

## Covenant and the Unity of Scripture

John M. Frame

Prof. of Apologetics and Systematic Theology  
Westminster Theological Seminary in California

Reformed theologians have commonly found in the covenant motif a helpful way to show forth the unity of the Bible. Traditionally, these writers have found in Scripture two major covenants, sometimes called the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. The former embraces the pre-fall period. In it God offers an eternal life of blessedness (symbolized by the tree of life) to Adam and Eve on the condition that they abstain from the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. After the fall into sin, God sets forth the covenant of grace: a promise of redemption through the divine messiah received through faith alone.

The covenant of grace, in turn, encompasses, on the traditional view, all the post-fall historical covenants including those with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and the "New Covenant" effected by the blood of Jesus himself, of which the earlier covenants are but anticipations.

On this understanding, the whole Bible, diverse in content as it may appear at first sight, can be seen as a story of God making covenants and man responding to them. The books of law show what God expects of his covenant people. The books of history indicate man's actual response. The Psalms contain the praise, the laments, the questionings, the blessings and cursings which should be on the lips of a covenant people. The wisdom books contain applications of the covenant law to human problems. The prophets bring God's covenant lawsuit against the covenant breakers while at the same time promising covenant renewal. The Gospels and Acts present the history of the New Covenant, which is applied to believers and to world history in the epistles and Revelation.

Recently, Meredith G. Kline has made some significant additions to our knowledge of the nature of biblical covenants. In his *Treaty of the Great King*<sup>1</sup> and especially in his *The Structure of Biblical Authority*<sup>2</sup> he has noted some important relations between covenants and the nature of the Bible.

His view is that "covenant" in Scripture often refers to a specific literary form common in the ancient near east, of which a number of extra-biblical examples (especially from the Hittite culture) are extant. Covenants between Yahweh and Israel, says Kline, are most closely analogous to the Hittite "suzerainty treaties" of the second millennium, B. C. These are treaties between a

---

<sup>1</sup> Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963.

<sup>2</sup> Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972.

great king and a lesser king, and they have a fairly standard form consisting of the following elements:

- A. Name of the Great King
- B. Historical Prologue
- C. Stipulations (Laws)
  - 1. Exclusive loyalty (=love)
  - 2. Specific requirements
- D. Sanctions (Blessings and Curses)
- E. Administration

Kline finds this literary form in the decalogue (Ex. 20:1-17), and he identifies the Book of Deuteronomy as a whole as a suzerainty treaty between Yahweh and Israel.

Section A makes clear that the great king, not the vassal, is the author of the document, and that its provisions are his own will. So Yahweh in Ex. 20:2 announces, "I am Yahweh your God." Note also the emphasis on the divine authorship (even divine publication!) of the document in Ex. 24:12, 31:18, 32:15f, 34:1, 27f, 32, Deut. 4:13, 9:10f, 10:2-4.

Section B indicates the previous benefits conferred upon the vassal by the suzerain: "who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery."

Section C shows how the suzerain expects the vassal to respond to these benefits: "You shall have no other gods before me," etc. The First of the Ten Commandments is a love commandment; for "love" was the term used for the kind of exclusive covenant loyalty required in the covenant law. This is followed by various specific commandments spelling out how one should behave if he is exclusively loyal to Yahweh.

Section D indicates the consequences of obedience (blessing) or disobedience (curse). In the decalogue, these are not put into a separate section (although they are in Deuteronomy: see chapters 27, 28), but are found in and with other commandments, curses in the Second and Third, blessings in the Fifth. Note that one's good standing in the covenant relation depends on his obedience or disobedience to the written covenant document.

Section E indicates how the covenant is to be administered. Copies of the covenant document are to be placed in the religious sanctuaries of suzerain and vassal (cf. Deut. 31:26), there is provision for periodic public reading (31:9-13), there are rules of dynastic succession (31:1-8). The covenant document stands as a witness: not man's fallible witness concerning God, but God's infallible witness *against* his disobedient people (31:26). Again, the emphasis is on the divine authority of the document.

