

Covenant Theology Series #1

Introduction

Many people, when they hear the word “covenant,” think of its meaning in very simple terms, as in “an agreement between two parties.” Others think in more legal terms, such as a contract. But the biblical meaning is more technical.

Basic Definitions

Biblical covenants come in two types: *parity* covenants and *suzerainty* covenants. Parity covenants are established between two equal parties, with the terms negotiated agreed upon with equal input between both. Suzerainty covenants, the term for which is borrowed from the suzerainty treaties of the Ancient Near East, involve the terms of a relationship between a lord (suzerain) and a *vassal*, or one who is under the authority of the lord. These terms are dictated by the lord without consultation with the vassal. The parties are thus unequal. In our study we will be concerned almost exclusively with the covenants that God makes with His creatures (“divine” covenants), which are always in the nature of the case suzerainty covenants. Some definitions of divine covenants include:

- “an agreement enacted between two parties in which one or both make promises under oath to perform or refrain from certain actions stipulated in advance” (*Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*)
- “a bond in blood, sovereignly administered” (O. Palmer Robertson, in *The Christ of the Covenants*)
- “a bond which manifests the structure of God how God relates” (Mike Biggs)

Two Senses of Divine Covenants

The concept of divine covenant is sometimes presented in the plural (“covenants”) and sometimes in the singular (*the* Covenant), and we shall see later the reason for this and the relationship between these two usages. For both of these usages, a distinction should be understood between two senses of the concept of divine covenant in the Bible:

1. *The formal sense*—This refers to the covenant as considered from man’s perspective (“from below”), or in other words, as an external arrangement constituted as a means to an end. This is the overwhelmingly predominant way that the term is used in the Bible.
2. *The material sense*—This refers to the covenant considered from God’s perspective (“from above”), as synonymous with the realization of the purpose for which the external arrangement was established, or in other words, as an end in itself.

As we shall see, this distinction is crucial in resolving certain tensions and/or apparent

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contradictions with respect to how the Bible speaks of covenant, such as conditionality/unconditionality, and whether being a covenant member is the same as being “saved.”

Important Major Covenants

There are several biblical divine covenants to which covenant theologians refer by various, and sometimes interchangeable terms, which make the terminology confusing at times. The major ones are:

- *The Covenant of Redemption*—This refers to an intratrinitarian covenant between the members of the Godhead concerning the salvation of mankind. Whether there is such a covenant is disputed among theologians. Examples of passages alleged as a basis for it are Psalm 2 and Psalm 110.
- *The Covenant of Works (also called the Covenant of Creation)*—In classical Reformed theology, especially as reflected in the Westminster Standards, this refers to an original covenant between God and His creation, as represented by Adam, at the beginning in the Garden of Eden. Its violation by mankind and the subsequent condemnation obtained thereby made necessary...
- *The Covenant of Grace (also called the Covenant of Redemption)*—This refers to the covenant arrangement whereby God accomplishes the salvation/redemption of His elect people.

The principle covenants of God with man, including:

- *Adamic Covenant*
- *Noahic Covenant*
- *Abrahamic Covenant*
- *Mosaic (Sinaitic) Covenant*
- *Davidic Covenant*
- *New Covenant*

are, in covenant theology, seen to be *stages*, or watershed events which delimit the stages, of the overall Covenant of Grace. We shall see the biblical basis for this, and its implications and significance, in subsequent sessions.

For now, it is important to see the centrality and importance of the concept of covenant as an organizing and central principle for rightly understanding the theology of the Bible and how it fits together, which is indicated in part by how frequently it is adduced in Scripture, especially by God Himself (refer to the concordance entries for “covenant” and “covenants.”

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Structure of Divine Covenants

As we previously noted, one way to look at covenant is as the structure of how God relates, both to Himself and to His creation. In accord with this, there are certain elements or aspects of covenants which contribute to this structure. James Jordan summarizes these dynamics well:

“The Bible reveals that God’s way of managing history is by making covenants with His people. There is a succession of such covenants in the Bible, each more glorious than the previous, each absorbing and transfiguring the previous, until finally we come to the New Covenant in Jesus Christ. There are two dimensions of these covenants. The first is the activity of covenant making, the sequence of events entailed in bringing in a new covenant. The second is the covenant document that summarizes the content of the newly established covenant, and its order of presentation. Generally speaking, the order of presentation in the covenant document is the same as the sequence of events in the covenant’s establishment.

