

CHAPTER 1

Introduction to Covenant Theology



The Difficult Nature of Covenant Theology

COVENANT theology is a vast and complex topic. It is easy to get lost in the various approaches and the different emphases of covenant theologians. Part of the confusion comes from the fact that scholars who approach the topic from similar viewpoints use different terminology to describe the components of covenant theology. Is there a covenant in Genesis 1–2 and what should it be called (Covenant of Works, Covenant of Life, Covenant of Creation)? Are there two basic overarching covenants in Scripture (bi-covenantal) or is there only one (mono-covenantal)? How should the Mosaic Covenant be understood? Is it part of the Covenant of Grace? Is it a republication of the Covenant of Works? How does the principle of works operate in the Mosaic Covenant (Lev. 18:5)? Major players in covenant theology have not always agreed on these questions. Various emphases within covenant theology have developed associated with certain individuals – it is not unusual to find those who follow John Murray or Meredith Kline.

The work of such men is greatly appreciated, but there is a need for a book that explains covenant theology according to the Westminster

Confession of Faith (WCF). This confession is the standard for several denominations and so it makes sense to begin with what the WCF has to say about covenant theology. The goal of this book is to explain covenant theology as it is presented in the WCF. This approach will not solve all the questions related to covenant theology, but it hopes to give clarity to some contested issues. Covenant theology, as presented in the Westminster Standards, is the starting point for understanding reformed covenant theology. This confession is the culmination of reformed thinking going back to the Reformation. The doctrine of the covenant is one of the distinctive features of the Westminster Standards because it is not merely a peripheral issue but is central to the system of doctrine taught in the confession.¹ In fact, it was the first confessional standard to use the terms Covenant of Works and Covenant of Grace.² In addition, this confessional standard is the creed used by conservative Presbyterian denominations all over the world.³ Many who read this book will have taken vows to uphold the Westminster Standards. Thus, one of the purposes of this book is to help seminary students, elders, and lay people understand covenant theology and to navigate the various approaches to it that are prominent today. Then, other approaches will be compared to the viewpoint of the Westminster Standards.

1. Geerhardus Vos, 'The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology,' in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation, The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), p. 239. He comments, 'The Westminster Confession is the first Reformed confession in which the doctrine of the covenant is not merely brought in from the side, but it is placed in the foreground and has been able to permeate at almost every point.'

2. Morton H. Smith, 'Federal Theology and the Westminster Standards,' in *The Covenant*, eds. Joseph A. Pipa, Jr. and C. N. Willborn (Taylors, SC: Presbyterian Press, 2005), p. 18. Cornelius P. Venema argues that there is no substantive difference between the Westminster Standards and the Three Forms of Unity on the doctrine of Christ and the covenants (*Christ and Covenant Theology: Essays on Election, Republication, and the Covenants* [Phillipsburg: P&R, 2017], p. 16, n. 21).

3. Besides the ARP, PCA, and OPC in the U.S.A., the Free Church of Scotland, the International Presbyterian Church (a family of churches spread across Great Britain, Europe and Korea since 1954 that affirm belief in either the WCF or the Three Forms of Unity), the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of England and Wales, the Presbyterian Church of Australia, The Presbyterian Church of Brazil, and the National Presbyterian Church in Mexico, among others.

The Importance of Covenant Theology

John Stek has questioned whether the concept of ‘covenant’ has been too heavily overloaded with an enormous weight of theological importance. Covenant is used so much that it comes to have a life of its own outside the Scriptural data.⁴ There may be some truth to this in circles where the word ‘covenant’ becomes an adjective appended to almost anything. Yet one cannot read Scripture for very long before it becomes obvious that covenant is a key concept in the Bible.⁵ The central place of covenant theology in the Bible is expressed well by Packer when he calls covenant theology a hermeneutic, ‘a way of reading the whole Bible that is itself part of the overall interpretation of the Bible that it undergirds.’⁶ Horton calls covenant the architectural structure of the Bible that holds together biblical faith and practice. Like the architecture of a building, the covenant is largely hidden from view.⁷ Thus the covenant structure is always there even if it is not recognized or noticed.

