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**B0531 – August 7, 2005 – Major Bible Themes**  
**Chapter 21 - The Covenants-Part 1**

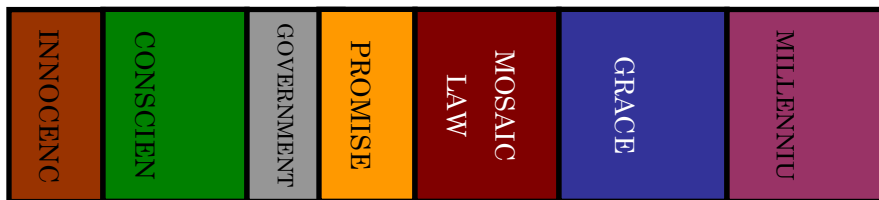
The first 19 chapters of Major Bible Themes majored on the Bible and God Himself. First we establish the Bible as verbal revelation from God that came into history by way of inspiration so that God the Spirit carried along the human authors so that they recorded infallibly the very words of God in totality. Our main source for establishing this doctrine is the Bible itself because to prove the validity of the Bible from external sources implies that those external sources are the actual infallible standard to which the Bible must adhere. So, the Bible is our ultimate presupposition. We trust that it is the revealed word of God. Revelation is therefore our starting point not autonomous human reason. We use human reason but not autonomously. Rather we use it in humble submission to God's revelation. Right reason presupposes God's revelation. Therefore, revelation precedes right reasoning.

Second, we looked at God Himself in 15 chapters. We studied the Trinity and concluded that God is one in essence and three in person. Then we looked at each individual person of the Trinity; God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. With each of these Persons we looked at their person and their work, establishing each from Scripture.

Last week, Major Bible Themes took a significant turn before moving on to the subjects of Angels and Man. Two lessons are situated here which are structural chapters; that is, they are structural landmarks in the Bible which everything else fits around. If the Bible was the filing cabinet then The Dispensations and The Covenants would be like folders in the filing cabinets. Therefore, these are two of the most crucial chapters in Major Bible Themes. The Dispensations and The Covenants provide major structural markers in the Bible which give us a full-orbed understanding of Scripture. They help us see the whole forest. That's why I would hope that if we, as a local church body, could be grounded in any two areas it would be The Dispensations and The Covenants. Without these you can't understand Scripture, history, culture, language, politics, government, science, anthropology, or future things because a Christian's way of looking at these things is built on an understanding of

The Dispensations and The Covenants. The implications for these two areas of theology are tremendous.

Last week, Dick taught us about the Dispensations and Dispensationalism. A dispensation is defined as a “distinct household arrangement in God’s unfolding plan”. By way of description, the world is a household run by God. In this household-world God is administering its affairs according to His own will and in various stages of revelation over the passage of time. These various stages mark off the distinctive arrangements in the outworking of His plan, and these distinct arrangements are the dispensations. A dispensation (*oikonomia*) should not be confused with an “age” (*aionas*) but is related to an “age” in that the dispensations are administered over a period of time. These dispensations are like chapters of world history. There are seven such chapters in the Divine Library.



These seven chapters are what we call the dispensations. It is important to understand that Dispensationalism is a different thing. Dispensationalism is a “system of theology” that is much broader than seven dispensations. These seven dispensations are simply a small part of the results of Dispensationalism. Dispensationalism can basically be defined by three core elements (*sine qua non*).

1. Normal, plain, (literal, grammatical-historical, straightforward) interpretation of all Scripture, including prophecy

This stands in contrast to the method of allegorizing Scriptural texts. We claim that there is one way of interpreting all Scripture and not two. This method of interpretation does not deny figures of speech or symbols but they are interpreted by the Bible itself. We are not free to give these figures of speech or symbols any meaning we want. The reason we include prophecy is because all prophecies fulfilled in history were fulfilled literally. Thus, past fulfillment gives us a model for how we should interpret yet unfulfilled prophecies.

2. God has one plan with two distinct peoples, Israel and the Church

A normal or literal interpretation of all Scripture results in the distinction between the people of Israel and the people of the Church. There are actually more than one people of God. This should not surprise anyone who knows how diverse God is in His dealings (e.g. pre-Israel saints, elect angels, saints of Israel, saints of the Church, tribulation saints, and millennial saints).

