

**Covenant Theology:  
Final Solution or Forced System?**

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## **Introduction**

Few debates on the current theological landscape have generated more heat among sincere, Bible-believing theologians than the ongoing dispute between proponents of Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism. In an effort to generate more light than heat, this paper will examine the basic tenets and historical development of Covenant Theology, demonstrating that rather than a final solution, it is in reality a system of theology that is not only inconsistent, but also a forced method of Biblical interpretation.

## **The Purpose of Covenant Theology**

The purpose of Covenant Theology is to provide a theological system that facilitates the understanding and integration of the entire Bible with the objective of unifying Scripture.

## **The Perspective of Covenant Theology**

Covenant theology teaches that the totality of Scripture is covered by or summarized in two covenants: (1) the covenant of works, and (2) the covenant of grace.<sup>1</sup> The covenant of works is viewed as an agreement between God and Adam which promised life to Adam in exchange for perfect obedience, and death as the penalty for failure. Since man failed to meet the requirements of the covenant of works, a second covenant, the covenant of grace, was instituted and became operational.<sup>2</sup> According to Louis Berkhof, a noted reformed theologian, the covenant of grace is “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.”<sup>3</sup>

A third covenant, the covenant of redemption, has been introduced by some Reformed theologians. This covenant of redemption is said to have been made in eternity past and is seen as the basis for the covenant of grace (described above) between God and the elect. Berkhof defines the covenant of redemption 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).”<sup>4</sup>

These two or three covenants, then, constitute the basis and operation for covenant theology in its interpretation of Scripture. Thus, this theological system which is based on the above mentioned covenants is known as covenant theology.<sup>5</sup>

## **The Past and Present of Covenant Theology**

Although covenant theology is said to have its prototype in patristic theology as systematized by Augustine of Hippo,<sup>6</sup> in actuality, systematized covenant theology is relatively recent in origin. According to Cornelius Van Til, himself a respected covenant theologian, systematized covenant theology “was not the expressed doctrine of the early church. It was never taught by church leaders in the Middle Ages not even mentioned by the primary leaders of the Reformation.”<sup>7</sup> Van Til also points out that covenant theology as a system is not any older than dispensationalism. He writes: “This does not mean it was not Biblical, but it does dispel the notion that covenant theology has been throughout all church history the ancient guardian of truth, which is only recently being sniped at by dispensationalism.”<sup>8</sup> There were no references to covenant theology in any of the great confessions of faith until the Westminster Confession in 1647, and even in that confession it was not as fully developed as it was later by Reformed theologians.<sup>9</sup>

Actually, the first proponents of the covenant view were reformers who were against the strict predestinarianism of the reformers in Switzerland and France, late in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. According to Charles Ryrie, “Covenant theology does not appear in the writings of Luther, Zwingli, Calvin or Melancthon, even though they discussed at length the related doctrines of sin, depravity, redemption, etc. They had every opportunity to incorporate the covenant idea, but they did not.”<sup>10</sup> While Calvin did mention the idea of a covenant between God and His people, this was not covenant theology. Covenant theology can be “found” in the major reformers only by doing what one covenant theologian does, and that is to not restrict the term “covenant theology” to “the more fully developed covenant theology of the seventeenth century.”<sup>11</sup>

The earliest traces of the covenant idea have been attributed to secondary reformers like Andrew Hyperius (1511-1564), Kasper Olevianus (1536-1587) and Rafael Eglinus (1559-1622). The covenant of works idea was especially strong in the teaching of William Ames (1576-1633), who ministered in England and Holland. Ames had a student named Johannes Cocceius (1603-1669) who shared the secondary reformers' concern that the strict predestinarianism of the great reformers of the time be checked and brought into balance. Cocceius taught in Holland and was concerned about the problems of Arminianism on the one hand and the harsh ways of rigorous Calvinism on the other. He desired to take theology **back to the Bible** and to find its doctrines there rather than in the strict Calvinism of his day. Although he identified with the Reformed group, he desired, along with others of his day, to in some way blunt the highly debated views on predestination.<sup>12</sup> In his efforts to lead theology back to the Bible as its only living source and foundation, he advanced the idea of a two-fold covenant of God with man (before and after the fall). Thus he became the author of the federal or covenant theology, which made the historical development of the Revelation the ruling principle of theological inquiry, and of theology as a system, subsequently becoming the founder of a purely Biblical theology.<sup>13</sup>