This order or sequence has been analyzed variously by different scholars. Some have seen three, some four, some five, some six, and some seven aspects of the covenant. We can say that in its fullest manifestations, God’s covenant with man, which we can illustrate from the Mosaic covenant, entails the following steps and aspects:

1. Announcement of God’s transcendence; Hi laying hold on the situation (Ex. 2:24-25; 20:3).
2. Declaration of God’s new Name, appropriate for the new covenant being installed (Ex. 3:13-15; 6:2-8; 20:2a).
3. Statement of how God brought His people from the old covenant and world into the new one (Ex. 20:2b; Deut. 1:6-4:40).
4. Establishment of the new covenant order, especially the governmental hierarchies thereof (Ex. 18:13-27; Deut. 1:9-18).
5. Appointment of new names for the new finished product (Gen. 1:4-5, 6-8, 9-10; at Moses’ time, “children of Israel” is the new name, replacing “Hebrew”).
6. Grant or distribution of an area of dominion to the covenant steward or vassal (Ex. 3:8; Deut. 1:19-12:31).
7. Stipulations concerning the management of this grant (Ex. 20:23; Deut. 5:1-26:19).
8. Statement of the terms by which God will evaluate man’s performance; promised blessings and threatened curses (Ex. 23:25-33; Deut. 27, 28).
9. Placement of witnesses to report to God on man’s behavior (Ex. 23:20-23; Deut. 4:26; 30:19).
10. Arrangements for the deposition of the covenant documents (Ex. 40:20; Deut. 31:9-13).
11. Arrangements for succession of covenant vice-regents (Deut. 31:7, 14, 23; Deut. 34).
12. Artistic poems that encapsulate the covenant, and that are to be taught to succeeding generations (Deut. 31:14-33:29).

We could probably come up with other aspects as well, depending on how much detail we wished to go into.

This covenant order can helpfully and biblically be grouped in more than one way. It is possible and desirable to see the sequence as proceeding from God's sovereign Control (1-3), to manifestations of God's sovereign Authority (4-7), and culminating in revelations of God's sovereign Presence with His people (8-12). This is based on John Frame's work. It is also possible and desirable to see the sequence as having five aspects...

Each of these patterns can be found in the Bible....

Given the fact that the covenant document is just that, a document, we are on solid ground in supposing that these numerical sequences function as literary structuring devices in certain parts of the Bible, and perhaps also in the Bible as a whole, considered as *the* covenant document. We are, accordingly, invited to search for such structures....

To recapitulate: there is a sequence of items that is found in biblical covenants. The overall sequence is almost always the same. There are also in the Bible various ways of grouping this sequence, according to symbolically significant numbers. Scholars have identified groups of three (Trinity), four (world foundations), five (housebuilding), six (man), and seven (sabbath). We might profitably also look for groups of ten (law) and twelve (covenant people). There seems to be a certain prominence to the five-fold arrangement in the Pentateuch, with its five books, perhaps because five is a number associated with housebuilding."¹

This prominent five-fold sequence is useful for summarizing the structure and aspects of God's covenant relationships, to wit:

1. *The juxtaposition of transcendence and immanence*—the transcendent and sovereign God draws near (immanent) to His people through a bond the terms of which He sovereignly imposes on His people.
2. *Representative mediation*—God administers these terms through the means of a mediating hierarchy through which God is represented to His subjects and they are represented to Him.
3. *Stipulations*—God obligates/binds Himself by promising certain things to His people and binds them by imposing obligations on them through the revelation of His Law.
4. *Sanctions*—Blessings for obedience to the stipulations and curses for disobedience are pronounced.
5. *Continuity/succession*—Arrangement is made for the continuing of the covenant into the future.

Gary North has provided a helpful way to think of and remember these elements is to think of them in terms of five questions which a new employee might ask of his employer regarding the terms of his employment:

¹ James Jordan, *Covenant Sequence in Leviticus and Deuteronomy* (Institute for Christian Economics: Tyler, Texas, 1989).

1. Who's in charge here?
2. To whom do I report?
3. What can I expect (e.g. salary/benefits) and what are my responsibilities/duties?
4. How is my performance or lack thereof rewarded/punished?
5. Does this outfit have a future?

