

THE COVENANTS OF GOD

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For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory (2 Cor. 1:20).

My family recently moved to Greenville, South Carolina. When we purchased our new home, I was informed that our subdivision is a “covenant community.” Being a Reformed minister, I was delighted to hear that. Then, a week after we moved in, my wife found a note on our door insisting that we remove the basketball goal from our front driveway. At this, I realized that by a covenant community they meant that we have a neighborhood association dominated by retirees.

This is just one of many examples of dubious uses of the word “covenant.” In Christian circles, the word “covenant” is in. We have gone from covenant people and covenant children to covenant schools and covenant businesses. I recently was given a bag of covenant coffee beans, which, by the way, I received as an effectual means of grace. Today, if you want to express a zeal to be distinctively Christian, and especially if you are Reformed-leaning, you are very likely to apply the word *covenant* to your activity or group or product. In the process, the word has begun to lose definition and take on little more than a vague nimbus.

The purpose of this address is to clarify what a covenant is and how the biblical covenants work. We also consider the implications of what it means to live in covenant with our saving God.

WHAT IS A COVENANT?

What, then, is a covenant. This has been the subject of surprisingly heated debate in recent years. But I think no better answer has been given than that of the biblical

scholar O. Palmer Robertson, in his book, *The Christ of the Covenants*: “A covenant is a *bond in blood sovereignly administered*. When God enters into a covenantal relationship with men, he sovereignly institutes a life-and-death bond. A covenant is a bond in blood, or a bond of life and death, sovereignly administered.”¹

There are three elements of this definition, beginning with the statement that a covenant is a *bond*. As Robertson explains, “a covenant is that which binds people together.”² His use of that term is an attempt at careful precision, responding to much scholarly debate in the twentieth century. Until then, covenant theologians were nearly unanimous in describing a covenant as a *pact* or *contract*. The reason for this was that in their most simple form, covenants involve the agreement of two or more persons. For instance, the Bible says that when Abraham and Abimelech sought to resolve the dispute of their people over one of Abraham’s wells, they entered into a covenant. Abraham gave Abimelech seven ewe lambs and Abimelech agreed to respect Abraham’s rights over the well. Genesis 21:27 says, “So Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two men made a covenant.” Therefore, the eminent 19th century scholar Charles Hodge wrote that because covenant “when used of transactions between man and man means a mutual compact”, we must give it the same sense “when used of transactions between God and man”.³

But there is a problem with using this kind of human covenant – called a *parity covenant* – to assess divine covenants, namely, that there is a fundamental difference between man’s relationship with God compared with man’s relationship with man. None of the biblical covenants are mutual compacts, in the sense of two parties working out an agreement. God’s covenants with man little resemble two businesses working out a joint venture.

In response, the definition of a covenant was taken to the other extreme by the Scottish theologian James Torrance, who insisted that a covenant is not a contract but a relationship of love.⁴ But the

¹ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), 4.

² *Ibid.*

³ Cited in David Golding, *Covenant Theology* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2004), 89.

⁴ James Torrance, ‘The Covenant Concept in Scottish Theology and Politics and its Legacy,’ *The Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 34, No. 3.

problem of this formulation is that it strips covenant of all its legal aspects, as it was intended to do. It fails to note the difference, for instance, between a wedding and a marriage. A wedding is the making of a covenant, and it is most definitely legal. What the marriage covenant does is establish and regulate the marriage relationship in terms of privileges and obligations.

