

An Examination of Covenant Theology

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A simple definition of Covenant Theology

Covenant Theology can be defined very simply as a system of theology that attempts to develop the Bible's philosophy of history on the basis of two or three covenants. It represents the whole of Scripture and history as being covered by two or three covenants.

The history of Covenant Theology

Covenant Theology did not begin as a system until the 16th and 17th centuries. It did not exist in the early Church. Louis Berkhof, a prominent Covenant Theologian wrote, "In the early Church Fathers the covenant idea is not found at all."¹ Nor was the system developed during the Middle Ages or by the prominent Reformers Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, or Melanchthon.

According to Berkhof, Kaspar Olevianus (1536-1587) was the real founder of a well-developed Covenant Theology "in which the concept of the covenant became for the first time the constitutive and determinative principle of the whole system."² The system started in the Reformed Churches of Switzerland and Germany and passed to the Netherlands, Scotland, and England. In 1647 the Westminster Confession of Faith in England became the first confession of faith to refer to Covenant Theology.³ In the Netherlands, Johannes Cocceius played a significant role in making Covenant Theology widely accepted through his publication in 1648. In Cocceius' treatment, "the whole development of sacred history is governed by this thought" (the covenant idea).⁴ A later writer, Herman Witsius (1636-1708), tied the covenant idea together with the eternal decrees of God.⁵ This gave rise to the idea that in eternity past God determined to govern the whole course of history on the basis of one or two covenants.

Covenant Theology was introduced to America primarily through the Puritans. Major examples of prominent Covenant Theologians of the 19th and 20th centuries are Charles Hodge of America and Herman Bavinck and Abraham Kuyper of Holland.

A description of Covenant Theology

As noted earlier, Covenant Theology attempts to develop the Bible's philosophy of history on the basis of covenants. Covenant Theologians disagree concerning the number of these covenants. Some say there are two (the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace). Others say there are three (the Covenant of Redemption, the Covenant of Works, and the Covenant of Grace). Those who propose only two covenants combine the Covenant of Redemption and the Covenant of Grace. For example, Shedd writes:

¹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (second revised and enlarged edition; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1941), p. 211.

² *Ibid.*

³ Charles Caldwell Ryrie. *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), p. 179.

⁴ James Orr, *The Progress of Dogma* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., n.d.), p. 303.

⁵ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, p. 182.

“Though this distinction (between the covenant of redemption and the covenant of grace) is favored by Scripture statements, it does not follow that there are two separate and independent covenants...The covenant of grace and redemption are two modes or phases of the one evangelical covenant of mercy.”⁶

Berkhof claims that most Covenant Theologians favor the three-covenant view. In light of this, this study will examine that view.

The Covenant of Redemption

According to Berkhof, the Covenant of Redemption was established between God the Father and God the Son. In this covenant the Father granted the Son to be Head and Redeemer of the elect. In return, the Son voluntarily agreed to take the place of those whom the Father had given Him.

The Covenant of Redemption was established in eternity past. God knew that man would fall away from Him. Thus, in eternity past God determined to provide redemption during the course of history for the elect.⁷

The Covenant of Redemption placed certain requirements upon the Son:

- The Father required of the Son that He should make amends for the sin of Adam and of those whom the Father had given Him, and should do what Adam failed to do by keeping the law and thus securing eternal life for all His spiritual progeny.⁸
- This involved the Son’s becoming human, yet without sin, and being placed under the Mosaic Law.

In return for what the Son would do in providing redemption, the Father promised several things to the Son: Resurrection (Ps 16:8–11; Ac 2:25–28), a numerous seed (Ps 22:27; 72:17), all power in heaven and earth (Mt 28:18; Eph 1:20–22; Heb 2:5–9), and great glory (Jn 17:5; Phil 2:9–11).⁹

According to Berkhof, there is a threefold relationship between the Covenant of Redemption and the Covenant of Grace. First, the Covenant of Redemption is the eternal model after which the historical Covenant of Grace is patterned. Second, the Covenant of Redemption is the foundation of the Covenant of Grace. It makes the Covenant of Grace possible. Third, the Covenant of Redemption provides the means for the establishment and execution of the Covenant of Grace.¹⁰

⁶ William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, II (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), p. 360.

