

COVENANT THEOLOGY

Introduction

Within historical Reformed Christian systems of thought, Covenant Theology is not merely treated as a point of doctrine, neither is it treated as a central dogma. Rather, Covenants are viewed as *the structure by which the Biblical text organizes itself*. Covenant Theology is often referred to as “Replacement Theology” by its **detractors**; describing the view that the Church replaces Israel, particularly with regard to Old Testament promises. Covenant theologians **deny** that God has abandoned his promises to Israel, but see the fulfillment of the promises to Israel, particularly, in the person and the work of the Messiah, Jesus Christ of Nazareth, who established the Church in organic continuity with Israel, not a separate replacement entity. In its simplest form, Covenants describe *the nature of the relationship between the one true God and his people* (both individually and corporately).

What are the differences between Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology?

Dispensationalism is pessimistic in that God fails in every dispensation; their outline is imposed on the Scriptures and cannot be derived purely by a reading of the Word itself; Dispensationalism cannot agree how many dispensations there even are; Dispensationalism sees only *complete discontinuity* between the New Covenant and all other dispensations with the exception of the Noahic covenant (no justification as to why this alone transcends the dispensation). *Sadly similar to the Marcionite heresy!*

On the other hand, Covenant Theology is positive in that the thread of Redemption runs through all Covenants and God is victorious in all His purposes. Covenant Theology recognizes *the unity and disunity* that runs through the different Covenants (ex. Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic) to the New Covenant. Covenant Theology is scripturally derived by great Bible students from the text itself. Covenant theology recognizes the *eternal character of God’s dealings with man* and His ultimate victory through His Son, Jesus Christ.

An outline of the Covenant

Scholars have found the Bible’s covenants were consistent with Middle Eastern *Suzerainty Treaties*, therefore God’s Word had a sense of familiarity to those who first received it. One helpful outline for Covenants is the Mnemonic, THEOS, which is the Greek word for God. It describes the following aspects of the Covenant:

- T:** Transcendence (The greatness of the Covenant maker)
- H:** Hierarchy (How the Covenant will be administered)
- E:** Ethics (The Conduct required by the Covenant)
- O:** Oath (The Sanctions, positive and negative, for conduct)
- S:** Succession (The continuance of the Covenant)

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See if you can find these elements in such segments as the Creation Account, the Abrahamic Covenant, Deuteronomy 6 and even the Great Commission as you read God's Word.

References:

Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter Seven (but woven throughout the work! - js)

The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant. WCF 7.1. [emphasis added - js]

Vos, Geerhardus, "The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology." In *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*. Edited by Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., 234-267. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980.

Introducing Covenant Theology - Michael Horton, Baker Books, 2006

The Christ of the Covenants - O. Palmer Robertson, P&R, 1980

One would need an entire book just to list all of the works on Covenant Theology. Just think of any great reformed writer/theologian, and they've written on it!

