

“Covenant Theology: A Brief Overview and Evaluation
of the Covenants of Redemption, Works, and Grace”

Seminary revealed to me how little I know and how much I need to study. It also provided me opportunities to study and explore topics I knew little to nothing about, such as Covenant Theology. The following article is adapted from a paper I wrote in seminary, born out of a desire to personally research a significant theological position. I hope it is accurate and that it provides an introductory resource for further study.

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Introduction

The two mainstream opposing theological positions relating to ecclesiology and eschatology are Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology. While this doctrine does not address the question, “How is one saved?” (though some believe so), it addresses other important questions: What is the purpose of the nation of Israel? Who are the “people of God”? How should prophecies be interpreted and understood? How does the New Testament relate to the Old Testament? What is the purpose of the church? How much of apocalyptic literature is to be taken literal and/or allegorical? The theological issues surrounding Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology are not secluded to the ivory tower of academia, or simply fodder for debate among scholars and theologians. Rather, it directly affects the people in the pews. Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology impact one’s hermeneutics and homiletics. In exhorting leaders toward Christ-centered preaching, Bryan Chapell says,

Christ-centered exposition of Scripture does not require us to unveil depictions of Jesus by mysterious alchemies of allegory or typology; rather, it identifies how every text functions in furthering our understanding of who Christ is, what the Father sent him to do, and why. The goal is not to make a specific reference to Jesus magically appear from every camel track of Hebrew narrative or every metaphor of Hebrew poetry (leading to allegorical errors), but rather to show where every text stands in relation to the person and work of Christ, whose grace alone achieves our salvation. *Such an interpretive approach will always take the preacher to the heart of covenantal and Reformed theology* by requiring discernment of the progressive and ever-present revelation of God’s sovereign grace through Scripture.”¹ (Emphasis added)

Christ-centered preaching aims to faithfully communicate God’s Word to God’s people with respect to redemptive history. So, is Covenant Theology the theological position that is *most faithful* to God’s Word, as opposed to Dispensationalism? Given the importance of this theological issue, this article will provide a brief overview and analysis of Covenant Theology–

¹ Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2nd ed (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 237.

its theological distinctives and exegetical arguments—and evaluate it as a viable theological position.²

² A critique or comparison with Dispensationalism is outside the scope of this paper.

Overview and Distinctives of Covenant Theology

An exhaustive and comprehensive survey of Covenant Theology, including detailed exegetical analyses, is beyond the scope of this paper; further in-depth studies are required. This overview is meant to provide a basic primer to Covenant Theology's core distinctives. First, it will be helpful to remember that Covenant Theology is a theological system with a particular hermeneutical approach. Roger Olson says,

Biblical *theology* has long recognized the importance of the covenant theme for hermeneutics...Christian theology has traditionally regarded God's redemption of humanity through Christ the fulfillment of a covenant of *grace*. Evangelical biblical scholars and theologians traditionally draw heavily on this covenant theme to explain the flow of biblical history or drama of *redemption*.³

Simply stated, Covenant Theology is a theological framework that supposedly appropriates or interprets the whole of Scripture within the biblical framework (and theme) of covenants.

Covenant Theology uses "the covenant concept as an architectonic principle for systematizing of Christian truth" (e.g., Covenant of Works, Covenant of Grace, Covenant of Redemption).⁴ Paul Enns describes Covenant Theology as,

A system of theology teaching that God entered into a covenant of works with Adam, who failed, whereupon God entered into a covenant of grace, promising eternal life to those who believe. Covenant Theology affirms there is one people of God called true Israel, the church (in contrast to Dispensationalism, which teaches there are two people of God, called Israel and the church).⁵

³ Roger E. Olson, *The Westminster Handbook to Evangelical Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 163.

⁴ Donald Macleod, "Covenant Theology," in *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology*, ed. Nigel M. de S. Cameron (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 214.

⁵ Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), 633.

Overview

Historically, Covenant Theology was refined along with Reformed Theology. Michael Horton goes so far as to say “*Reformed* theology is synonymous with *covenant* theology.”⁶ This is significant since the development of Reformed Theology (or Tradition) connects with other doctrinal issues.⁷ Michael Harbin says, “‘Reformed tradition’ is a term often used by Presbyterians and people in related groups to reflect their theological system....the Reformed tradition is *the historical process of the church clarifying views on specific points of theology by dealing with issues as they arose.*”⁸ Harbin provides a succinct overview:

Covenant theology is a system developed by two men, Johannes Cocceius (1603-1669) and Hermann Witsius (1636-1708). It was an attempt to tie the Old and New Testaments together by two covenants. The first was called the covenant of works, defined as the covenant instituted by God with Adam after creation. This was abrogated by the Fall and was replaced by the covenant of grace. The covenant of grace is the covenant of salvation, a single covenant for all men after the Fall. Thus the unifying feature of the Bible in this system is God’s grace.⁹

This brief overview observes the following recurring key elements: (1) an eternal covenant of redemption between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; (2) the federal headship of Adam; and (3) the unity of the covenant of grace. Enns provides a summary of the features on the major distinctives of Covenant Theology:¹⁰

⁶ Michael Horton, *Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006), 11.