In its basic form, a covenant is a *pact*. But to avoid the suggestion of a mercantile contract, Robertson uses instead the term *bond*. It involves a mutual commitment and entails a most solemn obligation. This is why biblical covenants so often include the swearing of oaths. Thus God pledged in his covenant with Abraham: “I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore” (Gen. 22:17). The Israelites swore an oath in accepting God’s covenant through Moses: “All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do” (Ex. 24:3). With this in mind, James Boice defines a covenant as “a solemn promise confirmed by an oath or sign.”⁵

A brief survey of the biblical covenants will reveal that they are not all the same. Some are covenants between men, referred to as *parity covenants*. Some of God’s covenants consist solely of his promises, without any obligation on the part of man. These are called *royal grant covenants*: the sovereign king covenants to bestow blessings out of his own grace. The covenant with Noah is the best example: “I will establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth” (Gen. 9:11). Nothing was asked of Noah; God simply promised never to send another flood. God’s covenant with Abraham was a royal grant covenant. Although this covenant certainly required Abraham’s continued faith and the circumcision of the males in his household, its basic content was God’s simple promise of grace. The Davidic covenant, in which God promised David an heir to sit on his throne forever, is another royal grant covenant.

The third kind of covenant is known as a *suzereign-vassal* covenant. It consists of the obligations imposed by a monarch on his people, with promises of blessings and threats of cursing in the case of

⁵ James M. Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1986), 6.

disobedience. The ancient world abounded in such covenants, and today's world is filled with its analog (including, perhaps, my relationship to the neighborhood owner's association). The classic biblical example is the Mosaic covenant. God gave the law to Israel, demanding their obedience and threatening their judgment in the case of disobedience. The destruction of Jerusalem and exile of the Jews into Babylon in 586 B.C. gives eloquent testimony to God's seriousness. This was the condemnation God gave Jeremiah to deliver, as the last of the prophets prior to the exile: "I solemnly warned your fathers when I brought them up out of the land of Egypt, warning them persistently, even to this day, saying, Obey my voice. Yet they did not obey" (Jer. 11:7-8).

So God's covenants include a bond – binding his people to himself with promises of blessing and obligations of obedience. But Robertson adds that a divine covenant is also a bond *in blood*. This is why the Old Testament frequently speaks of covenant-making with the term *cutting* a covenant. The point is that when God makes a covenant with man, he makes "it clear that this is no mere casual or informal relationship into which he is entering, but one which extends to the ultimate issues of life and death."⁶ We see this right at the start, in God's covenant with Adam: "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Gen. 2:16-17). We see this again in God's covenant with Abraham. God bound himself to his promise by having Abraham take a heifer, a goat, a ram, and other animals, cut them in two and divide the halves. Then Abraham saw "a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch[pass] between these pieces" (Gen. 15:17). God alone walked through the pieces, saying, in effect, "If I break my promise, let this be done to me!"

God's covenants are bonds in blood because the penalty of breaking his covenants is death. Therefore, says Hebrews 9:22, "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins." Peter Golding explains, "The shedding of life-blood provides the only satisfaction for covenant obligations incurred but not fulfilled."⁷ This gains special emphasis in the new covenant in Christ, in which Jesus offers

⁶ Golding, *Covenant Theology*, 78.

⁷ *Ibid.*

his own blood to pay the penalty for his people: “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many” (Mk. 14:24).

Lastly, God’s covenants are bonds in blood *sovereignly administered*. The point is that God does not come down and negotiate terms with mankind. As the Creator-King, he sovereignly imposes his covenants. God’s covenants may be bi-lateral in their functioning – God offering blessings on the condition of obedience – but they are all uni-lateral in their initiative. All of God’s covenants are monergistic in their origin. Covenant-making is a function of God’s lordship: God imposes covenantal obligations, the penalty for which is death and the ultimate blessing of which is eternal life.

HOW DO THE COVENANTS RELATE?

It is widely recognized that the Bible’s story of redemption is presented through the progression of God’s covenants with man. In other words, the architecture of the Bible’s message of salvation consists of God’s covenants. Therefore, a key issue in covenant theology is properly relating the Bible’s covenants to one another.

