

ESCHATOLOGY: DOCTRINE OF LAST THINGS

PART 41

The Covenants

Understanding the covenants God made with Israel is essential in terms of understanding God's work in the history of His creation. Israel cannot properly be understood in terms of her role in relationship with Yahweh and the world nor can her role as it relates to the future be properly understood apart from understanding the covenants. The proper role and place of the church in history cannot properly be understood apart from understanding Israel and the covenants. God's Kingdom program, so vitally important to understanding what He is doing in history, cannot be understood apart from the covenants. The entire biblical narrative—land, seed, and blessing, and Kingdom—is informed by the covenants God made with Israel.

Making up covenants that serve as a basis for establishing a religious, theological system simply destroys the revelation God has provided us in the Word of God. Concerning those theological covenants, Chafer articulated a serious word of warning against so-called Covenant Theology which is based entirely on theologically constructed "covenants"—works, redemption, and grace—that do not exist and seriously misrepresent the Word of God. At the same time these theologians neglect, fail to understand, and even disparage and reject the true biblical covenants we will be examining. "Little reference has been made thus far in this work [referring to his Systematic Theology] to the essential error of Covenant Theology. It may be mentioned at this point only as it bears on human responsibility before God. The theological terms, *Covenant of Works* and *Covenant of Grace*, do not occur in the Sacred Text. If they are to be sustained it must be wholly apart from Biblical authority. What is known as Covenant Theology builds its structure on these two covenants and is, at least, a recognition—though inadequate—of the truth that the creature has responsibility toward his Creator. Covenant Theology has Cocceius (1603-1669) as its chief exponent. 'He taught that before the Fall, as much as after it, the relation between God and man was a covenant. The first covenant was a "'Covenant of Works.'" For this was substituted, after the Fall, the "'Covenant of Grace,'" to fulfil which the coming of Jesus Christ was necessary' (*Encyclopaedia [sic] Britannica*, 14TH ed., V, 938). Upon this human invention of two covenants Reformed Theology has largely been constructed. It sees the empirical truth that God can forgive sinners only by that freedom which is secured by the sacrifice of His Son—anticipated in the old order and realized in the new—but that theology utterly fails to discern the purposes of the ages; the varying relationships to God of the Jews, the Gentiles, and the Church, with the distinctive, consistent human obligations which arise directly and unavoidably from the nature of each specific relationship to God. A Theology which penetrates no further into Scripture than to discover that in all ages God is immutable in His grace toward penitent sinners, and constructs the idea of a universal church, continuing through the ages, on the one truth

of immutable grace, is not only disregarding vast spheres of revelation but is reaping the unavoidable confusion and misdirection which part-truth engenders. The outworking of divine grace is not standardized, though the Covenant idea of theology would make it so; and as certain as God's dealings with men are not standardized, in the same manner the entire field of the corresponding human obligation in daily life is not run into a mold of human idealism." [Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 4:156-157]. Chafer came out of the Reformed/Covenant system of theology, but he didn't entirely leave it either. Chafer is correct in his assessment, but he gives far too much credit to these theologians. Their system destroys the biblical narrative as God revealed it in order to establish a Protestant system of religion. The Reformers never quite got over their Roman Catholic roots and this was especially true of Eschatology, but this also seriously denigrated their Soteriology as well. A philosophical question: Does anyone besides me find it tragically ironic that this system of theology which calls itself "Covenant Theology," claims to be biblical, but disregards and denigrates the true biblical covenants all the while constructing their theological system on phony covenants that are entirely extrabiblical, which also means unbiblical, and nonexistent?