⁷ See Anthony A. Hoekema, “The Covenant of Grace in Calvin’s Teaching,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 2, no. 2 (1967): 133-61; Morton H. Smith, “The Church and Covenant Theology,” *Journal of The Evangelical Theological Society* 21, no. 1 (March 1978): 47-65; O. Palmer Robertson, “Current Reformed Thinking on the Nature of the Divine Covenants,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 40 (1977): 63-76.

⁸ Michael A. Harbin, “The Hermeneutics of Covenant Theology,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 143, no. 571 (July-September 1986): 247.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, 509.

Comparisons	Covenant of Works	Covenant of Redemption	Covenant of Grace
Persons	With Adam	With Father and Son	With mankind
Promise	Physical/eternal life confirmed	Salvation provided for mankind	Eternal life
Condition	Obedience	–	Faith
Warning	Physical death	–	Eternal life
Time	Eden before Fall	Eternity Past	Eden after Fall

Definitions

Covenant

Perhaps obvious, the understanding of “covenant” (Hebrew *berith*, בְּרִית; Greek *diatheke*, διαθήκη; Latin *pactum, foedus, testamentum*) is crucial to Covenant Theology. There are numerous examples of covenants throughout ancient history (e.g., suzerainty covenants), as well as in Scripture (e.g., Abrahamic Covenant). The focus of Covenant Theology is covenants made between God and man.¹¹ In this context, a covenant is “a bond in blood sovereignly administered.”¹² O. Palmer Robertson describes three aspects to this definition: (1) an oath-bound commitment, (2) a life and death commitment, and (3) it is sovereignly administered.¹³ It is an oath-binding relationship between two parties, which incorporate implications of life and death according to its stipulations. It is unilateral with conditional and unconditional elements. Wayne Grudem provides the following definition on covenants made between God and man: “A covenant is an unchangeable, divinely imposed legal agreement between God and men that

¹¹ Covenant Theology’s focus is *theological* covenants, as opposed to *biblical* covenants. The Covenants of Redemption, Works, and Grace are not specifically mentioned in Scripture; they are theological categories. Biblical covenants refer to the covenants directly mentioned in Scripture (i.e., Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, Priestly, and New).

¹² O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1980), 4.

¹³ Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, 4-15.

stipulates the conditions of their relationship.”¹⁴ In other words, this is a binding relationship between two parties in which man can only accept, not negotiate, the terms of the contract.

As with any theological system, there is a spectrum of beliefs within the Covenant Theology camp. For example, not all agree on the number or titles of covenants within Covenant Theology: The Westminster Confession of Faith only identifies a Covenant of Works and Covenant of Grace;¹⁵ O. Palmer Robertson describes a Covenant of Creation and Covenant of Redemption; and the Puritans spoke of a Covenant of Redemption, Covenant of Works, and Covenant of Grace. This paper will focus on the covenants of Works, Grace, and Redemption.

Covenant of Works

Grudem defined the Covenant of Works (also called the Edenic Covenant, the covenant of nature, or the covenant of life) as “the legal agreement between God and Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden whereby participation in the blessings of the covenant depended on the obedience, or ‘works,’ of Adam and Eve.”¹⁶ According to Eugene Osterhaven, God entered into a covenant with Adam, which consisted of (1) a promise of eternal life dependent upon obedience for a probationary period, (2) the threat of death for disobedience, and (3) the sacrament of the Trees of Life and of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.¹⁷ Donald Macleod connects this Covenant to the doctrine of federal headship in which Adam, whom God presented stipulations to, acted as the representative of the human race; his obedience would mean life and

¹⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1994), 515.

¹⁵ See Appendix A: The Westminster Confession of Faith.

¹⁶ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1239.

¹⁷ M. Eugene Osterhaven, “Covenant Theology,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1984), 279.

his disobedience would mean death.¹⁸ Ultimately, had Adam kept the Covenant of Works, man would have enjoyed the blessings of obedience (e.g., partaking in the Tree of Life).

