covenant of grace of Sinai was in fact made into a Hagarite covenant,* a covenant giving birth to servitude, as Paul describes it in Gal 4:24. There he has in view not the covenant as it should be, but as it could easily become through misuse.³ (*emphasis mine*)

² Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2013) vol. 2, p. 51

³ *Ibid.*, p. 77

Earlier generations of Israelites – perhaps because they were closer in proximity to the covenant of works – seemed to have a greater understanding of the need for a gracious covenant; one that did not depend upon the perfect obedience of the people. Vos states that, “in the patriarchal era, the gracious character of the covenant was more obvious” (**Gal. 3:18**).

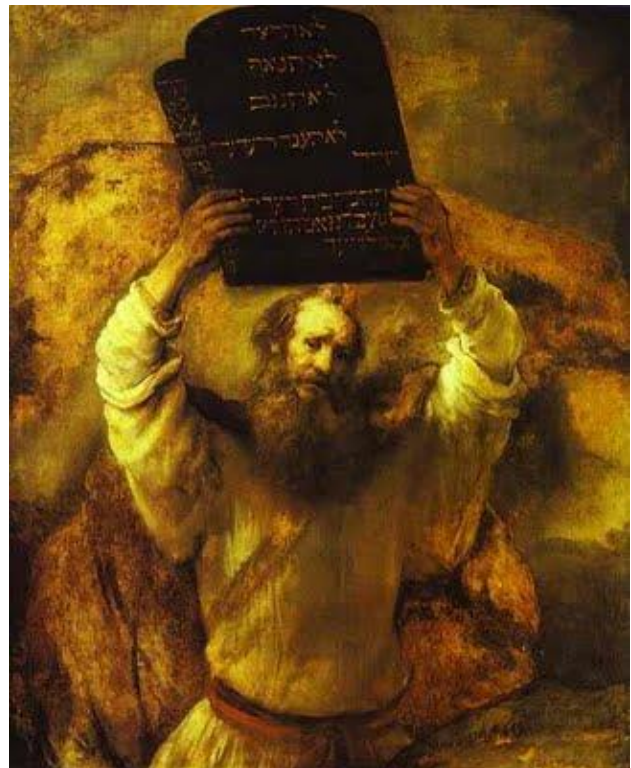
Though the law is given and obedience required, the Mosaic covenant is not a return to or republication of the covenant of works. When the law was given to Israel it was done only after a gracious salvation was granted. So, all of the law, ceremonies and regulations in the Mosaic covenant were announced to those who had already been delivered from slavery by God’s grace. They were never intended to believe that their obedience to the law would be the means of their salvation. Indeed, the very ceremonies prescribed in the Mosaic covenant proclaimed, through types and shadows, the gospel.

Deuteronomy 7:1-12

Here, God connects the giving of the law with the covenant made with their forefathers. So, the covenant with Moses which involved a command to keep the law, was not a separate covenant from that made with Abraham. Rather the Mosaic covenant was to be understood as an administration of the covenant of grace.

But what, you may ask, are we to make of the conditional statements in Deuteronomy 7? Is the conditionality – keep my commands and I will keep my covenant – a contradiction of grace?

To put it simply, No. Keep in mind that there is a condition to the covenant of grace; namely, faith. One must believe. Granted, faith is a gift of God’s grace but one must believe nevertheless. So, in principle, the existence of a condition does not on its own rule out grace.



In terms of the Mosaic covenant and the conditionality based upon the people’s obedience, we must keep in mind that unlike the covenant of works, the Mosaic covenant included a provision for failure; for sin. God included in the Mosaic covenant a system for making atonement for the people’s sin. And that provision was an act of grace, something which did not exist in the covenant of works.

In contrast to cheap sentimentalism, God’s grace in the Old Testament is more than a whim or a spineless capitulation to human rebellion. God does not ignore the problem of sin and pretend it does not exist. He responds with holy anger and wrath toward sin and cannot simply pardon the rejection of his rule as if it had never happened. So there is need for atoning action to deal with the transgressions of his law. Thus, God established a sacrificial system under Moses, the supreme manifestation of which is the Day of Atonement, detailed in Leviticus 16, whereby the sins of the nation were addressed. God himself created the sacrificial system. He regulated it via his Word and an elect priesthood, and ultimately, it is God who chooses to accept the sacrifices presented to him.

This fact—that God is the one who established and regulated the sacrificial system—must not be missed. It is significant because it teaches us that the Old Testament sacrifices were not manmade attempts to placate or cajole an angry God. The sacrifices prescribed in the Mosaic Covenant were not means to earn God's favor. The Old Testament sacrifices were God-given means to allow sinful humans to relate to him. He established the content, the terms, and the results of the sacrifices because his justice needed to be satisfied in a particular way. This initiative is further evidence of his grace and favor toward his people. The sacrificial system was not an example of humanity reaching up to God but, rather, God reaching down to humanity; an action completely founded in God's unmerited favor toward his people. God established *by grace* the sacrifices which served to satisfy his justice.

How the Mosaic Covenant functions:

A. Upholds God's righteousness

- The covenant of grace was never intended to diminish God's holiness. People on the receiving end of grace need constant tutoring in the holiness of God.

B. Institutes ceremonies and various regulations which will further reveal the nature of Christ's work on behalf of sinners.