Cocceius' views were set forth in a work published in 1648. In this work he expounded the concept of two covenants: the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. In both he said man had a part to play and a responsibility to meet. He made these covenants the basis, background and substance of all God's redemptive dealings with man. Thus Cocceius' detailed and systematized the idea of the covenants, giving a more prominent part to man in contrast to the rigorous predestinarianism of his day. Cocceius made the covenant idea the governing category of all Scripture. However, he was not entirely the father of covenant theology, for many of the ideas he systematized were found in the earlier writers mentioned above. In addition, the Westminster Confession's covenant of works and covenant of grace appeared one year before the publication of Cocceius' work on the subject. Nevertheless, it is important to note that in the Westminster Confession, the covenants are used more in the nature of general divisions of the purpose of God; and that in Cocceius, the covenant idea received "an extension and systematic development which raised it to a place of importance in theology it had not formerly possessed. **It is not only made by him the leading idea of his system but in his treatment, the whole development of sacred history is governed by this thought.**"<sup>14</sup>

The success of Cocceus in countering the excesses of the Calvinism of his day was short-lived. Herman Witsius (1636-1708) subsequently became influential and was mainly responsible for extending the covenant of grace concept back into eternity. In doing so, he paralleled the covenant idea with the decrees and extreme predestinarianism, the position against which Cocceius was protesting. The Cocceius party repudiated Witsius' views, but they gained acceptance among subsequent covenant theologians. Thus, this linking of the covenant of grace with the eternal decrees led some to introduce the third covenant of redemption made in eternity past between the persons of the Godhead as the basis for the covenant of grace. But this development came after Cocceius and the Westminster Confession.

Covenant theology came to America with the Puritans through the writings of Francis Turretin and Herman Witsius. It was championed in the new world in the works of John Cotton and others. Later it was advanced in the writings of Charles and A.A. Hodge of Princeton.<sup>15</sup>

In summary, covenant theology is a post-reformation doctrinal development. It began as a reaction to extreme Calvinism, but was soon twisted back to become the handmaiden of Calvinism. The covenant statement in the Westminster Confession is underdeveloped; it was Cocceius who developed the idea and Witsius who made it the governing category of Scriptural interpretation. But covenant theology as taught today is a development from both the theology of the Reformers (who did not teach a covenant scheme at all), the teachings of Cocceius and the Westminster Confession. Covenant theology is a refinement—and the refining did not antedate Darby by many years. As Ryrie astutely observes: **“Covenant theology cannot claim much more antiquity than dispensationalism . If lack of antiquity is detrimental and refinement is disallowed for dispensationalism, then by the same two criteria covenant theology is discredited. And, if these matters are nonessential for covenant theology, then they are likewise irrelevant in the evaluation of dispensationalism.”**<sup>16</sup>

In regard to the charge of recency which has often been leveled against both covenant theology and dispensationalism, no less a figure than John Calvin has stated: “First, by calling it ‘new’ they do a great wrong to God, whose sacred Word does not deserve to be accused of novelty. That it has lain long unknown and buried is the fault of man’s impiety. Now when it is restored to us by God’s goodness, its claim to antiquity ought to be admitted at least by the right of recovery.”<sup>17</sup>

## **The Proof of Covenant Theology**

In regard to the proof of covenant theology, the concepts advanced by the covenants of works and grace are by no means unscriptural. Even L.S. Chafer indicates that although the covenant of redemption rests upon “but slight revelation,” he observes that it is sustained largely by the fact that it seems both reasonable and inevitable.<sup>18</sup>