Covenant of Grace

John Frame describes the promise of the gift of salvation in Gen 3:15 as a Covenant of Grace.¹⁹ Grudem defines this Covenant as “the legal agreement between God and man, established by God after the fall of Adam, whereby man could be saved. Although the specific provisions of this covenant varied at different times during redemptive history, the essential condition of requiring faith in Christ the redeemer remained the same.”²⁰ Osterhaven provides a broader definition: a covenant made by God with mankind, offering life and salvation through Christ to all who believe.²¹ Though it includes various dispensations (cf. Gen 3:15; Gen 6-9), it is ultimately one covenant.²² Covenant Theology views subsequent biblical covenants (e.g. Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, New) as continuing the Covenant of Grace program. Robert Reymond says,

These descriptions [in the Westminster Confession of Faith VII/V] of the covenant of grace expressly make the point that the covenant is one, the covenant after the cross is simply being administered (to employ the terms to describe the two administrations as such which are used specifically to describe their respective sacraments) with “more simplicity,” “less outward glory,” and more fulness [sic], evidence, and spiritual efficacy to all nations. It also underscores the truth that the earlier administration’s “promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances”

¹⁸ Donald Macleod, “Covenant Theology,” in *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology*, ed. Nigel M. de S. Cameron (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 215.

¹⁹ John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), 66.

²⁰ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1239.

²¹ Osterhaven, “Covenant Theology,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 280.

²² To be clear, Covenant Theology believes in dispensations (e.g., differing eras of history in which a particular covenant is the focus, like the Covenant of Works in the Garden of Adam between creation and Fall), and Dispensationalism believes in covenants (e.g., biblical covenants).

all pointed forward to Christ, and were sufficient and efficacious, through the Spirit's operation, to "instruct and build up the elect in faith in *the promised Messiah*."²³

Covenant of Redemption

Providing a general definition, Grudem defines the Covenant of Redemption (or Covenant of Peace) as "the agreement between the members of the Trinity in which each agreed to fulfill his respective role to accomplish the salvation of human beings."²⁴ More specifically, the agreement between God the Father and God the Son are focused on. Louis Berkhof says, "The covenant of redemption may be defined as *the agreement between the Father, giving the Son as Head and Redeemer of the elect, and the Son, voluntarily taking the place of those whom the Father had given Him*."²⁵ The Covenant of Redemption also directly relates to man's salvation and God's redemptive plans. Macleod says this Covenant "was an eternal covenant between the Father and the Son, according to which *the Son became surety for his people, undertook to obey and suffer in their place and was promised everything that pertains to grace and salvation*" (emphasis added).²⁶ Similarly, Osterhaven describes it as "the eternal pact between God the Father and God the Son *concerning salvation of mankind*" (emphasis added).²⁷ Osterhaven expands on how the Father and Son carried out the Covenant of Redemption,

God the Father and God the Son covenanted together for the redemption of the human race, the Father appointing the Son to be the mediator, the Second Adam, whose life would be given for the salvation of the world, and the Son accepting the commission, promising that he would do the work which the Father had given him to do and fulfill all righteousness by obeying the law of God.²⁸

²³ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of Christian Faith*, 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 506.

²⁴ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1239.

²⁵ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 71.

²⁶ Macleod, "Covenant Theology," in *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology*, 215.

²⁷ Osterhaven, "Covenant Theology," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 279.

In explaining the Holy Spirit's role in this Covenant, Frame says, "The Holy Spirit is also a party to this agreement, for the Father and the Son (John 15:26; Rom. 1:4) agreed to send the Spirit into the world to bear witness of Christ...All the Spirit does for God's people was planned before the foundation of the world."²⁹

The above definitions are helpful to have a working knowledge of terms that theologians use. At first glance, these simple descriptions *appear* to be consistent with Scriptural truths. However, these theological explanations seem to be driven by Covenant Theology's theological framework and hermeneutical system. It will be helpful to highlight a consistent pattern of Covenant Theology's hermeneutical methodology.

²⁸ Ibid., 280.

²⁹ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 59.

The Hermeneutics of Covenant Theology

As much as theologians and scholars affirm that one's theological system should be derived from the text of Scripture (and not vice versa), there appears to be a recurring pattern of hermeneutical principles that Covenant Theologians seem to prioritize, which result in their Scriptural interpretations and arguments for or support of Covenant Theology's distinctives. To be fair, like Dispensationalism, the historical-grammatical method is the basic method of hermeneutics of Covenant Theology, but would differ from Dispensationalism in the application of extent and location of special hermeneutics (i.e., identification and uses of similes, metaphors, allegories, types, apocalyptic literature, etc.), particularly in prophetic passages.³⁰ It seems that Covenant Theology's interpretive framework seeks to place all of Scripture back into the theme of covenants. J.I. Packer is honest in answering the question, "What is covenant theology? The straightforward, if provocative, answer to that question is that it 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" (emphasis added).³¹ Simply stated, Covenant Theology is a hermeneutical method, which contradicts the pattern of Scriptural interpretation forming theological doctrines. The following are recurring patterns of Covenant Theology's hermeneutical principles, which are used to support its distinctives.

New Testament Priority and Analogy of Faith

Horton notes that Covenant Theology simply uses the hermeneutical principle that Scripture interprets Scripture.³² This is a helpful principle in remaining faithful to the historical-

³⁰ Harbin, "The Hermeneutics of Covenant Theology," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 252, 255, 257.

³¹ J.I. Packer, introduction to *The Economy of the Covenants: Between God and Man* by Herman Witsius (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 1:27.