⁷ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 269-71.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

The Covenant of Works

According to Covenant Theology, the Covenant of Works was established between the triune God and Adam. In this covenant God made Adam the representative head of the human race, so that Adam could act for all his descendants.

The Covenant of Works was established between the creation and fall of man. Thus, unlike the Covenant of Redemption, it was made during the course of world history.¹¹ In the Covenant of Works God required “implicit and perfect obedience” of Adam.¹² Adam was placed on probation temporarily in order to determine whether he would willingly subject his will to the will of God. God promised eternal life (not natural life) to Adam and his descendants in return for Adam’s perfect obedience. Berkhof admits that no such promise is stated in the Bible, but “the threatened penalty clearly implies such a promise.”¹³ Since Adam was appointed representative head of the human race, if he were to disobey God, he and his descendants would be penalized with death, “including physical, spiritual, and eternal death.”¹⁴

The Covenant of Grace

According to Covenant Theology, God established the Covenant of Grace because Adam broke the Covenant of Works. Berkhof defines the Covenant of Grace as “that gracious agreement between the offended God and the offending but elect sinner, in which God promises salvation through faith in Christ, and the sinner accepts this believingly, promising a life of faith and obedience.”¹⁵ This definition clearly indicates that the first party of the Covenant of Grace is God, who acts as a gracious, forgiving Father.

Covenant Theologians disagree concerning the second party of the covenant. Berkhof says, “It is not easy to determine precisely who the second party is.”¹⁶ Some say the second party is the sinner; others say it is the elect or the elect sinner in Christ; still others say it is believers and their seed.¹⁷ Berkhof is convinced that the Covenant of Grace “is fully realized only in the elect,” but “the covenant as a historical phenomenon is perpetuated in successive generations and includes many in whom the covenant life is never realized.”¹⁸ In other words, even some people who never become regenerate are included in the Covenant of Grace.

How can the Covenant of Grace include both those who become regenerate and some who never become regenerate? According to Berkhof, the Covenant of Grace has two aspects. It exists both as “a communion of life” and as “a purely legal relationship.”¹⁹ Only the regenerate experience the covenant as a communion of life, for only they enter fully into the spiritual life intended by the covenant. But both the regenerate and their children experience the covenant as a legal

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 216.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 273.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 276.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 286.

relationship. This means, then, that unregenerate children of believers are in the Covenant of Grace. They enter the covenant by virtue of their physical birth to parents who are in the covenant.²⁰

What is involved in experiencing the Covenant of Grace as a legal relationship? To express it another way, how are the unregenerate children of believers in that covenant? Berkhof gives a fourfold answer to these questions:

- First, “They are in the covenant as far as their responsibility is concerned.”²¹ They are responsible to repent and believe.
- Second, “They are in the covenant in the sense that they may lay claim to the promises which God gave when He established His covenant with believers and their seed.”²² God promised to produce spiritual life in the seed of believers. This does not mean that God will save every child of every believer, for His promise was “given to the seed of believers collectively, and not individually.”²³ But it does mean that children of believers exist in a privileged position, for “as a rule God gathers the number of His elect out of those who stand in this covenant relationship.”²⁴
- Third, they are in the covenant in the sense that they are subject to the ministrations of the covenant. They are constantly admonished and exhorted to live according to the requirements of the covenant. The church treats them as covenant children, offers them the seals of the covenant, and exhorts them to a proper use of these. They are the guests who are first called to the supper, the children of the kingdom, to whom the word must be preached first of all (Mt 8:12; Lk 14:16–24; Ac 13:46).²⁵
- Fourth, “They are also in the covenant as far as the common covenant blessings are concerned.”²⁶ Unregenerate children of believers are subject to certain special ministries of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit strives with them, convicts of sin, enlightens in a measure, and gives blessings of common grace (Gen 6:3; Mt 13:18–22; Heb 6:4–6).²⁷

When these children reach their years of discernment, they are responsible to accept their covenant obligations voluntarily by entering the communion of life aspect of the covenant through a true confession of faith.²⁸ But what happens to a person who does not do this? “If one who stands in the legal covenant relationship does not enter upon the covenant life, he is

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 286-87.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 289.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 289.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

nevertheless regarded as a member of the covenant.”²⁹ Berkhof made one other interesting observation concerning such children: “As long as the children of the covenant do not reveal the contrary, we shall have to proceed on the assumption that they are in possession of the covenant life.”³⁰