In attempting to provide Scriptural proof for the covenant of works, Allis writes: “The relationship established in Eden has been properly called the covenant of works. That it promised life as the reward for obedience is not immediately stated. But, it is made clear elsewhere, notably in Deuteronomy (Deuteronomy 6:5, 10-12ff; 30:15-20). The first Psalm is a poetical expounding of this covenant, and it has its counterpart in Romans 2:7-9.”<sup>19</sup> **The problem is that the Deuteronomy passages have to do with life in the Promised Land and not in Heaven.**

Allis’ Scriptural proof for the covenant of grace is expressed as follows: “This covenant is first set forth in the words of the protevangel (Genesis 3:15), which promised Eve ultimate triumph over the enemy of her race. This is made clear in the wonderful words that are said of Abram: ‘And he believed in the Lord, and he accounted it to him for righteousness.’ To which Paul appeals to show that Abraham was justified by faith and not by works of the law.”<sup>20</sup>

A.A. Hodge, in his first of seven proofs for the covenant of grace, writes: “As shown at the opening of this chapter, such a covenant is virtually implied in the existence of an eternal plan of salvation mutually formed by and to be executed by three persons.” His further proofs include John 17; Isaiah 53:10-11; John 10:18; Luke 22:29. **The problem is that the covenants are deductions, not inductions from Scripture.** Actually, the dispensationalist has more inductive evidence for the existence of the specific dispensations than does the covenant theologian for his covenants of works and grace.<sup>22</sup>

In supporting the covenant of grace from Genesis 3:15, J. Barton Payne cites as proof: “Genesis 3:15 is, in fact, not even called a b’rith; but it is necessarily assumed to be so, both because of the presence of all the important features, and because of the development of all subsequent redemptive b’riths from it.” In the preceding sentence he states that those covenant features which are supposedly present in Genesis 3:15 are there **only in a most rudimentary form.**<sup>23</sup>

Allis uses the term “cryptic” and J. Barton Payne uses “rudimentary” in relation to Genesis 3:15 as a revelation of the important covenant of grace. Yet the Biblical covenants with Abraham, Israel, David, and others are clearly and specifically revealed. Abraham, for example, had no doubt that a covenant was being made when God Himself passed between the pieces of the sacrifice (Genesis 15:17-21). **The problem is that covenant theologians ask us to believe in the existence of a covenant which was scarcely revealed.** Commenting on the proofs of covenant theology, Ryrie observes that Scripture references are easily given to support (1) the covenant with Abraham, (2) the covenant on Sinai, (3) future covenants like the Davidic and (4) the New Testament culmination; but references are not found which deal directly with the establishment of a covenant of grace or its characteristics. **References are found concerning the blessings of salvation, but none to support the covenant of grace.**<sup>24</sup> What the covenant theologian does to make up for the lack of specific Scriptural support for the covenants of works and grace is to project the general idea of covenant in the Bible and the specific covenants (like the covenant with Abraham) into these covenants of works and grace.<sup>25</sup>

### **The Problems with Covenant Theology**

Dispensational premillennialists maintain that the singular great objective of God is to save men by faith alone, through the atoning work of Jesus Christ our Savior, **by placing them in different ages under different tests to show them their helplessness and their need for His saving grace.** Covenant amillennialists have never explained how one can take such a position without calling God’s plan the “covenant of grace” (terminology not found in the Bible). Yet, at the same time, Covenant amillennialists do away with such vital distinctions as those between law and grace, the church and Israel or the kingdom and the church.<sup>26</sup>

Bear, who holds the covenant amillennialist view, concludes that the dispensational teaching about dispensations gives two methods of salvation, works and grace. Feinberg counters, however, with the observation that to be logical, Bear ought to charge dispensationalists with teaching seven ways of salvation, if each dispensation means a new way of salvation. He points out that those were the ways of condemnation, and not the ways of salvation. This, he says, is seen in Romans 2. Then Feinberg asks, “Do dispensationalists make a greater line of cleavage between law and grace than Paul does in Romans 11:6: *‘But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace.’* If grace was not manifested in a new way through the death of Christ, what is the meaning of John 1:17 after all? There it is clearly stated *‘For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.’* And what about 2 Corinthians 3:7? There Paul writes: *‘But if the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory on his face, fading as it was, how will the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory?’* **There is no need to superimpose upon the testimony of Scripture a principle that, though it seems to unify the Scripture, does so only at the expense of the obliteration of some of the most clearly defined distinctions in the Word of God.** The remedy is worse than the supposed disease! There is a unifying principle and it lies not in the direction of covenantism. A.G. Hebert gets it right when he maintains, “The Messianic Hope is the central theme of the Bible. It is that which gives the two Testaments their unity.”<sup>27</sup>