³² Horton, *Introducing Covenant Theology*, 12.

literal-grammatical understanding of a text, but, within Covenant Theology, it often functions as New Testament understanding being used to interpret (or reinterpret) the Old Testament. In other words, the New Testament takes priority over the Old Testament. In this hermeneutical methodology, nearly every text becomes about Christ to fit the theme of grace in God's redemption history, consistent with the Covenants. Horton goes on to say that "whenever Reformed theologians attempt to explore and explain the riches of Scripture, they are always thinking *covenantally* about every topic they take up."³³ Horton explains that interpretation on any given point must be consistent with the whole of teaching of Scripture (i.e. analogy of faith), and concludes that covenantal unity is the framework of Scripture that undergirds the diversity in Scripture.³⁴ Further quoting Horton will provide a typical example of Covenant Theology hermeneutics of NT priority and analogy of faith:

To read Deuteronomy, for example, as if it were timeless principles of blessing and cursing is to confuse this covenant concerning a national, geopolitical entity (i.e., the nation of Israel), with the eternal plan of redemption carried forward in the unconditional divine promise to Abraham and fulfilled in Christ. Again, covenant theology helps enormously in understanding both the continuities and discontinuities as we read Scripture. It helps us to see the basic *continuity between* the old and new covenants in terms of a single covenant of grace running throughout, as well as the *discontinuity within* even the Old Testament itself when it comes to the principle of a unilateral divine promise and an arrangement dependent on personal obedience to all that God commands.³⁵

Indeed, there are real points of continuity and discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments. However, *this* application of Scripture interpreting Scripture and analogy of faith disregards the original authorial intent to the original audience. In other words, it does not allow texts to stand alone in their respective contexts; the context for every text becomes the Covenants.

³³ Ibid., 14.

³⁴ Ibid., 14-15.

³⁵ Ibid., 20-21.

Typology

Before directly examining Covenant Theology's exegetical claims, another area of special hermeneutics worth brief mention is typology. Jim Rosscup defines a type as "an Old Testament person, animal, object, event, office, or institution which first has its place and design in an actual historical situation itself but at the same time is specifically intended by God to pre-figure some greater future reality."³⁶ It is an illustration of a literal thing or event that is rooted in history and pictures something in the future. Yet Covenant Theology, a nondispensational system that emphasizes more continuity than discontinuity between the Testaments, uses typology to further develop its theological Covenants. John Feinberg says,

Nondispensational systems [e.g., Covenant Theology] stress that the type is a shadow and the antitype is reality; therefore, the meaning of the antitype supersedes and cancels the meaning of the type in its own context. Dispensationalists do not think types necessarily are shadows, and they demand that both type and antitype be given their due meanings in their own contexts while maintaining a typological relation to one another.³⁷

In application, within Covenant Theology, the church as the people of God (antitype) supersedes national Israel as the people of God (type), applying all the promised blessings to the church (also known as Replacement Theology). At best, Israel's significance is to highlight the "continuity" of Christ's redemptive work as a particular dispensation of the Covenant of Grace; at worst, Israel's historical significance (and historical context of the prophetic blessings) is irrelevant, or was never intended by God under the Covenant of Redemption.

It appears that the pattern of Covenant Theology's hermeneutical methodology is upside-down (or inappropriate circular argumentation with a particular theological presupposition as its starting point). They are driven by their theological framework or system, and inappropriately

³⁶ Jim Rosscup, "BI505 Hermeneutics," Lecture Notes, The Master's Seminary, Fall 2012, 109.

³⁷ John Feinberg, "Systems of Discontinuity," in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*, ed. John Feinberg (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1988), 78.

apply interpretations on Scriptural passages and truths to support their interpretations. It is like wearing orange tinted glasses and concluding that the world has an orange hue. A biased perspective is being used to support a particular claim. Their theological framework (Covenant Theology) impacts their interpretations of texts, which are then used to support their theological framework (e.g., there is a Covenant of Works between Adam and God; Gen. 1-3 describe a covenant between Adam and God; thus, there is a Scriptural basis for the Covenant of Works). A text must be understood in its own context—historical, literary, grammatical contexts. Perhaps the charge of some Dispensationalists that all Covenant Theologians only allegorize is too strong. At the same time, there is a consistent pattern of *theologized* hermeneutic that does not allow a text to speak for itself—a pattern of *eisegesis*.