3. The ultimate purpose of history is the glorification of God

Finally, another result of normal or literal interpretation of all Scripture results in the recognition of a doxological purpose of God in history. This is in contrast to many evangelicals who look at God's ultimate purpose as salvation of men. Salvation is not the ultimate purpose of God. It is *a* purpose of God but it is only part and parcel of God's ultimate purpose which is to glorify Himself (Eph 1:3-14). This changes the lens through which we look at Scripture. For example, if one thinks God's ultimate purpose is salvation then he will come to every text trying to find salvation themes (e.g. Parable of the Leaven).

## **I. WHAT IS A COVENANT?**

A covenant is a "contract" between two or more parties. When you think of the biblical covenants you want to think of them as "contractual agreements between two or more parties". You don't want to think of them as mysterious, spiritual things. Thus, a biblical covenant is a contract. Contracts were common in the ancient and modern world. In the Bible, a covenant could have been between families (Gen 21:22-24), between nations (Hos 12:1), or between a monarch and his subjects (2 Sam 5:3). Why do we have contracts? What's the purpose of a contract? The purpose of a contract is to measure the behavior of the two parties who sign the contract. The parties' behavior is then recorded on what we call a credit report. The credit report provides a history of the parties' reliability or unreliability. If you have bad credit then no one is going to make a contractual agreement with you because you are unreliable. Meredith Kline claimed that the entire Bible is written in contractual language. If this is so then how do you interpret a contract? Do you interpret contracts allegorically? Or do you interpret contracts literally? By definition, contracts are interpreted literally. Contractual language is designed to bind both parties to the terms of the contract so we can measure the behavior of the other party. If contracts were not interpreted literally then what happens to the standard for measuring behavior? If we can read into the contract what we want to, if we can change the meaning of a few key words here and there then what happens to the contract? Those who sign contracts assume that the terms are clearly understood as literally interpreted by both parties. What you'll find is that everyone argues about the interpretation of the Bible but hardly anyone argues about

the interpretation of a contract. Yet, as Dr Kline said, the Bible is written in contractual language. The Bible should therefore be interpreted literally or normally throughout. If you don't then you lose the standard for measuring behavior. Since the contracts in the Bible are between God and man then it is the only standard for measuring the behavior of God and man. When we want to measure the behavior of God we look in the Bible to see if God fulfilled what He said He would do. We call this God's His faithfulness. When we want to measure the behavior of man we look in the Bible to see if men have fulfilled what they said they would do. We call this man's unfaithfulness. This is why, as a man, I would be very apprehensive about making commitments or promises to God. Because of man's depravity we easily break our promises and commitments. This is evidence of our lack of integrity, reliability, and our unfaithfulness. Not a one of us is committed to God. It's Him who is committed to us. So, the covenants are contractual agreements between two parties. Although covenants were widely used by nations in the ancient world, Dr. William F. Albright said, "Only the Hebrews, so far as we know, made covenants with their gods or God."<sup>i</sup>

## **II. 4 ASPECTS OF BIBLICAL COVENANTS**

Biblical covenants have four distinguishing elements; 1) parties to the covenant, 2) legal terms, 3) founding sacrifice, and 4) a sign.

### **1. Parties to the covenant**

Parties to the biblical covenants must be made between the personal Creator God and personal creatures or in some cases with the animals.

### **2. A Sign**

#### **A. Unilateral or Unconditional Covenants**

The biblical contracts are signed by either God alone or God and man. If signed by God alone then He alone is responsible to fulfill the terms of the contract. This is called a unilateral (one way) or unconditional contract because the ultimate fulfillment of the legal terms depends solely on God who signed the contract. The language of these covenants typically comes in the form of "I will..." statements. An example of a unilateral or unconditional covenant is the Abrahamic Covenant. Turn to Gen 15

**Genesis 15:9-10** So He said to him, "Bring Me a three year old heifer, and a three year old female goat, and a three year old ram, and a turtledove, and a young

pigeon." <sup>10</sup> Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, and laid each half opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds.

In the ancient world this was the common way a covenant was “cut”. Animals would be cut in half and then whoever passed between the pieces was responsible for fulfilling the terms of the covenant.

**Genesis 15:17** It came about when the sun had set, that it was very dark, and behold, *there appeared* a smoking oven and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces.