The establishment, requirements, and promise

Covenant Theologians disagree concerning when in history the Covenant of Grace was established. Some believe that it was established immediately after Adam’s fall when God gave the first promise of the Redeemer (Gen 3:15). Others take a different view. Berkhof states that Genesis 3:15 was the first revelation of the Covenant of Grace, but it was not the formal establishment of that covenant.³¹ The covenant was not established until God’s covenant with Abraham (Gen 12). “The establishment of the covenant with Abraham marked the beginning of an institutional Church.” Before Abraham “there was what may be called “the church in the house...,” families in which the true religion found expression..., but there was no definitely marked body of believers, separated from the world, that might be called the Church.”³² Thus, Berkhof sees the Church in the Old Testament and appears to equate the beginning of the Church with the establishment of the Covenant of Grace.

Although Berkhof is convinced that the Covenant of Grace was not formally established until Abraham’s time, he also is convinced that believers before Abraham were in the Covenant of Grace. “The Abrahamic Covenant did not include the believers that preceded him and who were yet in the Covenant of Grace.”³³

Covenant Theology claims that the Covenant of Grace requires several things of those people who are in it. It requires faithful, devoted love, agreement to be God’s people, saving faith in Christ, continual trust in Christ forever, and a life of obedience and consecration to God.³⁴

The main promise which God made in the Covenant of Grace is: “I will...be a God unto thee and to thy seed after thee” (Gen 17:7). However, this main promise includes the following promises: Temporal blessings, justification, adoption, eternal life, the Spirit of God with His many ministries, and final glorification.³⁵

On the basis of biblical statements to the effect that Jesus is the Mediator of the New Covenant (Heb 8:6; 9:15; 12:24), Covenant Theologians have concluded that Christ is the Mediator of the Covenant of Grace.³⁶

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 289.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

³¹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (second revised and enlarged edition; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1941), p. 293.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 295.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 282-83.

The relationship of the Covenant of Grace to the dispensations and progressive revelation

Covenant Theologians recognize that there have been different dispensations and progress of revelation through the course of world history. For example, in the Netherlands, Johannes Cocceius (1603-1669) recognized three dispensations after the fall of man. He called the first “ante legem” (before the Law), the second “sub lege” (under the Law) and the third “post legem” (after the Law).³⁷ Traditionally, however, most Covenant Theologians have preferred to divide postfall history into two major dispensations. Berkhof said:

“It is preferable to follow the traditional lines by distinguishing just two dispensations or administrations, namely, that of the Old, and that of the New Testament; and to subdivide the former into several periods or stages in the revelation of the covenant of grace.”³⁸

Ernest Frederick Kevan, principal of London Bible College, London, England, expressed it this way:

“God’s covenanted purpose with sinful man has ever been one of grace; but the covenant of grace was based on a double plan, or, to use scriptural terminology, was revealed in two dispensations. The first of these was the Mosaic dispensation sometimes called the ‘Old Covenant,’ and the second is the Christian dispensation, usually called the ‘New Covenant.’”³⁹

Covenant Theologians claim that the Covenant of Grace exists throughout these dispensations. In spite of some differences in administration between the dispensations, it is the same Covenant of Grace that is being administered. Kevan declared that in the strictly biblical sense the word,

“‘Dispensation’ is used in the Scriptures to make only one distinction, that is, the distinction between the way the grace of God was made known before the coming of Christ and the way it was manifested after his redeeming work had been accomplished. Strictly, the covenant is one and the same covenant of grace all through.”⁴⁰

To Kevan’s way of thinking, then, it is rather improper to speak of Old Covenant and New Covenant.⁴¹ Berkhof said that the Covenant of Grace:

“...is essentially the same in all dispensations, though its form of administration changes...Now it is undoubtedly true that there is considerable difference between the administration of the covenant before and after the giving of the law, but the similarity is greater than the difference...The covenant of Sinai was *essentially* the same as that established with Abraham, though the form differed somewhat...The covenant of grace,

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 292.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