Main Biblical Support and Arguments of Covenant Theology

How do Covenant Theologians biblically support their theological claims, and are they legitimate? First, it is interesting to note that common defenses of Covenant Theology cite theological arguments. In answering objections to Covenant Theology, Ligon Duncan cites J.B. Torrance (1923-2003),³⁸ William Klempa, and John Murray's (1898-1975) objections (which, in my opinion, is a straw-man tactic and does not address actual, Scriptural critiques/objections to Covenant Theology):³⁹

1. Covenant Theology misunderstands the nature of a covenant
2. Covenant Theology inappropriately dichotomizes nature and grace
3. Covenant Theology moves from emphasis on Christ to emphasis on ourselves
4. Covenant Theology makes God's justice His central attribute
5. Covenant Theology places atonement prior to God's love
6. The bi-covenantal scheme (e.g. Works and Grace) is unbiblical
7. Covenant Theology purports that God saves people in two different ways
8. Intra-Trinitarian covenant (e.g. Covenant of Redemption) leads to dualism
9. Covenant of Works does not account for elements of grace in the Adamic administration
10. Scripture does not refer to Adam's relationship with God as a covenant
11. "Covenant" is only applied to redemption in administrations with man, but Adam was not in a redemptive setting
12. "Covenant" is related to security (i.e., unconditional), but Adam was not secured because he was able to break the covenant

Interestingly, of the twelve objections cited, perhaps the last three directly relate to evaluating Covenant Theology's exegetical claims. Many accessible scholars describe and defend Covenant Theology with doctrinal clarity and precision, yet fall short in addressing exegetical objections and in providing clear exegetical support. Still, Duncan says,

Covenant Theology is a *blending of both biblical and systematic theology*. If biblical theology is the thematic survey of redemptive history, with an emphasis on the theological development—era to era—of whatever loci is being studied, then covenant theology could rightly be called "biblical biblical theology." That is, *covenant theology recognizes that the Bible itself structures the progress of redemptive history through the*

³⁸ It seems that Ligon Duncan's source for J.B. Torrance was taken from the *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* for his comments are nearly identical to Donald Macleod's entry.

³⁹ Ligon Duncan, Introduction to Covenant Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary, Lecture, Spring 2013.

succession of covenants. It is systematic theology in that it recognizes the covenants as a *fundamental architectonic or organizing principle for the Bible's theology*. Thus it proceeds to integrate the biblical teaching about the federal headships of Adam and Christ, the covenantal nature of the incarnation and atonement, the continuities and discontinuities in the progress of redemptive history, the relation of the Jewish and Christian scriptures, law and gospel, into a coherent theological system.⁴⁰ (Emphasis added)

Horton (a Covenant Theology proponent), too, maintains, “systematic theology never imposes a system on Scripture but seeks instead to draw out the main teachings of Scripture from Scripture itself.”⁴¹ If Covenant Theology draws its theology directly from Scripture, what are their main exegetical arguments? Due to space, the analysis of exegetical arguments is limited to the most important or most commonly used support texts.

Texts Used for The Covenant of Works

Genesis 1-3

The primary text for the Covenant of Works is in the creation and Fall account, specifically Gen 2:16-17. Reymond lists four reasons why the account between God and Adam in Gen 2 should be regarded as the Covenant of Works: (1) the word “covenant” (בְּרִית) does not need to be present in order to be considered a covenant, like God’s covenant with David in 2 Sam 7 (cf. Ps 89:28); (2) “the covenant elements (parties, stipulation, promise, and threat) are present;” (3) Hosea 6:7 implies that Adam’s sin was a transgression of covenant; and (4) “the New Testament parallels between Adam and Christ (cf. Rom 5:12-19; 1 Cor 15:22, 45-49) imply that just as Christ was the federal (*foedus*: “covenant”) representative of the New Covenant (Luke 22:20; Heb 9:15), so also Adam acted as a federal representative of a covenant arrangement.”⁴² Grudem argues,

⁴⁰ Duncan, Introduction to Covenant Theology, RTS, 10.

⁴¹ Horton, *Introducing Covenant Theology*, 77.

“In the Garden of Eden, it seems quite clear that there was a legally binding set of provisions that defined the conditions of the relationship between God and man. The two parties are evident as God speaks to Adam and gives commands to him. The requirements of the relationship are clearly defined in the commands that God gave to Adam and Eve” (cf. Gen 1:28-30; 2:15-17).⁴³

While Gordon Wenham notes “the divine epithet the LORD God” in Gen 2:4 suggests the revelation of “God’s character as sovereign creator of the universe (God) and his intimate *covenant-like* relationship with mankind (the LORD),” it is interesting that Wenham also notes the *covenant theology* expressed in Deuteronomy (cf. 30:15-19), the prophets (cf. Isa 24:4-6; Jer 21:8), and wisdom literature (cf. Prov 14:12; 16:25)—that disobedience to God’s commands brings the curse and ultimately death—“there is no certain use of this garden of Eden story [e.g. *covenant theology*] elsewhere in the OT.”⁴⁴ In other words, if Gen 2-3 was intended to be paradigmatic for the Covenant of Works (and the Covenant of Grace), one would expect it to be repeated, quoted, or referenced in other portions of Scripture; God had ample opportunities to do so. The argument that there is a republication of the Covenant of Works through the Sinaitic Covenant (cf. Ex 19-24) is debatable, and still fails to explain the lack of reference to Gen 2:15-17 in the Book of Exodus. The most direct reference (Rom 5:12ff, apart from Hos 6:7) communicates Adam as a type for Christ. The references to Gen 2-3 in other portions of Scripture speak on the origin of human depravity, or God’s intended model of marriage and of male headship. Contextually, Gen 2-3 is the historical account of man’s creation and fall, reminding the nation of Israel of God’s sovereignty, holiness, and mercy as they enter the Promised Land. Gen 2-3 may reflect elements of “covenant,” but it is dubious to draw from those

⁴² Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of Christian Faith*, 430.