Here we find the first clear scriptural references to a written document divinely authored, which because of its divine authorship bears full divine authority. Not surprisingly, Kline finds here the origin of the idea of an authoritative canon. Seen in this way, the concept of an authoritative written word of God does not begin with twentieth century fundamentalism, nor seventeenth century orthodoxy, nor medieval scholasticism, nor post-apostolic defensiveness, nor late Jewish legalism. Rather, it is embedded in the original constitution of the people of God and is assumed throughout Scripture.

Kline holds that the original covenant document, the Ten Commandments, written by the finger of God (Ex. 31:18, 32:16) on two tables of stone, is the seed of the biblical canon. Additional writings were added to the covenant document as history progressed (see Josh. 24:25f). These described the history of Israel's response to the covenant (Gen.- Esther), the covenant servant's praises, laments, questions (Psalms), covenantal wisdom (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs). The prophetic books describe, as we saw earlier, God's covenant lawsuit and promises of covenant renewal. Kline offers a similar analysis of the New Testament which, nevertheless, he regards as a new and separate canon directing a "new" covenant.

This covenantal model of canonicity is enormously helpful in dealing with questions concerning biblical authority, infallibility and inerrancy. On this model, God is the ultimate author of Scripture,<sup>3</sup> and we vassals have no right to find fault with that document; rather we are to be subject to it in all our thought and life.

What I would like to do now is to show that Kline's thesis is also helpful to our understanding of the *unity* of Scripture. Let us assume for now that Kline's model is correct; those who have doubts may pursue his arguments for themselves. And then let us ask what that model implies with regard to the unity of the biblical text.

The treaty form, as described above, is certainly a diversity-in-unity. It is a single document, with a single purpose, to govern a vassal people in the name of a Great King. Yet to accomplish this single purpose, five different sections are necessary, as we have seen. These five sections define five types of revelation found within Scripture:

- A. Revelation of the name of God
- B. Revelation of God's mighty acts in history
- C. Revelation of God's law
  - 1. Love
  - 2. Specific requirements
- D. Revelation of God's continuing presence to  
bless and curse

---

<sup>3</sup> But meaningful human participation in the production of Scripture is by no means excluded; see Ex. 34:27f in comparison with verse 1.

E. Revelation of God's institutional provisions:  
 Scripture, church, sacraments, discipline,  
 etc.

Name-revelation (A) is an important form of revelation in Scripture. In a narrow sense, we may think of God's names as the various words used to designate him: *Yahweh*, *Elohim*, *Adon*, *Theos*, etc. Those names are an important aspect of scriptural revelation. Dramatically, God appears to Abram and says "I am God Almighty *El Shaddai*; walk before me and be blameless" (Gen. 17:1). Inaugurating another era of revelation, God comes to Moses in the burning bush and declares his name to be "I am that I am" (Ex. 3:14) and *Yahweh* (verse 15, evidently related in some fashion to the verb "to be;" cf. Chapter 6:1-3). God performs his mighty acts "that they may know that I am Yahweh," Ex. 14:18, I Kings 8:43, Psm. 9:10, 83:18, 91:14, Isa. 43:3, 52:6, Jer. 16:21, 33:2, Amos 5:8. As *El Shaddai* marked God's covenant relation with Abraham, so *Yahweh* marks the covenant relation between God and the nation Israel. All of God's mighty acts he performs in order to proclaim, display, and advance that covenant relation. In the New Covenant, it is the name of Jesus into which people are to be baptized (Acts 2:38), in which we trust (I John 3:23), through which we are to pray to God (John 16:23f), and in which we perform all our labors (Col. 3:17).

God's names also have meaning. *Yahweh*, for instance, connotes God's sovereign control over the world, his ultimate authority to determine standards for intelligent beings, and his covenant solidarity and presence with his people.<sup>4</sup> When God reveals himself as *Yahweh*, he stresses those elements of his character.

In a still broader sense, God's "name" (*shem* or *onoma*, without a proper name) is a way of referring to God himself in all his self-revelation; cf. Josh. 7:9, Ezek. 20:9. In this respect it is a near synonym of the "word of God." To praise the name of God is to praise him; to dishonor the name is to dishonor him. Note the unity between the name of God and God himself in passages such as Ex. 33:19, 34:6f, Psm. 7:17, 9:10, 18:49, 68:4, 74:18, 86:12, 92:11, Isa. 25:1, 26:8, 56:6, Zech. 14:9, Mal. 3:16.