³⁹ Ernest Frederick Kevan, “Dispensation,” in *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology*, editor-in-chief, Everett F. Harrison (Grand Rapids; Baker Book House, 1960), p. 168.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

as it is revealed in the New Testament, is essentially the same as that which governed the relation of Old Testament believers to God.”^{42, 43, 44, 45}

According to Covenant Theology, each dispensation or covenant named in the Bible is simply another stage of the progressive revelation of the nature of the Covenant of Grace throughout history. George N.M. Collins, minister of Free St. Columba’s Church in Edinburgh, Scotland, wrote:

“Throughout the OT period there were successive proclamations of this covenant. We find it in the *protevangelium* of Genesis 3:15. Certain of its provisions were later revealed to Noah (Gen 9). It was then established with Abraham (Gen 12) and with his descendants after him, thus becoming a national covenant. Although in the NT this covenant is described as *new*, such passages as Romans 4 and Galatians 3 show that it is essentially one with the covenant under which believers lived in OT times...But although the same covenant, it is described as a *better* covenant under the NT dispensation, because it is now administered not by Moses, a servant, but by Christ the Son (Heb 3:5,6).”⁴⁶

Covenant Theologians present several proofs for the existence of the Covenant of Grace throughout the dispensations:

- First, “The summary expression of the covenant is the same throughout, both in the Old and New Testament: ‘I will be thy God.’ It is the expression of the essential content of the covenant with Abraham (Gen 12:7), of the Sinaitic covenant (Ex 19:5; 20:1), of the covenant of the plains of Moab (Deut 29:13), of the Davidic covenant (2 Sam 7:14), and of the new covenant (Jer 31:33; Heb 8:10).”⁴⁷
- Second, “The Bible teaches that there is but a single gospel by which men can be saved. And because the gospel is nothing but the revelation of the covenant of grace, it follows that there is also but one covenant.”⁴⁸
- Third, “The Mediator of the covenant is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb 13:8).”⁴⁹ The point of this proof is that if the Mediator (Christ) is the same throughout history, the covenant which He mediates must also be the same throughout history.

⁴² Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 278.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 292.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.297.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 299

⁴⁶ George N.M. Collins, “Covenant Theology,” in *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology*, editor-in-chief, Everett F. Harrison (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1960), p. 144.

⁴⁷ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 279.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

- Fourth, the way of salvation revealed in the covenant is the same. Scripture insists on the identical conditions all along (Gen 15:6 c.f. Rom 4:11; Heb 2:4; Ac 15:11; Gal 3:6-7; Heb 11:9). The promises for the realization of which the believers hoped were also the same (Gen 15:6; Ps 51:12; Mt 13:17; Jn 8:56). And the sacraments, though different in form, have essentially the same signification in both dispensations (Rom 4:11; 1 Cor 5:7; Col 2:11-12).⁵⁰

Here Berkhof used the term “sacraments” to refer to circumcision and baptism.

Key elements Of Covenant Theology’s exposition of the biblical philosophy of history

In a previous chapter it was noted that in order for an exposition of the biblical philosophy of history to be valid, it must contain certain necessary elements. Now that Covenant Theology has been surveyed as a system, it is essential to determine how it deals with those necessary elements as it attempts to exposit the Bible’s philosophy of history.

As was seen earlier, the first necessary element of a valid exposition is an ultimate purpose or goal for history toward the fulfillment of which all history moves. Because Covenant Theology emphasizes the Covenant of Grace as God’s means of working His purpose throughout history, and because it defines that covenant as “that gracious agreement between the offended God and the offending but elect sinner, in which God promises salvation through faith in Christ, and the sinner accepts this believingly, promising a life of faith and obedience,”⁵¹ it would appear that Covenant Theology sees the ultimate goal of history as being the glory of God through the redemption of the elect.

The second necessary element is the recognition of distinctions or things that differ in history. Covenant Theology states that distinctions after the fall of man are different administrations of the same Covenant of Grace.

The third necessary element is a proper concept of the progress of revelation. As it deals with this concept, Covenant Theology sees each new body of truth that is revealed as simply another stage of the progressive uncovering of the nature of the Covenant of Grace.

The fourth necessary element is a unifying principle which ties the distinctions and progressive stages of revelation together and directs them toward the fulfillment of the purpose of history. Covenant Theology’s unifying principle for history after the fall of man is the Covenant of Grace.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 280.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 277.