Briefly, what is Covenant Theology? Covenant theologians define the Covenant of Works as a covenant between God and Adam. If Adam would perfectly obey God, he would receive eternal life. He failed so the death promised in the covenant was invoked. The Covenant of Redemption, which not all Covenant theologians recognize because some roll it into the Covenant of Grace, is a covenant made between God and Christ in which they covenanted together for the redemption of the human race of which Christ, the Second Adam, would be Mediator by giving His life for the elect. By His acceptance of this covenant with God, Christ promised to do God's work and to fulfill all righteousness by obeying the law of God. The Covenant of Grace is made between God and the elect part of mankind. The elect have been given by the Father to the Son from eternity. This covenant began at the promise in the Garden (Gen. 3:15) and continues on today. [*Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, s.v. "Covenant Theology," pp. 301-303]. That is an extremely simplified explanation; their system of theology is quite complex and they employ extraordinary means to get the Bible to conform to their theology. They have built this faulty foundation into an elaborate, unbiblical, manmade, theological scheme. If the foundation is faulty, the superstructure built on the foundation cannot be sound either. Its adherents cannot understand the true biblical covenants, dispensations and dispensational distinctions, Israel, the Kingdom, Soteriology, Eschatology, and I could go on. When they claim this nonexistent covenant of grace began with Genesis 3:15, they are placing the church in Genesis and this is the basis for their Replacement Theology. It is also why they believe the sole purpose of God acting in history is to redeem mankind which makes their system man-centered rather than God centered even though they claim to be the great defenders of God's sovereignty. Be alert when reading theological literature that point to these theological covenants because they will lead you away from biblical truth instead of to it.

The covenants between God and Israel are of two different types. Generally, we describe them as conditional and unconditional. While conditional is an accurate description of the Mosaic Covenant, I have come to the conclusion that unconditional is not a helpful term in understanding the Abrahamic Covenant and the Covenants that amplified it later in biblical history. It's not clearly incorrect, but it can be a bit misleading and confusing in how we describe those Covenants. For example, I have often described the Abrahamic Covenant as being entirely the responsibility for its fulfillment resting on God and there is nothing Abraham or his descendants could do to prevent its fulfillment. That is true, but that thinking disregards the requirement there be a faithful generation of Jews to whom the Covenant would be fulfilled. That generation has not yet existed and the Covenant has not yet been fulfilled. This ties into Matthew and the Kingdom offer which we will examine in a moment. I'm going to present my thoughts concerning the use of the word "unconditional" when describing the biblical covenants and I think we should think more in terms of a reward covenant. The use of the word is so ingrained that it isn't going to go away, so if that's what you're comfortable with, use it, but I am going to explain what I think are the problems with it.

Pentecost provided a good example of how the use of the word "unconditional" causes confusion. "In an unconditional covenant that which was covenanted depends upon the one making the covenant alone for its fulfillment. That which was promised is sovereignly given to the recipient of the covenant on the authority and integrity of the one making the covenant apart from the merit or response of the receiver. It is a covenant with no 'if' attached to it whatsoever." This is the traditional way dispensationalists have always described what we call unconditional covenants and this is not quite correct. The royal grant covenant is, in fact, a covenant of merit. It is a reward for faithful service. Once awarded, merit no longer bears on keeping it, at least as it concerns the original recipient. Pentecost goes on then to make a statement that serves, as Dr. Anderson noted, to muddy the waters. "To safeguard thinking on this point, it should be observed that an unconditional covenant, which binds the one making the covenant to a certain course of action, may have blessings attached to that covenant that are conditioned upon the response of the recipient of the covenant, which blessings grow out of the original covenant, but these conditioned blessings do not change the unconditional character of that covenant. The failure to observe that an unconditional covenant may have certain conditioned blessings attached to it had led many to the position that conditioned blessings necessitate a conditional covenant, thus perverting the essential nature of Israel's determinative covenants." [J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology*, p. 68]. This is confusing and that is why I think using the word "unconditional" is not exactly the point. When we say we have an unconditional covenant with conditions, that is a contradiction that is confusing.