The second form of revelation (B) is also prominent in Scripture. Scripture may be called the story of God's mighty deeds performed for the salvation of his people. Whether called "signs," "wonders," or "mighty acts," God does amazing works to accomplish the redemption of his people and the judgment of the wicked, from the flood of Genesis 6-9 to the final judgment. In the biblical history, especially important roles are given to the deliverance of Israel from Egypt and to the greatest miracle, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. This is, essentially, the message of God's grace. It tells us what God has

---

<sup>4</sup> See my *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, N. J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), 15ff. I expect to argue these points in more detail in my forthcoming *Doctrine of God*.

done for his people; it enumerates his free gifts. It includes all of what is called redemptive history, but also creation and providence: Psm. 136:4, 25, 145:4-6, 12, Psm. 104.

Law-revelation (C) is also important within Scripture. The *torah* is the heart of the Old Covenant, giving instruction in God's standards, which are invoked throughout the Old Testament. Throughout the historical, poetic, wisdom and prophetic books, God calls his people back to obey his commandments. The written *torah* is that law in which the righteous man meditates day and night (Psm. 1:2); it is the law which is "perfect, restoring the soul" (Psm. 19:7). It is the word of God to which praises are sung in Psm. 56:4, 10, 119:161f, etc.

Jesus also comes bringing commandments which his disciples are to obey. Though rejecting the attempt to save oneself by keeping the law, the New Testament nevertheless stresses our obligation to keep the commandments of Jesus: Matt. 7:21ff, 28f, Mark 8:38, Luke 9:26ff, 8:21, John 8:47, 12:47ff, 14:15, 21, 23f, 15:7, 10, 14, 17:6, 17, I Tim. 6:3, I John 2:3-5, 3:22, 5:2f, II John 6, Rev. 12:17, 14:12.

Sanction revelation (D) can also be found throughout Scripture. God's covenants are two-edged. Those who are faithful to the covenant receive blessings; those who are not faithful receive curse. Many in Israel falsely trusted in their covenant membership, as if being children of Yahweh they could sin with impunity. But God responded to them with devastation and exile, preserving the faithful remnant. In time it becomes evident that only Jesus is the perfectly faithful remnant. He bears the curse for his people-- for all who are joined to him by God's election (Gal. 3:13, Eph. 1:4). Yet even under the New Covenant there are those who attach themselves to God's church who later prove to be devoid of true faith and outside of God's electing love. Those receive exceptionally severe curses as those who rebelled against Christ in the face of intimate knowledge (Heb. 6:4-6, 10:26-31). Biblical writers never tire of presenting the enormous consequences of faith or unbelief: the rewards coming to God's people, the dreadful judgments upon the wicked.

Finally, Scripture is also concerned with the continuing life of God's people, with those arrangements (E) by which the word of God is preserved and applied to each generation. The original covenant document was placed by the ark of the covenant, the holiest place among the people of God. It was, as we have seen, to be read publicly from time to time. God established prophet, priest and king to rule his people according to his word. In the New Covenant, Jesus fulfills these offices; but he too is concerned that his church be built on a firm foundation (Matt. 16:18ff). He appoints the apostles to remember his words (John 14:26) and to convey new truth from the spirit (John 15:26, 16:13). The apostles, in turn, establish the offices of elder and deacon (Acts 6:1ff, I Tim. 3:1ff, etc.)

Therefore, even if we have reservations about Kline's thesis that the Scripture historically developed from the original covenant document, we must admit that the five major elements of the covenant form each represent an important aspect of biblical revelation.

Now we ask our main question: How do these covenant elements testify to the unity of Scripture? My threefold answer: by their pervasiveness, their mutual complementarity, and their perspectival relationship. Let me expound each of these in turn.

## 1. Pervasiveness

First, each of these covenantal themes is fundamental to all parts of Scripture, as should be evident from the above survey. The five forms of covenantal revelation are equally at home in Old and New Testaments, in books of history and books of prophecy, in gospels and epistles, in apocalyptic.

