

An Evaluation of Covenant Theology

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Commendable features of Covenant Theology

In its attempt to exposit the Bible's philosophy of history, Covenant Theology has several commendable features. First, its emphasis upon the grace of God, the redemptive work of Christ, and salvation by grace through faith has been most commendable. These are crucial areas of God's truth which must be emphasized, and Covenant Theologians have done some of the finest work of researching and expounding these great doctrines.

Second, Covenant Theology is to be commended for its recognition of Jesus Christ as the central figure of world history. This recognition is exactly on target, for Jesus Christ is truly the key to the accomplishment of God's purpose for history.

Third, Covenant Theology has made an honest attempt to be faithful to the Scriptures while expositing the biblical philosophy of history. This motivation to be faithful is precisely what it should be because God intends the Bible to be the authority for what man believes and practices.

Problematic features of Covenant Theology

Space will not permit a thorough evaluation of Covenant Theology; therefore, only some of the problems involved with this system of thought can be examined at this point.

- 1) *Covenant Theology's ultimate goal of history is too limited or narrow.*

As noted in the previous chapter, Covenant Theology sees the ultimate goal of history as being the glory of God through the redemption of the elect. **Although the redemption of elect human beings is a very important part of God's purpose for history, it is only one part of that purpose.** During the course of history, God not only has a program for the elect but also a program for the nonelect (Rom 9:10-23). In addition, God has different programs for nations (Job 12:23; Isa 14:24-27; Jer 10:7; Dan 2:36-45), rulers (Is 44:28-45:7; Dan 4:17), Satan (Jn 12:31; Rom 16:20; Rev 12:7-10; 20:1-3), and nature (Mt 19:28; Ac 3:19-21; Rom 8:19-22).

Since God has many different programs that He is operating during the course of history, all of them must be contributing something to His ultimate purpose for history. Thus, the ultimate goal of history has to be large enough to incorporate all of God's programs, not just one of them.

- 2) *Covenant Theology denies or weakens some of the distinctions that are in the Bible.*

This is done by insisting that distinctions are simply different phases of the same Covenant of Grace. For example, Covenant Theology nullifies the genuine distinction between the Abrahamic Covenant and the Mosaic Covenant (the Law). Berkhof wrote, "The covenant of Sinai was *essentially* the same as that established with Abraham,

though the form differed somewhat.”¹ But if these two covenants were essentially the same, why did Paul emphasize their distinctiveness in Galatians 3? For example, in Galatians 3:18 Paul asserted that if the inheritance is based on the Law of the Mosaic Covenant, it cannot at the same time be based upon the promise of the Abrahamic Covenant. In addition, Covenant Theology denies the existence of distinctive gospels in the Bible. By contrast, it was demonstrated in the first chapter that there are indeed different gospels in the Bible.

Covenant Theology insists that there is no essential distinction between the Mosaic Covenant (the Law) and the New Covenant. Berkhof declared that when Paul in 2 Corinthians 3 contrasted the ministry of the Law with the ministry of the New Covenant, he had in mind the ministry of the Law as it was perverted by Jews long after the Law was given, not the ministry of the Law as it was given by God.²

However, the language of 2 Corinthians 3:3-11 will not permit this approach. It indicates that the Law about which Paul talked is the Law that was engraved on stones, not a Jewish perversion of that Law. In 2 Corinthians 3 Paul emphasized the fact that the Mosaic Covenant and the New Covenant are not essentially the same. The Law of the Mosaic Covenant was written on tablets of stone (external, v. 3), but the Law of the New Covenant is written on tablets of human hearts (internal, v. 3). The Mosaic Covenant Law was a ministry of death (vv. 6-7), but the New Covenant is a ministry of life (v. 6). The Mosaic Covenant Law is a ministry of condemnation (v. 9), but the New Covenant is a ministry of righteousness (v. 9).

The language of Jeremiah 31:31-34 also indicates that the Mosaic and New Covenants are not essentially the same. In verse 32 God declared that the New Covenant would not be like the Mosaic Covenant. Anderson said that here God “speaks of a new covenant, not a covenant renewal, and thereby assumes a radical break with the Mosaic tradition.”³

Covenant Theology also denies the distinction between the nation of Israel and the Church. As noted earlier, Covenant Theology believes that the Church existed in Old Testament times and that Israel was a major part of the Church in the Old Testament. It often defines the Church as the continuing covenanted community. In other words, the Church consists of all the peoples throughout history who have had a covenant relationship with God. Thus, these peoples are essentially the same. Because this issue of Israel and the Church being distinct is a major point of difference between Covenant and Dispensational Theology, it will be dealt with more in depth in a future chapter. For now, the following is asked: If it is true that the Church existed in the Old Testament and that Israel and the Church are the same, why did Jesus place the building of His Church in the

¹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (second revised and enlarged edition; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1941), p. 298.