⁴³ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 516.

⁴⁴ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, in *Word Biblical Commentary*, eds. David A. Hubbard, Glenn W. Barker, and John D. Watts, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1987), 1:87, 90.

inferences an entire theological system, which is then imported to other portions of Scripture. In other words, this exegetical support is insufficient since Covenant Theology's understanding of "covenant" from other passages is imported into Gen 2-3 and re-exported out to the rest of Scripture.

Hosea 6:7

Hosea 6:7a says, "But like Adam they have transgressed the covenant."⁴⁵ Herman

Bavinck argues,

The only possible explicit scriptural reference to such a covenant [of works] is Hosea 6:7, which speaks of Israel and Judah transgressing the covenant, "like Adam." The translations "like a man" or "at Adam" are possible but less likely. The parallel that Paul draws in Romans 5:12-21 between Adam and Christ is decisive here. We stand to Adam in the same relation as we stand to Christ; guilt and death accrue to us because of his transgression, and we are made righteous by the righteousness of Christ. Adam is thus a type of Christ; he is our representative, i.e. covenant head."⁴⁶

However, what does Hosea 6:7 mean in its own context, not "decided" by Rom 5:12-21 or other passages? There is no consensus on how *adam* (אָדָם) ought to be translated—(1) personal name Adam, (2) reference to the Jordan valley town of Adam, or (3) generally man.⁴⁷ While there may be references to Genesis accounts in Hosea (cf. Hos 1:9, 10; 2:20, 25; 4:3; 5:14; 6:2, 8-9; 9:6, 16; 10:8; 11:8; 12:3-6, 13), none (excluding the possibility of 6:7) refer to a "Covenant of Works" with Adam in the Garden.⁴⁸ At best, Hosea 6:7 may refer to "God's original creational relationship [with man] in covenantal terms."⁴⁹ Also, "no other prophet seems to name Adam"

⁴⁵ All English Scripture quotes are in the NASB.

⁴⁶ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Abridged in One Volume* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 329.

⁴⁷ Byron G. Curtis, "Hosea 6:7 and Covenant-Breaking Like/At Adam," in *The Law is Not of Faith: Essays on Works and Grace in the Mosaic Covenant*, edited by Bryan D. Estelle, J. V. Fesko, and David VanDrunen (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 175. Curtis concludes that the use of *adam* is best understood as a place name.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 189-91.

except the genealogy in 1 Chron 1:1.⁵⁰ If *adam* is taken “like dirt,” the interpretation can be understood as Israel committing covenantal treachery by treating God’s covenant like dirt.⁵¹ Internally, contrary to Bavinck, the translation of the personal name Adam is more unlikely. Hosea may be *covenantally* minded, but it does not appear that he is speaking of the Covenant of Works with Adam.

The immediate contexts of Genesis and Hosea do not result with Covenant Theology as having the best interpretation. Some suggest that the Covenant of Works is no longer enforced (cf. Gal 3:10-11), yet that is typical of misapplying NT understanding (i.e., presuming that the additional details provided by NT imply the cancelling of OT detail).⁵² Other suggested Scriptural support include Leviticus 18:5; Ezekiel 20:11, 13, 20; Luke 20:28; Romans 5:12-19; 7:10; 10:5; Galatians 3:12.

Texts used for The Covenant of Grace

According to Enns, the phrase “I will be God to you and to your descendants after you” signal the Covenant of Grace.⁵³ Thus, a primary text is difficult to select. The following only provides a small sampling of texts used by Covenant Theology for the Covenant of Grace.

Genesis 3:15

The promise of a seed who will bruise or crush the head of the serpent is rightly understood as Christ (cf. Gal 3:16), but also declared the Covenant of Grace in Covenant Theology. Duncan speaks of atonement and grace being provided after sin (which cannot exist

⁴⁹ Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, 22-24.

⁵⁰ Curtis, “Hosea 6:7 and Covenant-Breaking Like/At Adam,” in *The Law is Not of Faith*, 188-89.

⁵¹ Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, in *Word Biblical Commentary*, eds. Bruce M. Metzger, David A. Hubbard, Glenn W. Barker, and John D. Watts (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1987), 113.

⁵² Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 518.