- The various regulations established under Moses were types pointing to Christ. For instance, the sacrificial system was meant to teach the people of their need for a final and perfect sacrifice on their behalf; a Lamb whose blood would offer final satisfaction. It is for this reason why the term Old Covenant is not a reference to the Abrahamic, but the Mosaic covenant. Since the Mosaic covenant employed ceremonies and regulations which were meant to be temporary signs pointing to Christ, we refer to it as the Old Covenant.

C. Restrains sin

- The moral law of God is written upon the conscience even of unbelievers, though they do not always recognize it. People from various cultures and competing worldviews nevertheless typically understand that such things as theft and murder and adultery are wrong. In this way, God's law helps to restrain the onslaught of sin in society. This function of the law is often referred to as the first use of the law.

D. Drives sinners to Christ

- The law of God is meant to terrify sinners with a vision for God's holiness and an exposure of their sinfulness. By exposing our moral failure, the law drives us to seek a Savior. This function of the law is often referred to as the second use of the law.

E. Instructs Christians on how to live God-glorifying lives

- This is what we often times refer to as "the third use of the law." For the Christian, the law of God is not a means for justification, but a means by which we learn how to live God-glorifying lives. We do not seek our salvation in obedience. Rather, we obey out of gratitude for salvation by grace.

The following is a sampling of New Testament texts proving that the giving of law is not antithetical to grace. Calls for obedience share a complementary relationship with the promise of salvation by grace alone. Keep in mind that these calls to obedience and many others were offered in the days of Christ's fulfillment of the covenant of grace...

- John 14:15 – "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments."
- John 14:21 – "He who has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me; and he who loves Me shall be loved by My Father, and I will love him, and will disclose Myself to him."

- Galatians 3:10 – “For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, “CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT ABIDE BY ALL THINGS WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW, TO PERFORM THEM.”
- Ephesians 4:1 – “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.”
- Ephesians 4:17 – “This I say therefore, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind,”
- Ephesians 6:6 – “not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart.”
- Phillipians 2:12 – “So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling;”
- I Timothy 6:14 – “that you keep the commandment without stain or reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ,”
- I Timothy 6:18 – “Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share,”
- Hebrews 13:16 – “And do not neglect doing good and sharing; for with such sacrifices God is pleased.”
- James 1:22 – “But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.”

4. Davidic

- 2 Samuel 7:1-17

[10] And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may dwell in their own place and be disturbed no more. And violent men shall afflict them no more, as formerly, [11] from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel. And I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. [12] When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. [13] He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. [14] I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, [15] but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. [16] And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.” (vv. 10-16)

Though the word covenant is not used in this text, it is clear that God is establishing a covenant with David. Elsewhere, the Bible explicitly states that God inaugurated a covenant with David. For example, Psalm 89:3-4 states, “I have made a covenant with My chosen, I have sworn to David, My servant, your seed will I establish forever and build up your throne to all generations.” Psalm 132 also states that God made a covenant with David.

In the covenant, God promises specific blessings to David:

A. David’s heir will occupy the throne.

“When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom” (vs. 12).

B. David’s heir will build a temple for the Lord.

“He shall build a house for My name...” (vs. 13).

C. David’s heir will have a unique relationship with God.

“I will be to him a Father, and he shall be to me a son...” (vs. 14).

- Those of us who live in the days of the new covenant in Christ have the privilege of relating to God as his sons and daughters. But for Hebrews in the days of the Old Covenant, calling God

Father would have been radically new. Not until the covenant with David do we see an individual so clearly identified as a son of God.

D. David's heir will be disciplined for sin but will not be cast away.

"When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you" (vv. 14b-15).

- The promise of discipline is a further application of the Father and Son relationship that God is establishing with David's heir.
- It is worth noting the remarkable duration of David's dynasty. His descendants ruled Judah for over four hundred years, longer than the greatest Egyptian dynasty. The reign of the Davidic Dynasty also stands in stark contrast to the various ruling families of the Northern kingdom (Israel). It is likely that there has never been a longer reigning single dynasty in history than David's four-hundred-year dynasty.

The Davidic Covenant, however, was not that David's house would reign for a long time, but that the dynasty would reign forever. The prophets understood this and prophesied that the covenant would be fulfilled in the Messiah. That is precisely what Jesus and the apostles affirmed. The eternal reign promised to David was to be fulfilled by David's greatest Son, Jesus Christ. The eternal rule of David's house, was always intended to be a Messianic rule. Therefore, the Davidic Dynasty was a type, a shadow pointing forward to an eternal reality.



And this, by the way, is one of the classic examples of why we should not allow the Old Testament pattern of description to determine our understanding of the New Testament reality. If so, we end up believing with the Dispensationalists that one day, David is going to be reestablished on the throne in literal, earthly Israel. Of course, the New Testament in passages like Hebrews 1:5, makes it clear that the Davidic reign was prophetic of Christ's reign. The reality is, by definition, clearer than the shadow. So we must interpret the shadow in light of the reality, not the reality in light of the shadow. If the Davidic reign was a foreshadowing of a greater and ultimate reality fulfilled in the person and reign of Christ.

5. The New Covenant in Christ

Through his life, death, and resurrection Jesus brought to complete fulfillment all the requirements of the covenant of grace. The sign attached to the new covenant is baptism.