James Orr, who has no ax to grind for dispensationalism, assesses the hermeneutics of covenant theology as follows: “. . . it failed to seize the true idea of development, and by an artificial system of typology and allegorizing interpretation, sought to read back practically the whole of the New Testament into the Old. But its most obvious defect was that, in using the idea of the covenant as an exhaustive category, and attempting to **force** into it the whole material of theology, it created an artificial scheme which could only repel minds of simple and natural notions. It is impossible, e.g. to justify by Scriptural proof the detailed elaboration of the idea of a covenant of works in Eden, with its parties, conditions, promises threatening, sacraments, etc. Thus also the Reformed theology—the more it had assumed this stiff and artificial shape—failed to satisfy the advancing intellect of the age. . . .”<sup>28</sup>

**Note that Orr charges covenant theology with (1) forced interpretation, (2) artificiality, especially in typology, and (3) no Biblical proof for the covenant of works, and (4) failure to satisfy its age.**

While there has been a resurgence of a- millennialism in recent years, the truth is that “. . . the very terminology used in relation to covenant making in the Old Testament would seem to indicate that there was no covenant in Eden before the fall . . . [Note Genesis 15:7-17 and Jeremiah 34:18]. There is no record of any such sacrificial procedure in connection with Adam’s establishment in the garden. Not only so, it is contrary to the entire situation, as death was foreign to the earthly scene prior to the entrance of sin.”<sup>29</sup>

In addition, while covenant theologians maintain that the dispensational system is too involved and departmentalized, Berkhof's discussion of the relation of the counsel of redemption to the covenant of grace is equally departmentalized if not more.<sup>30</sup> And, as important as the covenant of grace is to the covenantist, he is forced to admit, as Berkhof does, that "It is not easy to determine precisely who the second party is. In general it may be said that God naturally established the covenant of grace with fallen man."<sup>31</sup> However, dispensationalists hold that the difficulty in determining the identity of the second party arises from the fact that the covenant has no basis or proof in Scripture. While Berkhof states concerning the covenant of grace that "it is essentially the same in all dispensations, though its form of administration changes,"<sup>32</sup> Feinberg suggests that "Those changes of administration sound very much like dispensational changes held by dispensationalists."<sup>33</sup>

Furthermore, it is interesting to note at this point that even some postmillennialists and amillennialists recognize at least some dispensational distinctions in Scripture. Barndollar offers the following proof: "Dr. Charles Hodge, a postmillennialist, outlined four dispensations. Loraine Boettner, a post-millennialist, sees only two dispensations. R.B. Kuiper, of Westminster, recognizes two dispensations. Floyd Hamilton, an amillennialist, speaks of at least three, and Albertus Pieters objects to more than three dispensations. Thus we see that it is not only the premillennialists who have recognized dispensations, but many others as well."<sup>34</sup>

H.L. Payne accurately describes the confusing and contradictory position held by covenant theologians: “They begin by arbitrarily establishing the grounds for proving the existence of a covenant; from this they proceed to set up a covenant nowhere mentioned as such in Scripture yet of greater significance and outreach than all those which are specifically mentioned; then to complete the circle of fallacy they arbitrarily declare, again without Scriptural support, that the covenant thus introduced includes all those which are plainly set forth in the Word and so claim the passages related to the bona fide covenants as argument for their own invention.”<sup>35</sup>

