

UNDERSTANDING COVENANT THEOLOGY

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The Covenants of the Bible

Recommended Reading

- O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*
- O. Palmer Robertson, *Covenants: God's way with his people*
- Peter Golding, *Covenant Theology: The Key of Theology in Reformed Thought and Tradition*
- Michael S. Horton, *God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology*
- T.M. Moore, *I Will Be Your God: How God's Covenant Enriches Our Lives*

Different Ways to Structure the Bible

1. Old Testament
2. New Testament

1. Pentateuch
2. Writings
3. Poetry
4. Prophets
5. Gospels/Acts
6. Epistles
7. Revelation

Covenant Theology:

- Adamic Covenant
- Noahic Covenant
- Abrahamic Covenant
- Mosaic Covenant
- Davidic Covenant
- New Covenant

Basic Features of a Biblical Covenant

- *Preamble*

“These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel beyond the Jordan in the wilderness...” (Dt. 1:1).

- *Historical Prologue*

“The Lord your God has multiplied you, and behold, you are today as numerous as the stars of heaven... Then we set out from Horeb and went through all that great and terrifying wilderness... Yet you would not go up, but rebelled against the command of the Lord your God... Then we turned and journeyed into the wilderness...” (Dt. 1-3).

- *Conditions/Obligations*

“And now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and rules that I am teaching you, and do them, that you may live, and go in and take possession of the land that the Lord, the God of your fathers, is giving you” (Dt. 4:1).

- *Sanctions/Curses*

“Cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them” (Dt. 27:26).

- *Promises/Blessings*

“If you faithfully obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth... Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field...” (Dt. 28:1-3).

- *Signs & Tokens*

“At the end of every seven years you shall grant a release. And this is the manner of the release: every creditor shall release what he has lent to his neighbor...” (Dt. 15:1-2). “Observe the month of Abib and keep the Passover to the Lord your God” (Dt. 16:1).

- *Provisions*

“Then Moses wrote this law and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord... And Moses commanded them, “At the end of every seven years, at the set time in the year of release, at the Feast of Booths, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God at the place that he will choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing”” (Dt. 31:9-11).

Three "Types" of Covenants

- Parity Covenants
 - Mutual compacts (see Gen. 20:14-18)
- Royal Grant Covenants
 - Unilateral promises of gracious gift (see 2 Sam. 7)
- Suzereign-Vassal Covenants
 - Treaty of the Great King (see Deut.)

The Adamic Covenant

- *Biblical Source:* Genesis 2 & 3

“And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, ‘You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die’” (Gen. 2:16-17).

- *Parties:* God and Adam (along with his future offspring)
- *Type:* Suzereign-Vassal
- *Conditions/Obligations:* Not eat of tree of the knowledge of good and evil
- *Sanctions/Curse:* “You shall surely die”
- *Promise/Blessing:* Eternal life.
- *Token/Sign:* Tree of Life
- *How related to us:* Original sin, imputation of Adam’s guilt

The Noahic Covenant

- *Biblical Source:* Genesis 9:8-17
“Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, and with every living creature that is with you” (Gen. 9:9-10).
- *Parties:* God and Noah, his offspring, and all living things.
- *Type:* Royal Grant
- *Conditions/Obligations:* None
- *Sanctions/Curse:* God’s self-malediction
- *Promise/Blessing:* Never again a flood to destroy the earth (promise of the preservation of creation).
- *Token/Sign:* Rainbow
- *How Related to Us:* Earth preserved for gospel harvest.

The Abrahamic Covenant

- *Biblical Source*: Genesis 12, 15 & 17
“Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them... So shall your offspring be” (Gen. 15:5).
- *Parties*: God and Abraham (with his spiritual offspring)
- *Type*: Royal Grant
- *Conditions/Obligations*: Faith
- *Sanctions/Curse*: God’s self-maledictory oath (Gen. 15:12-18)
- *Promise/Blessing*: Promised Land, Offspring
- *Token/Sign*: Circumcision
- *How Related to Us*: We are the offspring and receive the promises by becoming Abraham’s offspring through faith in Christ. (see Gal. 3:9, 14).

The Mosaic (Old) Covenant

- *Biblical Source:* Exodus 20, 24; Leviticus, Deuteronomy
“All the people answered with one voice and said, ‘All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do’” (Gen. 24:3).
- *Parties:* God and Israel
- *Type:* Suzereign-Vassal
- *Conditions/Obligations:* Obedience to God’s law.
- *Sanctions/Curse:* Removal of blessings & privileges , God’s curse (Dt. 27-28).
- *Promise/Blessing:* “I will be your God and you will be my people”
- *Provisions:* Sacrifices of atoning blood.
- *Token/Sign:* Sabbaths, feasts
- *How Related to Us:* Church as New Israel, grafted in (Heb. 8:8-12; Rom. 11:11-24)

The Davidic Covenant

- *Biblical Source:* 2 Samuel 7
 - “He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever” (2 Sam. 7:13).
- *Parties:* God and David (along with Israel)
- *Type:* Royal Grant
- *Conditions/Obligations:* None.
- *Sanctions/Curse:* None.
- *Promise/Blessing:* A royal son on David’s throne forever.
- *Token/Sign:* House of David?
- *How Related to Us:* Provides us a king to reign forever.

The New Covenant in Christ

- *Biblical Source:* Jer. 31:31-40; Lk. 22:14-23; Heb. 8:8-12
“The cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Lk. 22:20).
- *Parties:* God and Christ’s People
- *Type:* Royal Grant
- *Conditions/Obligations:* Faith
- *Sanctions/Curse:* None, but those outside receive eternal death.
- *Promise/Blessing:* Imputed Righteousness, Indwelling Holy Spirit, Eternal life.
- *Token/Sign:* Baptism, Lord’s Supper
- *How Related to Us:* Personal salvation through faith in Christ

Our Covenant History

Adamic Covenant (Works)

Broken by Adam, Curse of death on mankind




Noahic Covenant

God's promise to withhold judgment until the end




Abrahamic Covenant (Grace)

God's promise of eternal life through faith



Mosaic (Old) Covenant

National charter of Israel; Holy Seed & People preserved



Davidic Covenant

God's promise of divine/human Son to rule His Kingdom



New Covenant (Christ)

Fulfillment of all covenants; fullness of salvation through faith

Some Covenant Questions & Answers

- Are the covenants different or are they really all one?
There is a unity to the Bible's covenant theology, with the covenants organically related (vs. Dispensationalism). Yet each covenant is distinct, with its own dynamics and boundaries (vs. Hypercovenantalism).
- How were people saved prior to Christ?
Since Adam's fall, people have always been saved only through faith in Christ and His gospel. Yet Christ and His gospel were presented to them differently according to the particular covenant.
- How does the substance of a previous covenant relate to me?
Through Christ, since "all the promises of God find their Yes in Him" (2 Cor. 1:20). In Christ, all the aims of the previous covenants find fulfillment in us.
- Do the Ten Commandments have any significance for Christians?
Yes, since the purpose of the New Covenant is to fulfill the aims of the Old Covenant.
- Will there be another covenant after the New Covenant?
No, since Christ is that "alpha and omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (Rev. 22:13).