Fruchtenbaum tries to explain this unconditional doctrine concept but he too confuses the issue. Further, this confusion over the word "unconditional" gives ammunition to the opponents of dispensational Eschatology and of Israel to attack the doctrines of the

Covenants as the Bible presents them. Fruchtenbaum recognized this and he attempted to refute it but I think he failed. "This very point [the unconditional nature of the covenant] is frequently challenged by Covenant Theologians who insist that this covenant was a conditional covenant since it is obvious that conditions are found within it, such as the command to Abraham to leave the land of his birth to go to a new land. However, this misses the real issue and misconstrues exactly what Dispensationalists mean by an 'unconditional covenant.' When Dispensationalists speak of an 'unconditional covenant,' they do not mean that the content of the covenant contains no conditions, obligations, or commands. What they do mean is that God intends to fulfill the terms of the covenant regardless of whether man fulfills his obligations. Abraham may have had some obligations to fulfill, but even if Abraham failed to fulfill those obligations, God's promises to Abraham still would have been fulfilled. As a point of fact, Abraham lapsed on several occasions, but those lapses did not terminate the covenant. That is what is meant by 'unconditional covenant' and the Abrahamic Covenant is such a covenant. A conditional covenant does require one to meet the conditions of the covenant in order to receive the blessings of the covenant, and the Mosaic Covenant is such a covenant. One reason Covenant Theologians insist that the Abrahamic Covenant is conditional is the mere existence of conditions, which do not make the covenant itself a conditional one. Furthermore, even if it is conceded that 'the Abrahamic Covenant was made conditional upon Abraham's faithfulness,' God declared to Isaac in Genesis 26:5 that Abraham was faithful and obeyed God. The very fact that Abraham fulfilled his obligations now obligates God to fulfill His. With Abraham's fulfillment of his condition, he rendered the covenant unconditional since the obligation is now totally dependent upon God." [see Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology*, pp. 333-334]. The command of Abraham to leave his homeland was not a covenant requirement; there was no covenant at that time. The Abrahamic Covenant came about as a reward for his faithfulness to obey God and leave.

Fruchtenbaum missed the mark here. Fruchtenbaum presupposes the Covenant existed before Abram left Ur but that is not so. He writes that because Abraham was faithful to fulfill his obligations God is obligated to fulfill His in the Abrahamic Covenant. But this is incorrect. The nature of the royal grant covenant is a reward for faithfulness; it is not dependent on faithfulness afterwards; it is entered only because of the faithfulness of the vassal before the covenant is made. The faithful attitude, behavior, obedience, and work for the suzerain is displayed first and then the covenant is awarded. In this case, Abram believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness when he obeyed God and left his homeland for Canaan. The reward covenant came later. Fruchtenbaum has this backwards. Abraham was faithful and then God entered into covenant with him. Once the Covenant was entered, God was obligated to fulfill the covenant stipulations because He promised to do so. The command for Abraham to leave Ur was obeyed first and then the covenant was entered into by God with Abraham. The covenant would never have been entered into with Abraham if he had not obediently left Ur and traveled to Canaan first. The official Covenant did not exist

before Genesis 15 as Fruchtenbaum presupposes it did in Genesis 12. The promises of Genesis 12 are further articulated in the ensuing royal grant covenants.

We have to keep some things in mind when discussing the Abrahamic Covenant that make the concept of unconditional a little less clear. First, it is a Covenant made with the nation Israel which consists of individuals both believing and unbelieving. Second, individuals always enter into eternal relationship with God through faith which is not a work; therefore, some Israelites are saved and some are unsaved even though they are part of the covenant nation in relationship with God. Third, there is one condition to fulfilling this national type of Covenant and that is faithfulness on the part of the nation, the intended recipient of the Covenant. These covenants are between God and Israel; they are not between God and the church. The church has been grafted into the tree that is nourished from the Covenants; therefore, the church is fed and grown from the blessings flowing from the rich root of the Abrahamic Covenant and its amplifying Covenants that promised to bless all the families of the earth through Abraham. That blessing is the Savior of the world, Christ Jesus. The biblical Covenants concern the national destiny of Israel and they promise that Israel will never cease to exist. Individual citizens of the nation may believe and receive eternal life or they may not believe and receive eternal death instead. Those who do not believe will be lost and they will never receive the fulfillment of the promises in the Covenants, but the nation of Israel as a national entity will never be lost.