This “smoking oven” and “flaming torch” is the Shekinah Glory of God (the visible presence of God) passing between the pieces. In Abram’s day this was known as a “maledictory oath”. The one who passed between the pieces was saying, “Let me be damned if I do not fulfill the terms of the contract”. If the terms of the contract were broken then the one who passed between the pieces would then also be cut in half as the pieces through which he had passed. Therefore, God is saying, “Let me be damned if I do not fulfill the terms of the contract.” Now, did Abram pass between the pieces? Look at

**Genesis 15:12** Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, terror *and* great darkness fell upon him.

No, God made sure that Abram was in a deep sleep so that He alone was responsible to fulfill the covenant. This is an example of a one way or unconditional contract because God alone passed between the pieces. Therefore, no matter what Abram does God will fulfill the contract on the basis of His sovereign authority. This is a covenant of grace not works.

## **B. Unilateral Conditional Covenants**

If signed by God and man then both parties were responsible to fulfill the terms outlined in the contract. This is called a bilateral (two way) or conditional contract because the ultimate fulfillment of the legal terms depends on one or both parties meeting their specific conditions as outlined in the contract. The language of these covenants typically comes in the form of “if you...then I will” statements and can be summed up in the phrase “if you bless Me I will bless you and if you curse Me I will curse you.” By way of an example the Mosaic Covenant was a unilateral conditional covenant. The Mosaic Covenant was a suzerainty-vassal treaty. God was the suzerain and the families of Israel that left Egypt

were the His vassals. The vassals promised to do all that the Mosaic Law commanded. For example, turn to

**Exodus 19:8** All the people answered together and said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do!" And Moses brought back the words of the people to the LORD.

**Deuteronomy 5:27-29** 'Go near and hear all that the LORD our God says; then speak to us all that the LORD our God speaks to you, and we will hear and do *it.*' <sup>28</sup> "The LORD heard the voice of your words when you spoke to me, and the LORD said to me, 'I have heard the voice of the words of this people which they have spoken to you. They have done well in all that they have spoken. <sup>29</sup> 'Oh that they had such a heart in them, that they would fear Me and keep all My commandments always, that it may be well with them and with their sons forever!

Even though the suzerain's vassals said they would do all that the Lord had spoken they did not have a heart in them that would enable them to do so. Since YHWH's requirements in this covenant were beyond the ability of depraved men to carry out, the Law was designed intentionally by YHWH to force "Israel away from trying to live a holy life in the energy of the flesh and toward a moment-by-moment trust in God's gracious enabling."<sup>ii</sup> The failure of Israel is the subject of most of the Old Testament and is outlined prophetically in Lev 26 and Dt 28. God made an unconditional covenant to replace this conditional covenant in the New Covenant of Jer 31:31-34 which will be fulfilled with Israel and Judah at the Second Coming. God will put His Spirit within them so that they will be able to fulfill the terms during the Messianic Kingdom.

As a result of signing the covenant, the party that signed provides a sign of the contract. For example, the sign of the unconditional Abrahamic Covenant is physical male circumcision.

**Genesis 17:10-13** "This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. <sup>11</sup> "And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. <sup>12</sup> "And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations, a *servant* who is born in the house or who is bought with money from any foreigner, who is not of your descendants. <sup>13</sup> "A *servant* who is born in your house or who is bought with your money shall surely be circumcised; thus shall My covenant be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant.

The “sign” remains in history so that future generations of men can face the empirical evidence of the original covenant.

### **3. Legal Terms**

The legal terms define the agreement. The legal terms are verbal and promissory. Because they are verbal and promissory each party’s behavior can be measured through time by comparing their behavior to the original legal terms.

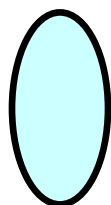
### **4. A Founding Sacrifice**

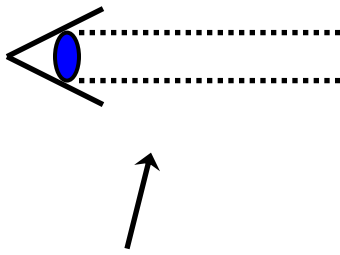
Lastly, a founding sacrifice is always required before fallen man can come into any vital relationship with God. Therefore, a founding sacrifice serves as atonement for man and enables God to come into covenant relationship with man. The example we saw earlier was the Abrahamic Covenant where God alone passed through the sacrificed pieces.