² *Ibid.*, p. 300.

³ Bernhard W. Anderson, “The New Covenant And The Old,” in *The Old Testament and Christian Faith*, ed. by Bernhard W. Anderson (New York: Herder And Herder, 1969), p. 232.

future beyond the time that He spoke in Matthew 16:18, and why did the Apostle Peter call the Day of Pentecost (Ac 2) “the beginning” (Ac 11:15)?

- 3) *Covenant Theology is mistaken when it teaches that each of the biblical covenants is a continuation and newer phase of the Covenant of Grace.*

This mistake becomes apparent, for example, when it deals with the New Covenant. As noted earlier, Covenant Theologians equate the New Covenant with the Covenant of Grace which they claim has been in existence since the fall of man or Abraham. They claim that the New Covenant in the New Testament is essentially the same as the Covenant of Grace in the Old Testament. Covenant Theologians assert that the word “new” does not permit the conclusion that there is an essential contrast between the New Covenant in the New Testament and what existed in the Old Testament.

However, the words that are translated “new” in the book of Hebrews will not permit these assertions of Covenant Theology. The word that is translated “new” for the New Covenant in Hebrews 8:8, 13, 9:15, and 12:24 refers to “what was not there before,” “what has only just arisen or appeared,” what is “new in time or origin,”⁴ “what is new and distinctive as compared with other things,” “what is new in nature, different from the usual,”⁵ and what is “new in kind.”⁶ In other words, the New Covenant was something brand new. It was not in existence before Christ died. The New Covenant established at Christ’s death was different in nature or kind from what went before. It “is essentially different from the old divine order.”⁷ This would not be true if the New Covenant were simply a continuation of a covenant that had been in existence since early Old Testament history.

The fact that Covenant Theology is mistaken when it teaches that each biblical covenant is a continuation and new phase of the Covenant of Grace becomes apparent again when it deals with the Mosaic Covenant (the Law). It asserts that the Mosaic Covenant was a newer phase of the Covenant of Grace that had been initiated hundreds of years before the Mosaic Covenant. But it is a fact that the Mosaic Covenant instituted required conditions which had not been introduced before. Thus, if the Mosaic Covenant were a newer phase of the Covenant of Grace, it would be adding new conditions to that long-established covenant. Such an addition would violate a principle that Paul taught in Galatians 3:15 when he declared that once a covenant has been ratified, no one adds conditions to it.

⁴ Johannes Behm, “kainos,” *Theological Dictionary Of The New Testament*, Vol. III, ed. by Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965), p. 447.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 448.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 449.

4) *Covenant Theology's unifying principle is too limited or narrow.*

The Covenant of Grace is the factor that Covenant Theology employs to unify history either from the fall of man or the time of Abraham. This unifying factor is too limited in at least two respects. First, the Covenant of Grace deals only with God's redemption of the elect. It does not unify the program of redemption with all of God's other programs. Second, since the Covenant of Grace did not begin until the fall of man at the earliest, it does not unify prefall history with postfall history, which the unifying principle of a valid exposition of the biblical philosophy of history must do.

5) *In order to make its system work, Covenant Theology must employ a double hermeneutic (a double system of interpretation).*

Covenant Theology recognizes that the historical-grammatical method of interpreting the Bible is normal. In this method, attention is focused upon historical background and grammar to determine the correct meaning of a passage. Words are given the common, ordinary meaning that they had in the culture and time in which the passage was written. Covenant Theology also recognizes that the employment of another method of interpretation could lead to disaster when seeking the meaning of a passage.

In spite of these recognitions, Covenant Theology uses a second method of interpretation when dealing with certain areas of biblical teaching. This is especially true in its treatment of prophetic teachings concerning the future, particularly the future of the nation of Israel and the future Kingdom of God. In these areas, Covenant Theology frequently employs the allegorical or spiritualizing method. In this method words are not given the common, ordinary meaning that they had in the culture and time in which the passage was written. Instead, they are assigned different meanings. For example, according to this method, the word "Israel" does not have to mean the nation of Israel. It could mean the Church. Thus, according to this method, the prophetic promises of future blessing for Israel do not have to be fulfilled with the nation of Israel. Rather, they are to be fulfilled with the Church.

One major problem with the allegorical method of interpreting unfulfilled prophetic Scriptures is that thus far the prophetic Scriptures that have been fulfilled have been fulfilled in accordance with the historical-grammatical method of interpretation, not in accordance with the allegorical method. This would seem to indicate the manner in which God intends prophetic passages to be interpreted. In light of this and the fact that Covenant Theology recognizes the danger of employing the allegorical method when interpreting other areas of biblical teaching, one could ask by what authority Covenant Theology uses the allegorical method when interpreting the prophetic Scriptures.