Dispensational Schemes Compared						
Darby	Ryrie	Grey	Scofield	Larkin	Thieme	Willmington
1 Noahic (Government)	1 Paradisaical	1 Edenic	1 Innocency	1 Edenic	1 Gentiles	1 Innocence
2 Abrahamic	2 Noah	2 Antediluvian	2 Conscience	2 Anti Diluvian	2 Israel	2 Conscience
3 Israel (law, priesthood, kings)	3 Abraham	3 Patriarchal	3 Human Government	3 Post Diluvian	3 Church	3 Civil Government
4 Gentiles	Israel (law, priesthood, kings)	4 Mosaic	4 Promise	4 Patriarchal	4 Millennial	4 Promise
5 Church, Spirit, Christian, Gentile, Church, Present ⁽¹³⁾	5 Gentiles	5 Church	5 Law	5 Legal		5 Mosaic Law
6. Millennium	6 Spirit	6 Millennial	6 Grace	6 Ecclesiastical		6 Church
	7 Millennium	7 Fullness of times	7 Kingdom	7 Millennial		7 Tribulation
		8 Eternal		8 Perfection		8 Millennium
						9 New Creation
John Nelson Darby. See articles: The Apostasy of the Successive Dispensations and Darby's Original Dispensational Scheme	Charles C. Ryrie, <i>Dispensationalism</i>, pp. 68, 71. (his version of Darby's scheme)	Dr James M. Grey was one of the editors of the <i>Scofield Bible</i> . Note the difference in names (and number) from the Scofield scheme.	C. I. Scofield, <i>Scofield Reference Bible</i> (1917 Edition) Lewis Sperry Chafer held to essentially the same scheme. See another variation at 7dispensations.org	Clarence Larkin (see chart)	Robert Thieme taped lectures <i>Basic Training</i> (c. 1968). See chart of Thieme's dispensational scheme	Harold L. Willmington, <i>Willmington's Bible Handbook</i>
Notes: 1. The Church age is variously stated to be either the 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, or 9th dispensation ⁽¹⁴⁾ ! What utter confusion for such a 'distinguishable' doctrinal scheme so 'clearly' taught in Scripture! 2. One commentator even proposes two 'Mosaic dispensations', one before the Church age and one after.						

In spite of Scofield's popular seven dispensational scheme the number and names of the dispensations is still a confusing issue. I have seen schemes for few as three to as many as [five](#), [seven](#) (E.W. Bullinger, Scofield, etc), [nine](#) (Finis Dake), [twelve](#) (A. E. Koch), [fourteen](#), and [eighteen](#) (C. H. Welch). Concerning the number of dispensations one website author opines

"How many dispensations are there? It all depends how finely you look at the issue - the more detailed your criteria for defining a dispensation, the more you get.....My own feeling is that *seven dispensations seems about right*". 'It all depends...seems about right' shows the writer, like others, just do not know for sure! And why the confusion? The fact is that dispensationalism is a scheme imposed upon the Scriptures rather than a clear teaching based on Scripture. If it were taught in Scripture there would be no confusion about the number and names of the dispensations.

From 'How Many Dispensations?' by Ed F. Sanders

“Covenant” is used in the Bible 289 times directly. In the King James version the word - covenant - appears 292 times; the word - covenantbreakers - appears once; the word - covenanted - appears 4 times; the word - covenants - appears 3 times. While The word oikonomia (**dispensation**) appears only nine times and in the New Testament, alone. (from Answers.com)

Covenant theology is a system of interpreting the Scriptures on the basis of two covenants: **the covenant of works and the covenant of grace**. Some covenant theologians specify three covenants: **works, redemption, and grace**.

In form, a covenant is an agreement between two people and involves promises on the part of each to the other. The concept of a covenant between God and His people is one of the central themes of the Bible. In the Biblical sense, a covenant implies much more than a contract or a simple agreement between two parties.

The word for "covenant" in the Old Testament also provides additional insight into the meaning of this important idea. It comes from a Hebrew root word that means "to cut." This explains the strange custom of two people passing through the cut bodies of slain animals after making an agreement (cf. Jer. 34:18). A ceremony such as this always accompanied the making of a covenant in the Old Testament. Sometimes those entering into a covenant shared a meal, such as when Laban and Jacob made their covenant (Gen. 31:54).

Abraham and his children were commanded to be circumcised as a "sign of covenant" between them and God (Gen. 17:10-11). At Sinai, Moses sprinkled the blood of animals on the altar and upon the people who entered into covenant with God (Ex. 24:3-8). The Old Testament contains many examples of covenants between people who related to each other as equals. For example, David and Jonathan entered into a covenant because of their love for each other -- this agreement bound each of them to certain responsibilities (1Sam. 18:3).

The remarkable thing is that God is holy, omniscient, and omnipotent; but He consents to enter into covenant with man, who is feeble, sinful, and flawed.