⁵³ Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, 509.

prior to sin), and sin cannot be prior to law (i.e., Covenant of Works).⁵⁴ In other words, in God's eternal purposes (i.e., Covenant of Redemption), the breaking of the Covenant of Works paves way for the Covenant of Grace. It is theologically argued that Gen 3:15 *is* the Covenant of Grace, which then has various dispensations (e.g., Abrahamic Covenant, New Covenant). Wenham concludes, contextually, Gen 2-3 is a proto-historical account of man's origins and sin,⁵⁵ not the inauguration of the Covenant of Grace.

Hebrews 13:20

Based on the Covenant of Redemption, the Covenant of Grace is thought of as an eternally established covenant. Heb 13:20, which speaks of "the blood of the eternal covenant," is taken as the Covenant of Grace (e.g., William Gouge, Matthew Henry, John Owen, Matthew Poole, Robert Dabney). Can the eternal covenant of Heb 13:20 refer to a covenant of grace (or the setting in Gen 3)? Richard Mayhue observes, "the OT clearly and specifically calls five different covenants 'eternal' or 'everlasting:'" Noahic (Gen 9:16), Abrahamic (Gen 17:7, 13, 19; 1 Chr 15:16, 17; Pss 105:8, 10; 111:5, 9; Isa 24:5), Priestly (Lev 24:8; Num 18:19), Davidic (2 Sam 23:5; Ps 89:3-4, 28-29, 36), and New (Isa 55:3; 59:21; 61:8; Jer 32:40; 50:5; Ezek 16:60; 37:26).⁵⁶ The author of Hebrews specifically addresses the Old and New covenants (Heb 8:9 and 8:8, respectively), but does not speak of the setting of Gen 3 or a general covenant of grace (in response to the Covenant of Redemption and the breaking of the Covenant of Works). The author of Hebrews has in mind the New Covenant (a biblical covenant, not a theological covenant of grace).

⁵⁴ Duncan, Introduction to Covenant Theology, RTS, Lecture Audio, Spring 2013.

⁵⁵ Wenham, *Genesis 1-15, WBC*, 1:91.

⁵⁶ Richard L. Mayhue, "Heb13:20: Covenant of Grace or new Covenant? An Exegetical Note," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 7, no. 2 (Fall 1996), 255-56.

Other suggested Scriptural support include Genesis 17:7; Jeremiah 31:33; 32:38-40; Ezekiel 34:23-31; 36:25-28; 37:26-27; 2 Corinthians 6:16-18; Hebrews 8:10.

Texts Used for The Covenant of Redemption

Similar to the Covenant of Grace in selecting a primary text, Enns presents the Scriptural support for the Covenant of Redemption as those that “emphasize the eternal nature of the plan of salvation.”⁵⁷ Bavinck states,

The classic text (Zech. 6:13) cited in support of this doctrine does not prove anything, but from Job 17:3; Isaiah 38:14; and Psalm 119:122 (none of which refer to the Messiah), and from Hebrews 7:22 (where we are told only that Christ, because he lives forever, is the guarantee that the new covenant will continue forever), it was inferred that in the pact of salvation Christ had from all eternity become our guarantor before God.⁵⁸

The small sample of texts below were chosen based on comments by some Covenant Theologians describing the Covenant of Redemption.

Titus 1:2

Charles Baker describes Covenant Theology’s interpretation of Titus 1:2: “Based upon the fact that God promised eternal life before the world began (Titus 1:2), and therefore before man was created, theologians have surmised that the Persons of the Godhead entered into a covenant to provide salvation from mankind before they were created or had fallen into sin.”⁵⁹

The argument is that the promise of salvation “long ages ago” is consistent with “the plan of redemption [that] was included in the eternal decree or counsel of God” (cf. Eph 1:4ff; 2 Thess 2:13; 2 Tim 1:9; 1 Pet 1:2).⁶⁰ Contextually, the phrase “promised long ages ago” does not support an intra-Trinitarian covenant act. It seems to speak of God’s unilateral, external

⁵⁷ Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, 508.

⁵⁸ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 398.

⁵⁹ Charles F. Baker, *A Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Grace Bible College Publications, 1971), 91.

⁶⁰ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 266.

presentation (or manifestation) of a promise (e.g., hope of eternal life—not the Father sending the Son or giving Him a people and the Son agreeing to be the Head or Redeemer of those people). Also, it is precarious to draw doctrinal support from inferences on texts like Titus 1:2 that are not explicitly teaching on the particular doctrine in question; it is Paul’s salutation and introduction, which understandably contain doctrinal truths. However, Titus 1:2 is simply consistent with God’s eternal redemptive purposes, not a description of the Covenant of Redemption.