Now, since we’ve looked at what a covenant is and the four defining characteristics of a biblical covenant I want to turn now to evaluate some of the supposed covenants that men have taught and which are included in chapter 21 of Major Bible Themes (you did read the chapter, right?). I want to evaluate these three covenants starting with a literal, plain, normal interpretation of scripture and looking for the four defining characteristics of a covenant. Are these three covenants taught in the Bible?

## **III. THE 3 THEOLOGICAL COVENANTS**

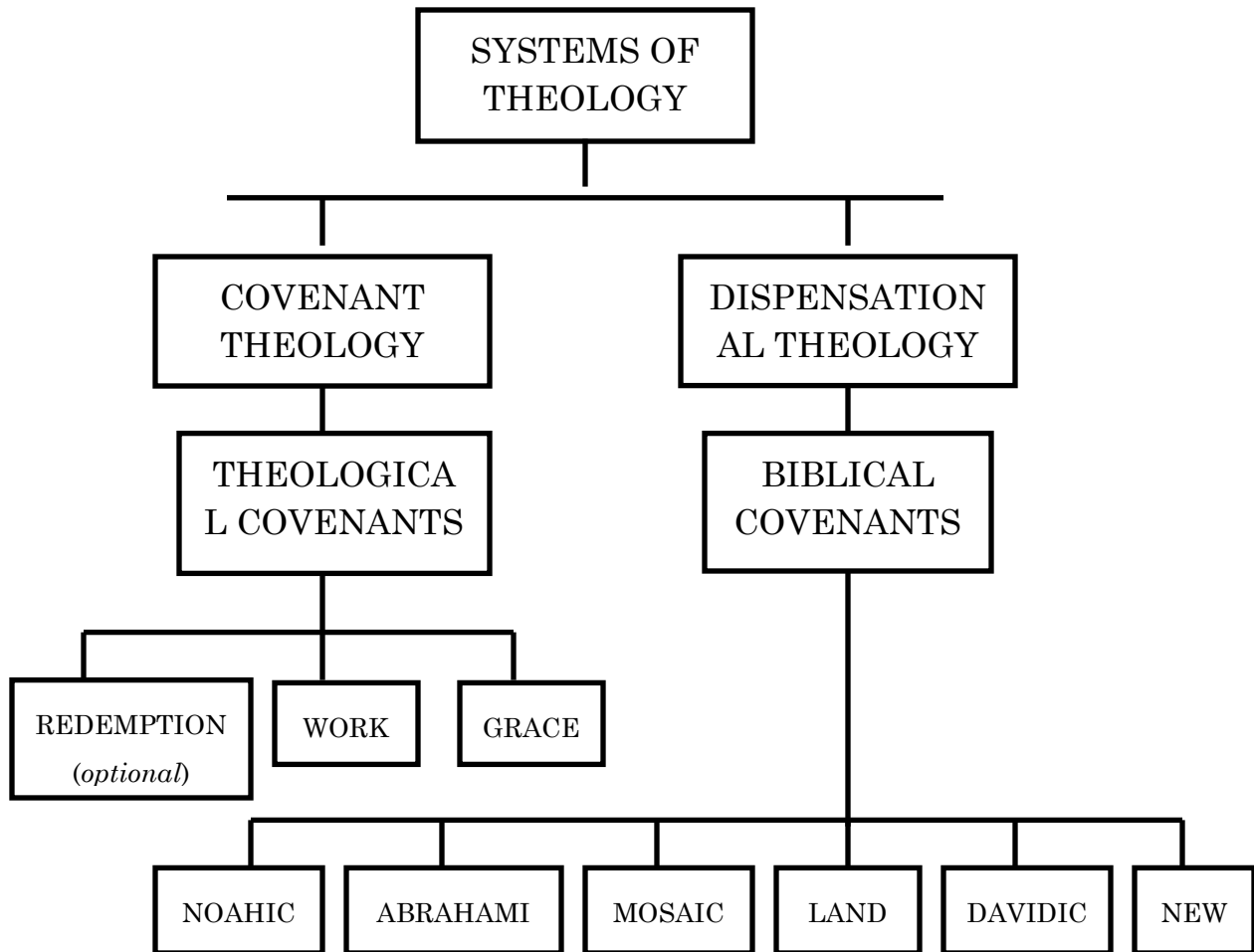
These three covenants are termed “theological covenants” because they define “Covenant Theology”, a system of theology that sees God’s ultimate purpose as salvation in contrast to Dispensationalism which sees God’s ultimate purpose as God’s glory. These three theological covenants do not come out of biblical exegesis rather they are constructed from scriptural implications. Those who hold to these theological covenants are known as “Covenant Theologians” and the unifying principle of their system of theology is the imagined Covenant of Grace. They look at every text through the lens of the Covenant of Grace.