Today, many evangelicals consider the distinctions between covenant and dispensational theology to be relatively inconsequential. In fact, progressive dispensationalists are even now promoting ideas that minimize key distinctions between Israel and the church.<sup>36</sup> While no doubt well-intended, covenant theologians and even progressive dispensationalists would do well to revisit the observations of Chafer who writes: “The advocates of this interpretation [covenant of grace] oppose every earthly feature of the divine program. They disregard or ignore the earthly covenants and promises; they spiritualize or vaporize the vast body of Scripture bearing on the Davidic throne and the kingdom; they present no specific reason why Christ was born as the Son of David; and they recognize no earthly glory or purpose in His second advent.”<sup>37</sup>

In response to the covenant theologians’ constant charge that dispensationalism is unnecessarily complex, overly fragments Scripture, and is suspect because of its recent origin, Ryrie counters:

Systematized covenant theology is recent [so Cornelius Van Til, a covenant theologian, in his entry “Covenant Theology,” *Twentieth Century Encyclopedia* (Baker, 1955, 1:306)]. It was not the expressed doctrine of the early church. It was never taught by church leaders in the Middle Ages . . . not even mentioned by the primary leaders of the Reformation. Indeed, covenant theology as a system is not any older than dispensationalism is. This does not mean it is not Biblical, but it does dispel the notion that covenant theology has been throughout all church history the ancient guardian of the truth which is only recently being sniped at by dispensationalism. There were no references to covenant theology in any of the great confessions of faith until the Westminster Confession in 1647, and even in that confession covenant theology was not as fully developed as it was later by Reformed theologians.<sup>38</sup>

Another charge leveled against dispensationalism is that of an excessively pessimistic view of history. However, Mark Bailey points out that it was Alva J. McClain who “refuted the charges that dispensationalists hold a pessimistic view of history and lack a unifying plan to understand the Scriptures.”<sup>39</sup> The real genius of McClain’s view of the kingdom was that “it created a comprehensive view of the kingdom of God through history, successfully instituting a unifying principle for dispensationalism that was regularly characterized as pessimistic, lacking in continuity, and suggestive of a God whose decree is alterable and unfixe.”<sup>40</sup>

Despite covenant theologians' objections to the contrary, dispensationalism continues to present a consistent and viable alternative to covenant theology. It avoids the inconsistency of literally interpreting prophecies concerning Christ's first advent while spiritualizing or allegorizing those foretelling aspects of His second coming and other future eschatological events. It also avoids the necessity of interpreting the Old Testament by the New, and does not require artificial exegesis to force or superimpose the doctrines of Christ, the church and salvation through faith in Christ arbitrarily on the Old Testament.<sup>41</sup> Thus, rather than being a final solution, covenant theology proves to be a forced system to Bible interpreters who value a consistent hermeneutic. Charles Lee Feinberg said it well: "Consistency, thou art a jewel."<sup>42</sup>

### **Endnotes**

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5. Ryrie, 178.
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22. Ryrie, p. 185.
23. J. Barton Payne, The Theology of the Old Testament, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962), p. 92.

24. Ryrie, pp. 186-87.
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27. Ibid., p. 84.
28. Orr, pp. 303-04.
29. H.L. Payne, "Amillennial Theology as a System," Th.D. Dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1948.
30. Berkhof, p. 270. "1. The counsel of redemption is the eternal prototype of the historical covenant of grace. The former is a compact between the Father and the Son as the Surety and Head of the elect, while the latter is a compact between the Triune God and the elect sinner in the Surety. 2. The counsel of redemption is the firm and eternal foundation of the covenant of grace. The counsel of redemption makes the covenant of grace possible. 3. The counsel of redemption consequently also gives efficacy to the covenant of grace, for in it the means are provided for the establishment and execution of the latter."
31. Ibid., p. 273.
32. Ibid., p. 279.
33. Feinberg, pp. 85-86
34. W.W. Barndollar, The Validity of Dispensationalism, (Des Plaines, IL: Regular Baptist Press), p. 36.
35. H.L. Payne, p. 145.

36. See, e.g., Craig A. Blaising, "The Extent and Varieties of Dispensationalism," in *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Up to Date handbook of Contemporary Dispensational Thought*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1993), 9-56; idem, "Changing Patterns in American Dispensational Theology," *WesTJ*29 (Spring-Fall, 1994): 149-64.
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