In relating the covenants, there are two main errors. The first is to overemphasize the *continuity* of the covenants. You will often see this in the use of the term, “the covenant,” or “God’s covenant,” as if there was only one covenant in the Bible. As a result, some theologians seek to shove all the Bible’s covenants into a single mold. A recent example of this was Norman Shepherd’s *The Call of Grace*, in which Shepherd highlights the implied obligations in the Bible’s royal grant covenants and highlights God’s graciousness in the suzerain-vassal covenants so that they all come out basically the same. The result of this, especially when combined with a disregard for the Bible’s distinction between law and gospel, is a fusing of faith and works in salvation and thus the corrupting of the doctrine of justification.

When speaking of God’s covenants, we must understand which one we are talking about and how we relate to them. An overemphasis on the unity of the covenants may thus have Christians approaching God as if we were Adam still in the garden or as Jews living under the law of Moses. However we understand the relationship between the Bible’s various covenants, it is essential that Christians remember that we are living under the new covenant in the blood of Christ.

A second error runs in precisely the opposite direction: an overemphasis on the *discontinuity* of the covenants. The result of this approach is to teach that God has different ways of salvation for different people. But a sound understanding of the Bible will see that there has always been only one way for sinners to be forgiven and accepted by God: through faith looking either forward to or backward on the atoning blood of Christ.

The Bible makes it perfectly clear that God's covenants are all *organically related*. For instance, when Moses arrived in Egypt to deliver the Israelites from slavery and enter them into the covenant at Mount Sinai, God told him to say, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you'" (Ex. 3:15). In other words, God sent Moses to deliver the Israelites out of faithfulness to his covenant with Abraham; indeed, God's promise to do this formed an explicit element in his promise in the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 15:13-14). Similar continuity exists between the Abrahamic covenant, the Davidic covenant, and the new covenant in Christ. This is why Zechariah the priest sang of the birth of Jesus, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David... to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham" (Lk. 1:68-69, 72-73). In other words, John the Baptist's father saw the birth of Christ as the ultimate fulfillment of God's covenants with Abraham and David. There is also direct continuity between the Mosaic covenant and the new covenant, as seen in the blood sacrifices and the Passover lamb. Hebrews 10:1 thus says the law was "a shadow of good things to come"; the light of Christ cast its shadow back into the old covenant through the ceremonial law. Likewise, there is a vital relationship between Adam and Jesus as covenant heads, as Paul emphasized in Romans 5:12-21: "If, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:17).

In general, we may relate the Bible's covenants as follows. First is God's covenant with Adam. Here was established the principle of representative or federal headship, as Adam stood for all his offspring

before God's command. With his fall came the problem of sin and death to which all the following covenants were directed. God's covenant with Noah, promising never to send another great flood, had the purpose of preserving the world until the time of Christ. Thus, Palmer Robertson labels it the "covenant of preservation."⁸ Next came God's covenant of promise with the patriarch Abraham. God promised the blessing of all nations through Abraham's seed, pledging to Abraham both a spectacular abundance of spiritual offspring and a promised land in which they would dwell (Gen. 12:2, 7; 15:5; 17:4-8; 22:17-18; Gal. 3:7-9). When God delivered Abraham's offspring from their bondage in Egypt and established the nation of Israel, he imposed the Mosaic or Sinaitic covenant. The purpose of this, Paul said, was to preserve Abraham's offspring and engage them in pedagogical training until the time of the coming of Christ (Gal. 3:19; 4:1-4). When it was evident that Israel required a righteous king to rule over them in God's name, God gave the Davidic covenant, establishing an everlasting throne and kingdom from David's line (2 Sam. 7:12-14, 16). Finally, as Paul explains, "When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Gal. 4:4-5).

In the new covenant in Christ, promised through Jeremiah amidst the ruins of fallen Jerusalem, all the earlier covenants find their fulfillment. Our need for a new Adam to fulfill righteousness on our behalf was provided through the perfect obedience of Jesus (Rom. 5:16-17). Our need for the creation not only to be preserved, as in the Noahic covenant, but fully renewed, is achieved in the new creation of his resurrection (2 Cor. 5:17). Abraham's need for a holy seed in whom all the nations would be blessed is realized in the Messiah. Christ's blood fills in the pictures of atonement in Moses' ceremonial law, and his gift of the Holy Spirit enables God's people not merely to receive the law but to obey it (Rom. 8:1-4; Heb. 8:8-12). And the Davidic covenant's need for a righteous king from David's line who will never die is achieved in the Son of David who is also the Son of God (Rom. 1:2-4). As Paul summed all this up in the glorious statement of 2 Corinthians 1:20: "For all the promises of God find

⁸ Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, 109-126.

their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory.”