The one area where a question might arise is the wisdom literature. Certainly the "name" (A) and the "mighty acts" (B) of God are not common themes of these books, at least in so many words. However, the fundamental premise of the Book of Proverbs is that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (1:7; cf. 9:10, Psm. 111:10, 112:1). The wisdom to be gained in Proverbs begins with covenant faithfulness to the Lord. Thus this literature presupposes, though it does not verbally emphasize, the covenant relationship. Certainly its teaching can be seen to spring from the covenant law (C). Ecclesiastes concludes that to fear God and keep his commandments is the whole duty of man (12:13f), thus echoing the connection between keeping the law and wisdom found in Deut. 4:6. The consequences of obedience and disobedience (D) are well illustrated in the wisdom books, and these books are themselves part of the structure (E) by which the covenant law is passed down and applied from generation to generation (cf. Prov. 1:8).<sup>5</sup>

Thus the covenant consciousness pervades the Scriptures. Each of the five themes ties Scripture together, as each part of the Bible seeks to advance that theme. Despite Scripture's diversity of authorship, style, and specific interest, all parts of it are united by its strong covenant interest.

## 2. Complementarity

The pervasiveness of these covenant themes, however, would not be conducive to the unity of Scripture if the themes themselves were inconsistent

---

<sup>5</sup> Compare Kline's larger discussion of the wisdom literature in *Structure*, 64-67.

with one another. Are the five elements of the covenant complementary, or do they present to us different concepts of God, of his works, of salvation, of the believer's life?

Within the covenant model, there is no evident tension. The name of the Lord (A) is the name of the one who performs the mighty works (B), lays down the law (C), executes the sanctions (D), establishes the institutions (E). The mighty works of the historical prologue present a strong motivation for the loyalty demanded in the law and a reason for the severity of the sanctions. The law itself must have teeth; thus it requires sanctions. And a people cannot truly be "under" law unless there are institutional ways in which the law can be preserved, taught, enforced. Thus the different parts of the covenant reinforce one another.

The consistency of these covenant elements is sharply at odds with the picture of Scripture found in many forms of modern theology. Typically, the various schools of liberal theology find in the Bible many discordant elements, which cannot be reconciled or fit together in a single theological system. Thus the theologian thinks he is forced to choose some of those motifs to use in his own theology and to discard (or de-emphasize) others. There is necessarily a certain arbitrariness in this procedure, though of course these theologians typically claim that they have chosen those motifs most fundamental to Scripture itself. Yet among these theologians there is wide disparity over which themes are affirmed and which ones discarded, which ones are considered central and which ones are relegated to the periphery. Thus we have had in our time a great number of "theologies of" this or that: the word of God, crisis, personal encounter, history, love, hope, being, process, etc. Each of these appeals to some *aspect* of Scripture, maintaining that other aspects are either to be ignored or to be minimized. Consider some examples:

(a) Person and Proposition: In modern theology, especially the personalism of Martin Buber<sup>6</sup> and Emil Brunner<sup>7</sup> there is often a sharp opposition between the revelation of a person and the revelation of propositions or information. As John Baillie puts it, in the New Testament, "the content of revelation is not a body of information or of doctrine. (Rather...) what is revealed is God Himself."<sup>8</sup> We certainly cannot doubt that God through Scripture reveals himself as a person.<sup>9</sup> But must we choose between person-revelation

---

<sup>6</sup> *I and Thou* (N. Y.: Scribner's, 1958).

<sup>7</sup> Especially in *Truth As Encounter* (Phila.: Westminster Press, 1964).

<sup>8</sup> Baillie, *The Idea of Revelation in Recent Thought* (N. Y.: Columbia University Press, 1964), 60.

<sup>9</sup> However, F. Gerald Downing argues in *Has Christianity a Revelation?* (London: SCM Press, 1964) that this is not the case, that we cannot say that God in Scripture reveals "himself." Downing's argument is not cogent in my opinion, but it is interesting in that it shows how one can, with some plausibility, argue for theological choices quite different from those of Buber, Brunner and Baillie.

and propositional revelation? Granting the first, must we deny the second? Baillie assumes that we do.<sup>10</sup>

The covenant form, however, presents us with a model of revelation which is both highly personal and highly propositional. God reveals his name, which is virtually equivalent to himself. He authors the entire treaty, revealing himself throughout its pages. He communicates love, by revealing his past blessings and by promising future ones to those who are faithful. He speaks intimately to his people.<sup>11</sup> He promises that he will be personally involved with his people to bless, to punish and to chastize.