We know this based on the nature of the Covenant and on the words of Christ. Remember, Christ came the first time with an offer of the covenanted Kingdom that was based on the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant and the following Covenants that explain parameters. But it was postponed. Why? From the Exodus to the Lord's First Advent, no obedient, faithful generation of Jewish people existed. The unfaithful Jews of the time of the Lord's offer of the Kingdom to them refused to be the faithful generation to whom the Covenant could be passed. How do we know there must be a faithful generation of Jews to inherit the Covenant? Because Christ said that was the condition for His return to inaugurate the Kingdom and that is characteristic of the nature of the Covenants. We know the Sermon on the Mount was a call to Covenant faithfulness according to the true intent of the Law. We know that to enter the Kingdom each individual must attain a standard of righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees. We know that standard of righteousness is found only in the Messiah, Jesus, and national faith in Him, led by the leadership of Israel, would have resulted in the fulfillment of the covenants at that time. That didn't happen then, but it will happen in the future.

Matthew 21:43⁴³ "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people, producing the fruit of it."

This verse is not about the church as so many Christians think it is; it is about a faithful generation of Jewish leaders who will lead the nation into faith in their Messiah. We also

know, from the words of Christ, that He will not come back until that generation of Jews comes to faith and asks Him to return.

Matthew 23:39 ³⁹“For I say to you, from now on you will not see Me until you say, ‘BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD!’”

The point of Matthew 5:20 is that only faith in the Messiah will provide the righteousness necessary to surpass the righteousness of the Jewish religious leadership at the time and that faith must be possessed by a generation of Jews in order that the Abrahamic Covenant will be fulfilled to them.

Matthew 5:20 ²⁰“For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

These things do add up to one condition that must be fulfilled by Israel in order for the Abrahamic Covenant to be fulfilled and that is a faithful, believing generation of Jews which has never happened since Jacob. The first generation of Israelites as a nation rebelled against God from the very beginning of the Exodus and no generation since has been a believing generation. We will see that Abraham was faithful and received the Covenant as a reward. Isaac obeyed God and received the Covenant as a reward. Jacob was faithful and received the Covenant as a reward. Since then the nation has been unfaithful and the complete fulfillment of the national Covenant blessings are in abeyance. It is noteworthy that none of the Patriarchs were completely faithful after they received the Covenant but it remained theirs despite their failures. It is also noteworthy that the generation of Jews who believe will be largely in the land. They are currently being regathered in unbelief, they will pass under the rod of judgment in the Tribulation, and they will believe and be saved. Only then will they be rewarded with the Abrahamic Covenant their forefathers possessed.

The Abrahamic Covenant is the basis for the Kingdom program—land, seed, blessing. The postponement of the Kingdom for lack of a faithful generation to receive the Covenant and the existence of a faithful generation of Israelites to realize the fulfillment of the Covenant are tied together. Once that faithful generation is granted the Covenant, the Covenant will be completely initiated and nothing the nation can or will do in the future will ever cause it to be held in abeyance or abrogated. But that will not be a problem because under the auspices of the New Covenant all the Jews will know Him from the least of them to the greatest of them (Jer. 31:34). How do all these various issues fit together in order to properly understand the covenants and God's Kingdom program involving Israel?