Covenant of Grace

On the other hand, there are many students of God’s word who reject these covenants and hold to the “biblical covenants”, which do arise from biblical exegesis. These students are typically known as “Dispensationalists”. These are the only two basic systems of conservative theology. Outside of this is where Roman Catholicism, Church of Christ, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormon’s, etc...



Even though we agree with these brethren on the deity of Christ, the Trinity, the substitutionary atonement and other fundamentals, there is a sharp rift between these two schools of theology in the important areas of Israel, the Church, Salvation, and Last Things.



## A. COVENANT OF REDEMPTION

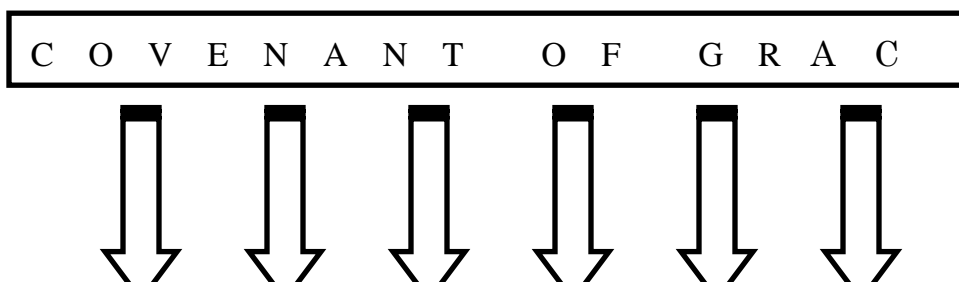
This covenant was an agreement between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Persons of the Trinity that the Son would provide a sacrifice for sinners and that the Father would accept this sacrifice. There is no Scriptural evidence for this being a “covenant” though there is certainly Scriptural evidence that God designed the plan of redemption from all eternity past. Not all Covenant Theologians hold to the Covenant of Redemption.

## B. COVENANT OF WORKS

The covenant of works was made with Adam before the Fall promising him eternal life if he did not eat of the fruit of the tree of good and evil (Gen 2:16-17). Again, this covenant is not mentioned in the Bible. As Covenant Theologian Berkhof admits, “Now it is perfectly true that no such promise is explicitly recorded...”<sup>iii</sup> This covenant idea is built on implications. It is interesting that if there were such a covenant it would mean there are two ways of salvation: salvation by works *before* the Fall and salvation by grace *after* the Fall. You can see how important it is that we build our theology on *exegesis* not *implications*.

## C. COVENANT OF GRACE

Because man fell, God came in with the covenant of grace. The covenant of grace was made with Adam and all elect progeny promising them eternal life in the promised Redeemer (Gen 3:15; 17:7). One Covenant Theologian writes, “Since man became incapable of works suitable for meriting salvation, this period has been understood as being controlled by the grace of God.”<sup>iv</sup> Again, this covenant is not found in Scripture but was originated by Bullinger and Olevianus. It was formulated into the Westminster Confession of Faith in 1648. This covenant became the unifying principle for all Covenant Theologians. They do not look at any Scripture without trying to find the Covenant of Grace. It is the lens through which they look at all Scripture. It is therefore, their hermeneutic. It tells them how to interpret passages. For them, as they look through the lens of the Covenant of Grace, the dispensations and the biblical covenants are just forms of administrating the Covenant of Grace.



Because the biblical covenants are not emphasized they do not see a distinction between the covenanted people of Israel and the Church. These brethren do not see two peoples of God. Instead, they see one people of God. In the OT that people was known as OT Israel and in the NT that people is known as the “new Israel”. This is also sometimes known as “replacement theology” because the Church has replaced Israel. In this approach to the Bible there is no future Millennial Kingdom with Israel at the head of the nations. Nor is there such a thing as the pre-trib Rapture, etc... They focus on the unity of the covenant in both testaments. This makes them very different from dispensationalists.

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<sup>i</sup> W.F. Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1968), 108.

<sup>ii</sup> Charles Clough, *Dawn of the Kingdom* (Lubbock Bible Church, 1974), 75.

<sup>iii</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (), 213.

<sup>iv</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1980), 55.

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