Packer shows how covenant theology undergirds the structure of Scripture by the story it tells, by the place it gives to Jesus Christ, by the specific parallel between Christ and Adam, and by explicitly declaring the Covenant of Redemption in John’s Gospel (He has come to do the Father’s will and is given a particular people to save).⁸ There are many concepts in Scripture that cannot be understood properly without understanding the covenant. Jesus used covenant terminology

4. John H. Stek, ‘Covenant Overload in Reformed Theology,’ *CTJ* 29 (1994): pp. 12-41. For other objections to covenant theology, see Ligon Duncan, ‘Recent Objections to Covenant Theology: A Description, Evaluation and Response,’ in *The Westminster Confession of Faith into the 21st Century, Volume Three*, ed. Ligon Duncan (Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2009).

5. Craig G. Bartholomew, ‘Covenant and Creation: Covenant Overload or Covenantal Deconstruction?’ *CTJ* 30 (1995): pp. 11-33. He seeks to answer the arguments of Stek. See also John Bolt, ‘Why the Covenant of Works is a Necessary Doctrine,’ in *By Faith Alone: Answering the Challenges to the Doctrine of Justification*, eds. Gary L. W. Johnson and Guy P. Waters (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), pp. 171-90. He interacts with both John Stek and Anthony Hoekema.

6. J. I. Packer, ‘Introduction: On Covenant Theology,’ in Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man* (2 vols., Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1990), n.p.

7. Michael Horton, *God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006), pp. 13-14.

8. Packer, ‘Introduction,’ n.p.

at a Passover to explain the significance of His death (Luke 22:20). Paul uses the language of covenant curse in explaining the importance of participating in the Lord's Supper in a worthy manner (1 Cor. 11:25, 29). The book of Hebrews speaks of a covenant mediator in reference to the high priestly work of Christ (Heb. 8:6). Covenant is so central to the outworking of God's plan of salvation that the gospel needs the framework of covenant theology.⁹ Covenant explains the work of Christ on the cross, the administration of salvation in the Old Testament, the administration of salvation in the New Testament in the covenant signs of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and the relationship established between God and His people. Covenants give assurance to God's people that a relationship with God is secure through covenant promises (see God's response to Abraham in Genesis 15 and 17).¹⁰

The Definition of Covenant

The word 'covenant' (*bēr'it*) refers to a legal agreement between two parties that is ratified by certain rituals that emphasize the binding nature of the agreement. The phrase in the Old Testament that is used to establish a covenant is 'to cut a covenant'. This phrase highlights the rituals of sacrifices and oaths that are at the heart of establishing a covenant (Gen. 15:7-18).¹¹ Covenants are made in a variety of situations. There are covenants between human parties who are equal (Gen. 21:27, 26:26-31, 31:44-50; 1 Sam. 18:3), between human parties who are not equal (Josh. 9:3-21; 1 Sam. 11:1; 1 Kings 20:34), and between God and humans (Gen. 6:18; 15:18; 17:2; Exod. 19:5; 2 Sam. 7; Ps. 89:3).¹²

Common elements in covenants include promises made and oaths taken to ensure the promises will be carried out. They include stipulations or laws that must be kept. There are blessings for keeping the covenant, and curses for breaking the covenant. Covenants also include descendants. Covenants are ratified by blood. Not every mention of a covenant includes the rituals that establish the covenant, but the importance of sacrifices

9. Packer, 'Introduction,' n.p.

10. Duncan, 'Recent Objections to Covenant Theology,' pp. 498-500.

11. Elmer B. Smick, בְּרִית, [בְּרִית], *TWOT*, p. 1:128.

12. Gordon J. McConville, בְּרִית, *NIDOTTE*, p. 1:748.