Concerning the use of the words “conditional” and “unconditional,” Dr. Anderson wrote about the confusion these words have brought into the discussion. “The traditional premillennial distinction of ‘conditional’ versus ‘unconditional’ has muddied the waters. As a matter of fact, the covenants of grant are conditioned upon

obedience, but are unconditional after their inauguration (at least for the initial recipient). The suzerainty-vassal covenants are unconditional in their initiation but conditional (as set forth in the historical prologues of these covenants), but any blessings that accrued came only upon the condition of the vassal's loyalty to the stipulations. The concept of 'conditional' versus 'unconditional' is both an oversimplification and an inadequate distinction. A better contrast between the two types is 'motivation for future obedience' versus 'reward for past obedience.'" [David R. Anderson, "The National Repentance of Israel" in *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*, 11, no. 21 (Autumn 1998), p. 17]. The royal grant covenants (the Abrahamic Covenant and its amplifying Covenants: Land, Davidic, and New) are awarded based on faithfulness and they are granted as a reward for that faithfulness. Once the covenant is awarded, it cannot be taken away. However, a suzerainty-vassal covenant (Mosaic Covenant) with its requirements for future loyalty could be added to it. That's what happened between the Abrahamic Covenant and the Mosaic Covenant. We will explore these concepts further once we get into the specifics of the individual covenants.

In terms of history, covenants are ancient in origin. As long as man has recognized the need to regulate relationships between one another whether it is individuals, tribes, cities, or nations, covenants of one sort or another came into existence in order to be the official agreement for the regulation of the relationship. Today, we call them contracts, treaties, or agreements. The most basic elements involved in covenants are blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. Some theologians recognize several elements that appear chronologically in the agreement and characterize these ancient covenants: introduction of the speaker, the history of the relationship, a general command, detailed stipulations, a document statement, witnesses, and the blessings and curses. [Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, p. 140]. In the most basic sense, "Covenants in the Old Testament have certain components that are uniform among the various types. There was a solemn promise made binding by an oath. This oath could be a verbal formula or a symbolic action. The parties making the oath were obligated to the contract. The covenant had legal force and became the basis for relationship between parties and defined the nature of ethical standards between them." As the concept of covenant relates to God and man, "God wants to bind Himself to His people to keep His promises so that He can demonstrate in history what kind of God He is. [Also] relationships in the Bible, especially between God and man, are legal or judicial. This is why they are mediated through covenants. Covenants usually involve intent, promise, and sanctions." [Richard Mayhue and Thomas Ice, s.v. "Covenants" in *The Popular Encyclopedia of Bible Prophecy*, pp. 60-65].

Peters was fighting Replacement Theology when he wrote about the language of covenants and the literal interpretation of them. "In all earthly transactions, when a promise, agreement, or contract is entered into by which one party gives a promise of value to another it is universally the custom to explain such a relationship and its

promises by the well-known laws of language contained in our grammars or in common usage. It would be regarded absurd and trifling to view them in any other light.... Why, then, should this universal rule be laid aside when coming to the covenants of the Bible? If it is important in any mere earthly relationship for the parties to understand each other, and such a comprehension is based on the plain grammatical sense of the language used, is it not equally, yea more, essential in so weighty a case as this; and to insure comprehension of the same is it not most reasonable to expect the same literal language? Indeed, when the covenants embrace the vital interests of a nation and the destiny of the race and the world, is it not requisite that they should be presented in such a form that the parties to whom they are given can readily perceive their meaning, without searching around for another and very different one to be engrafted upon them, or ... spiritualize them into a proper conception?" [George N. H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom*, Prop. 48, Obs. 1, 1:290].

Many people claim the Bible is simply copying the cultural norms of the time in terms of the covenant format. I'm proposing it is actually the other way around. The societies of the time used a covenant format designed by God which was then used in the Bible to be the format for the Covenants between God and Israel. Obviously, these pagan cultures didn't know they were using a covenantal format designed by God but He led them into designing it for His later purposes. This is the same kind of argument used in the creation story. Many people claim the Bible got its creation account from pagan accounts but it is actually the other way around. The Bible has the true creation account which was corrupted by the pagans and adopted as their own in its corrupt form. In the same way, God designed the covenant format for that time in history to suit His purposes. Israel didn't copy the covenant format from pagan people; the covenant format was designed by God and used by pagan people.

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