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE IN COVENANT WITH GOD?

Because of this Christ-centered continuity in God’s covenants, there is an essential unity in God’s covenanting with his people. As a result, a proper understanding of God’s covenant answers the vital question of what it means to be in covenant with God. I would like to conclude by answering this in four ways.

First, to be in covenant with God is *to benefit from the covenant (or federal) representation and headship of another*. The principle of federal headship is evident throughout God’s covenant. It was because my first-father Adam represented me that I fell under the curse of death through his sin. It was to our father Noah that we received God’s promise never to destroy the world until the redeeming work of Christ was done. It was because of their relationship to Abraham, the “friend of God” (Ja. 2:23), that his offspring received God’s blessing. It was through the mediation of Moses that Israel received God’s law. And it was because David was “a man after [God’s] own heart” (1 Sam. 13:14) that Israel was granted a king and kingdom.

All of these federal heads were great in their own way. But we have a better representative in Jesus Christ, with a better ministry, a better covenant, and with better promises (Heb. 8:6). For in the end, “there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all” (1 Tim. 2:5).

Through union with Christ through faith, we benefit from the whole panorama of his saving achievement. We receive an imputed righteousness through his obedience to God’s command, unlike Adam, whose disobedience alienated us from God. He leads us into a new world no longer cursed by sin, unlike Noah, who merely led his family into the same old world from which they had come. In Christ, we enter into the realization of God’s promise to Abraham, who looked forward to “a city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Heb. 11:10). His blood cleanses us from sin in a way that the blood of bulls and goats could never do, and his gift of the Holy Spirit renews our souls so that God’s law is written not on

tablets of stone but in the tablets of our renewed hearts. With him as our covenant head, we become citizens of the eternal kingdom of glory, with the Lamb upon the throne, who purchased us with his own blood.

All these incredible benefits accrue to us, not because of what we have done but because of what he has done for us, as his new covenant fulfills all the covenants of God. Realizing this covenant message from the Bible shows us that the message of the Bible is not what sinful man must do to commend himself to God, but what God in his love has done for sinful man to reconcile us to himself.

Secondly, to be in saving covenant with God is *to be the recipient of God's oath-bound promises*. God has not only given his promises, but he has sovereignly bound himself with a covenant oath. Jeremiah Burroughs therefore counsels us: "Every time a godly man reads the Scriptures... and there meets with a promise, he ought to lay his hand upon it and say, This is part of my inheritance, it is mine, and I am to live upon it."⁹ Hebrews 6:17-19 tells us that God bound himself not to ensure his own faithfulness – which is hardly needed – but so that "we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul." Looking on God's covenant with Abraham, and realizing that it is fulfilled in Christ our mediator, we should see the firepot and torch passing through the severed animal parts and say, "This is what God says will happen to him if he should fail to fulfill any of his promises to me."

Thirdly, to be in covenant with God is also *to have received obligations from God as his people*. People become distressed over the idea of conditions to God's covenants. There certainly are conditions. Even in a promise covenant like Abraham's, the obligation of faith is more than implied. Paul taught: "Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham... So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith" (Gal. 3:7-9). The same is true of the new covenant in Christ; the New Testament could not be more explicit about the necessity of saving faith. God has sovereignly imposed his covenant in Christ not only on his own people but on the whole world: as a blessing to those who

⁹ Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth,), 82-83.

believe and a curse on those who do not believe. Jesus taught, “Whoever believes in [God’s Son] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God” (Jn. 3:18). Paul said that the gospel we witness is “the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life” (2 Cor. 2:15-16). Moreover, we must continue in faith to be saved. Paul writes, “He has now reconciled [you] in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel” (Col. 1:22-23).