Covenant Theology Series #3

Dispensationalism

Introduction

There are two fundamental approaches to understanding the structure of flow and structure of both redemptive history and God's commentary on it in biblical revelation. One approach is to emphasize the *discontinuity* between the parts and eras associated with these two strands of biblical theology, and the other is to emphasize the *continuity* between these parts and eras. Covenant theology, when considered as biblical theology, emphasizes the continuity and sees this as the essential feature of both redemptive history and biblical revelation, an appreciation of which is crucial for understanding them properly. An extremely influential movement, especially in American Christianity, known as dispensationalism, is the principal *system* of biblical theology competing for dominance in forming a framework for redemptive history and biblical revelation. Although not all non-covenantal theologians (and everyone is a theologian) self-consciously subscribe to dispensationalism, anyone who approaches biblical theology understanding it to any degree as fundamentally discontinuous is to that degree dispensational in his approach to these matters. For that reason, an overview and evaluation of dispensationalism is both proper and necessary at this point in our study.

Historical Background

Dispensational theology as a formal system originated in England around 1830, among an ecclesiastically Separatist group known as the Plymouth Brethren. Its beginnings have questionable aspects, not least the suggestion of an association with occult experiences.¹ It spread to America through the immigration of several members, most notably, J. N. B. Darby and C. I. Scofield. The latter produced, in about 1917, a reference Bible which was one of the first, if not the first, containing interpretive notes on the same page as the text of Scripture. As it was disseminated among the Christian population of America, the interpretive system contained in the notes became associated without distinction with the content of Scripture, often without distinction, thus becoming a powerful inter-denominational influence on the understanding of the Bible among American Christians. Dispensationalism was officially declared a heresy by the American Presbyterian Church in the early twentieth century because of its teaching that there were different ways of salvation set forth in the Old and New Testaments. The New Scofield Reference Bible was produced to address this problem, with the notes revised to remove this assertion. Later as modernism and the rise of liberal theology, with its denigration of the historicity and inerrancy of Scripture, began to be ascendant in many of the mainline Christian denominations, rank and file Christians, who were receiving less and less biblical teaching from their liberal-influenced pastors and churches, became readers of the Scofield Bibles, dependent upon them for their understanding of the Bible, and were thus more and more influenced by the biblical theology of its system, and especially of its system of eschatology. As we will see, a

¹ For more on this, see

salient factor in this process was the contrast between the typically allegorical approach to Scripture, and especially its historical narratives, as “myth” — which actually amounted to unbelief — and the literalistic approach of dispensationalists. As a result, the largest percentage of evangelical Christians not only approach Scripture from a dispensational perspective, especially with respect to eschatology, but also regard anyone who challenges the system to be a theological liberal. In fact, many evangelical Christians have never been exposed to any other eschatological system, not to mention any other way of interpreting and handling Scripture. They simply have never heard anything else.

Overview of Dispensationalism

The essence of dispensationalism can be summarized in terms of three distinctive features, which together are responsible for generating the contents of the system:

1. *A distinctive hermeneutic* — This refers to its approach to the interpretation and application of Scripture, which can be described as *literalistic*. This is to be distinguished from the desirable approach of interpreting Scripture *literally*, which most dispensationalists assert is what they are doing. However, to interpret the Bible literally means to interpret it *as literature*, which involves taking into account the distinctive features of its literary genres (or “types”), often including figurative and symbolic expressions as a common convention.² Dispensational literalism has been defined by dispensationalists themselves as the principal that a given statement of Scripture should be assumed to be a literal statement unless it cannot possibly be understood in this way, although an examination of their interpretations indicates that they are far from consistent in the application of this principle.
2. *A distinctive ecclesiology* — This refers to their understanding of the Church, particularly in terms of its relationship to the nation of Israel. Traditional dispensationalists assert that there are two distinct and separate redemptive communities in Scripture, Israel and the Church, with separate and distinct revelation and promises, and separate and distinct destinies. In other words, there is no *continuity* between Israel and the Church. Dispensationalism sees the Bible’s program as mainly about Israel, and the Church as a “mystery parenthesis” in God’s program. This assertion either leads to or proceeds from a profound “chopping up” of the Bible in terms of its contents and promises, which some dispensationalists proudly claim as their conformity to what II Timothy 2:15 (KJV) describes as “rightly dividing the Word of truth.”
3. *A distinctive redemptive historiography* — This refers to the way in which dispensationalists “write history,” specifically redemptive history as it is revealed in the Bible. “Historiography” is defined as “the writing of history, especially...based on the critical examination of sources, the selection of particular details from the authentic materials in those sources, and the synthesis of those details into a narrative that stands the test of critical examination” (*Encyclopedia Britannica*). The salient feature of the way dispensationalists “synthesize” the details of Scripture is in terms of rigidly separate epochs or “dispensations” (hence the term), in which God deals with mankind in radically different ways and in terms of radically distinct requirements which constitute tests of a

² For more on this, see R.C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture*

sort. In each dispensation man fails the test, resulting in God's judgment, the eradication of the former dispensational economy, and establishment of an entirely new economy. The word "dispensation" is a translation of the Greek word *οικονομία* (*oikonomia*), from which we get the English word "economy." In other words, dispensationalists frame the story of redemptive history as a series of radically distinct epochs which are fundamentally *discontinuous*.