Galatians 3:20

S.M. Baugh argues that the context of Gal 3:15-22 helps clarify 3:20: Paul’s analogy of human covenant making (Gal 3:15) is applied to v. 17, “saying the law could not annul the inheritance by changing the principal basis of inheritance from a gracious grant ‘from faith’ to a basis of personal law-keeping,” which draws continuity between the New Covenant and the Abrahamic Covenant.⁶¹ Baugh goes on to say, “In covenant theology, this continuity and development is expressed when we confess that Christ represents the substance of the one covenant of grace inaugurated immediately after the fall and yet administered in different ways in the course of redemptive history.”⁶² It is argued that Paul moves that historical development into the eternal realm and the pre-incarnate Son (v. 19), which “[invokes] the intratrinitarian life of God [Covenant of Redemption] as the foundation of the covenant with Abraham [a dispensation of the Covenant of Grace].”⁶³ This interpretation, again, appears to presuppose a particular theological framework (i.e., Mosaic and Abrahamic Covenants are under the umbrella of Covenant of Grace).⁶⁴ John MacArthur helps to uphold the plain context and explains that

⁶¹ S. M. Baugh, “Galatians 3:20 and the Covenant of Redemption,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 66 (2004), 69.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

Paul is simply showing the superiority of the covenant of promise (Abrahamic Covenant) over the inferiority of the covenant of law (Mosaic Covenant), and that “God gave the covenant directly to Abraham without a mediator because He [God] was the only one involved in *making* the covenant.”⁶⁵ This understanding immediately rejects the idea of a covenant act among the Godhead since it is directly speaking to a covenant made with man.

Other suggested Scriptural support include Isaiah 24:5; 49:6-8; Luke 22:29; John 10:18; 17:4; 1 Peter 1:20.

⁶⁴ See Bryan D. Estelle, J.V. Fesko and David VanDrunen, eds. *The Law is Not of Faith: Essays on Works and Grace in the Mosaic Covenant* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009)

⁶⁵ John MacArthur, *Galatians, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1987), 88.

Conclusion

The brief overview of Covenant Theology above clarifies its theological distinctives—what is meant by Covenant of Works, Covenant of Grace, Covenant of Redemption. The short analysis of major or common textual support for Covenant Theology’s theological distinctives observed a pattern of biased hermeneutical methodology and insufficient Scriptural support to uphold its doctrinal position. Is there a better—more biblically faithful—alternative? One ought to examine Dispensationalism as an alternative theological position in understanding ecclesiology and eschatology. Yet in all of it, may the goal be to faithfully examine the Scriptures (cf. Acts 17:11), and not be driven by theological positions.

Appendices

Appendix A: The Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter VII Of God's Covenant with Man⁶⁶

I. The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto Him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of Him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which He has been pleased to express by way of covenant. (Cf. Is 40:13-17; Job 9:32-33; 22:2-3; 35:7-8; 1 Sam 2:25; Pss 100:2-3; 113:5-6; Luke 17:10; Acts 17:24-25)

II. The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works (cf. Gal 3:12), wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity (cf. Rom 10:5, 12-20), upon condition of perfect and personal obedience (cf. Gen 2:17; Gal 3:20).

III. Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second (cf. Gen 3:15; Is 42:6; Gal 3:21; Rom 3:20-21; 8:3), commonly called the covenant of grace; wherein He freely offers unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ; requiring of them faith in Him, that they may be saved (cf. Mar 6:15-16; John 3:16; Rom 10:6, 9; Gal 3:11), and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life His Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe (cf. Ezek 36:26-27; John 6:44-45).

IV. This covenant of grace is frequently set forth in scripture by the name of a testament, in reference to the death of Jesus Christ the Testator, and to the everlasting inheritance, with all things belonging to it, therein bequeathed. (Cf. Heb 7:22; 9:15-17; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25)

V. This covenant was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the Gospel (cf. 2 Cor 3:6-9): under the law it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all foreshadowing Christ to come (cf. Heb 8-10; Rom 4:11; Col 2:11-12; 1 Cor 5:7); which were, for that time, sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah (cf. 1 Cor 10:1-4; Heb 11:13; John 8:56), by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation; and is called the Old Testament (cf. Gal 3:7-14).

VI. Under the Gospel, when Christ, the substance (cf. Col 2:17), was exhibited, the ordinances in which this covenant is dispensed are the preaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper (cf. Matt 28:19-20; 1 Cor 11:23-25): which, though fewer in number, and administered with more simplicity, and less outward glory, yet, in them, it is held forth in more fullness, evidence, and spiritual efficacy (cf. Jer 31:33-34; Heb 12:22-27), to all nations, both Jews and Gentiles (cf. Matt 28:19; Eph 2:15-19); and is called the New Testament (cf. Luke 22:20). There are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations (cf. Ps 32:1; Gal 3:14, 16; Acts 15:11; Rom 3:21-23, 30; 4:3, 6, 16, 17, 23, 24; Heb 13:8).

⁶⁶ "The Westminster Confession of Faith," Center for Reformed Theology and Apologetics, accessed April 16, 2016, http://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf_with_proofs/.

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