But there are two important things to realize about faith as the condition of the new covenant. The first is that faith is not the *meritorious* condition of our salvation, but the *instrumental* condition. In other words, we are not saved *because of* our faith. The New Testament insists that we are saved because of God’s sovereign and free grace. “By grace you have been saved,” (Eph. 2:5). We are saved because by his sovereign grace God “chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4). But faith is the instrumental condition of salvation under Christ’s covenant. Faith is the means through which we are saved by and because of God’s grace in Christ.

Secondly, it is essential that we realize that salvation being by grace, not only are the conditions imposed upon us by God, but they are fulfilled within in by God. This was the point of St. Augustine’s staggering prayer: “Sovereign Lord, command what you will, but grant what you command.” Therefore, Paul teaches that faith must first of all be understood not as something we do but as something God does in us: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). Likewise, while we must persevere in faith in order to be saved, our perseverance flows from God’s preserving grace in our lives. Thus Paul says, “He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6). And Peter states not only that there is “an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you,” but that we “by God’s power are being guarded

through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Pet. 1:4-5).

This is why to understand the new covenant biblically is to understand the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Ezekiel foretold this, saying of the promised new covenant: “I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.” (Eze. 36:26-27). This is why Hebrews 8:10 speaks of the same new covenant: “I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

Lastly, to be in covenant with God is *to enter an eternal relationship of love with God in Christ*. Abraham was not just God’s covenant servant, but “the friend of God” (Ja. 2:23). God did not just send Abraham to live in Canaan as a pilgrim, but God went with Abraham into Canaan. When Abraham arrived there, God appeared to him, so that Abraham named the place Bethel, the house of God. God told him, “I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing” (Gen. 12:2).

How much more true is this of Jesus Christ in his covenant love for us. This is why the Bible so often speaks of our saving relationship in terms of the covenant of marriage. Paul says, “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:25-27).

There is a wonderful picture of this in the Old Testament: the love story of Ruth the Moabitess and Boaz of Bethlehem. Ruth comes to him with nothing – with no name, no heritage, no wealth, no honor – nothing except a heart turned to God in faith. And when she comes to righteous Boaz at the urging of Naomi, what does he do? He does not exploit her, but he spreads his own garment over her to cover her, to provide for her, and to be her redeemer with his own coin. And having redeemed her, he joins with her in the intimate purity of marital love. That is a picture of Christ’s covenant love for us.

Of course, there is a New Testament picture of the same. And with the most glorious significance it comes at the very end of the Bible. For while the new covenant is the last covenant of the Bible, its fulfillment and realization is not seen until the very end. “And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will wipe away every tear from their eyes’” (Rev. 21:2-3).

This is why I love to preach on the covenants of God during wedding services. I love to point out that while the bride radiates with such beauty, dressed just this one day in the spotless purity of the wedding gown, that God in Christ sees us like this every day. He has spread his garment over us in love, the perfect righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ. Do you realize that this is how God sees you every day of your life in Christ – perfect and spotless in the righteousness he has bestowed upon you?

But most favorite to me is the moment when I stand beside the bridegroom and the door at the rear of the church is opened. His bride in white is revealed, and she comes to give herself to him. I never fail to see my own beloved wife, and to remember her coming down that aisle to me, because it was the most joyful moment of my life. And I love to steal a look out the corner of my eye at the face of the bridegroom standing next to me. It never fails to hold an expression of rapturous wonder and delight. She is the most beautiful thing he has ever seen. And I remember that this is the delight with which my covenant Lord looks upon me, according to the promise of his Word. Isaiah says, “As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you” (Isa. 62:5). “He will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing” (Zeph. 3:17). And he says to me now, along with all his church, in the covenant declared in his Word: “I will be your God, and you will be my people.”