Evaluation

We will be addressing what we believe to be the errors of the dispensational approach to biblical theology throughout our study through a positive presentation of the biblical evidence and reasons for structuring our understanding of the Bible and of redemptive history and our relationship to God in terms of covenant theology. However, it is appropriate at the start of that presentation to give an overall evaluation and critique of the dispensational approach.

In the first place, although calling what is clearly meant to be understood as historical narrative "myth" and asserting that it is not literally true, but should be understood and applied allegorically, is fundamentally wrong should be rejected, it must be understood that this is so precisely because of proper literary analysis, that is, because such a procedure violates the nature of Scripture as it presents itself to us: a collection of literary works encompassing multiple genres, some of which cannot be faithfully interpreted in terms of the authors' intents without understanding them literally. But this is precisely the point at which dispensationalists also violate Scripture, since they insist on interpreting as literal statements verses and passages which are, in terms of the genre of literature in which they occur, possibly not literal. In fact, many such passages are interpreted by the inerrant and infallible New Testament Scriptures in non-literal ways. Examples include:

- Ezekiel 34:23,, 24 (compare verse 15) and 37:24, 25 predict that *David* shall be shepherd and rule over the people of God in a future kingdom, but this is universally understood to be fulfilled in terms of the *Son* of David, Jesus, as He claims this role in John 10:11, 16 and 12:34, and in terms of the principle illustrated by Peter in in Acts.2:22-36.
- The celestial phenomena in Joel 2:30, 31 are also interpreted by Peter in Acts 2:16-21 in non-literal ways, yet the same terminology as employed in Matthew 24:29 is invariably insisted by dispensationalists to be referring to literal celestial phenomena.
- Jesus frequently spoke in non-literal categories to his disciples and others and was misunderstood because He was speaking in Scriptural categories. Examples are Matthew 16:5-12; Mark 5:39; Mark 9:11-13; John 11:11-13.
- See the next point for overlapping examples of this point.

In the second place, it is clear from multiple Scriptures that Israel and the Church are one and the same entity, and that the *nation* of Israel is simply the covenant community prior to its establishment as an *officially* multi-national, multi-ethnic community. In other words, Israel is the Church of the Old Testament and the Church is Israel in the New Testament. Just of few of the Scriptural proofs of this include:

- Gentiles are specifically grafted into a community (olive tree) which formerly consisted only of Jews (the “natural branches”), some of which were broken of because of unbelief. There is only one olive tree, not two. This can hardly refer too anything other than the covenant community (Romans 11).
- Ephesians 2:11-22 confirms this when it explicitly declares that Gentiles have been made members of “the commonwealth of Israel” (or have received “citizenship in Israel”).
- The word for “church” (called out assembly) is, in Hebrew, using the same Greek word as used in the New Testament for the Church and in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, called the Church.
- The Church is called “Israel” in Galatians 6:16.
- Israel, from its beginnings as a nation, contained persons who were Gentiles or non-Israelites (e.g., Exodus 12:38; I Chronicles 11:10-47).
- The fulfillments of Old Testament covenant promises are explicitly applied to Gentiles in the New Testament (e.g., Romans 4:13; 9:24-26; Galatians 3:26-29)
- The Old Testament declares that Gentiles shall be declared to have been “born in Zion” (Psalm 87:4-6).
- And many, many others.

In the third place, the way that the New Testament quotes and uses the Old Testament demonstrates that the *fundamental economy* is the same, to wit:

- When the New Testament writers talk about salvation and how God deals with His people, they quote the Old Testament and adduce principles drawn from it (e.g., Romans 4:1-12; Hebrews 3:1-4;11)
- When Jesus appeared, those who observed the child spoke of the significance of His appearance in connection with the fulfillment of Old Testament covenant promises and in terms of His participation in that One Covenant (Luke 1:46-56; 67-79).
- See the connections established in the next study tracing the unity of the Covenant of Grace.