At the same time, the covenant is propositional. It is a document containing words and sentences. It functions as a legal constitution for God's people. It is to be kept, passed on, from generation to generation (Deut. 6:4ff, Jude 3). It contains information as to God's name, his mighty deeds, his will for our lives, his sanctions and his established institutions.

In the light of the covenant model, surely the burden of proof is on the modern theologian to tell us why we must place personal and propositional revelation in sharp opposition to one another. Or perhaps they should admit that their theological construction is simply a capitulation to the demands of "historical-critical" scholarship, setting the scholar free to find fault with biblical propositions as long as some vague "person-revelation" still shines through. But to do that is to rebel against God's requirements for human thinking (II Cor. 10:5).<sup>12</sup>

(b) Act and Word: It was once fashionable among modern theologians to emphasize very strongly that God reveals himself in *events* (acts, deeds, etc.) rather than in words (propositions!) about those events. That sort of contrast can be found in Barth<sup>13</sup> and Brunner, as was the last. Baillie also<sup>14</sup> assumes this dichotomy, as he did the last. But one wonders, then, how revelation can be both "person" and "event," and why we don't have to choose between *them*. Baillie gives very little indication of how "person" and "event" are related in the evidently complex reality called revelation.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> So far as I can tell, he offers no argument to prove that the person/proposition distinction is an exclusive disjunction. Brunner does, saying information about one of the parties detracts from the personal character of a relationship. But I find that utterly implausible.

<sup>11</sup> In the decalogue, God addresses Israel as if the nation were one person: *thou!*

<sup>12</sup> See my *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*.

<sup>13</sup> whose concept of "event" is, however, quite idiosyncratic.

<sup>14</sup> Op. cit., 62-82.

<sup>15</sup> Gordon Kaufman, in his *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* (N. Y.: Scribner's, 1968) actually describes Christ as a "person-event," but that idea remains as obscure in his thought as in Baillie's. See my review of Kaufman's book in the *Westminster Theological Journal* 32:1 (November, 1969), 119-124.

Somewhat more consistent was the proposal of G. Ernest Wright<sup>16</sup> that God reveals himself only in events interpreted through the eyes of faith. Events, not propositions; again, that was the contrast. James Barr, however, certainly a man with no sympathies for fundamentalism, refuted Wright's thesis with the obvious point that in the scriptural narrative God reveals himself not only by doing things but also by speaking directly to man.<sup>17</sup> Barr added that we may wish, as modern people, to reject the idea of direct speech from God to man; but in all honesty we should not pretend that that idea is absent from the Bible itself.

On the covenantal model, there is no opposition between God's acts and God's words. Both exist harmoniously in the treaty form. The whole document consists of God's words. But among those words are words which tell of God's mighty acts. These accounts of God's acts are not, as on Wright's view, the stumbling attempts of human beings to interpret their experiences (cf. II Pet. 1:20); they are rather God's own descriptions and interpretations of what he has done. Modern man may, like Barr, resist the possibility of such divinely formulated interpretation; but in doing so he resists the very notion of a sovereign God who can do what he wishes in and with his creation.

(c) Grace and Law: Not only among modern liberal theologians, but also throughout the history of Christianity there has been disagreement over the precise relation between grace and law. Because of certain expressions in the New Testament referring negatively to law, there has been a tendency in theology to radically oppose grace and law, even to remove law from any positive function in the Christian life.<sup>18</sup> This tendency has in my view been reinforced in the modern period by the craving for absolute autonomy expressed by modern philosophers and literary writers. Even among evangelicals there is now a substantial controversy as to whether salvation involves a commitment to obey Jesus as Lord, or whether such a commitment takes place some time after salvation, at the point when one becomes a "disciple."

Orthodox Reformed theology has traditionally avoided the sharp opposition between grace and law found in other traditions (e.g. Lutheran, Dispensationalist). While acknowledging that salvation is by the grace of God and not by any good works of man, Reformed theology has had no trouble saying that from the beginning of the Christian life we are obligated (indeed, privileged) to live according to God's law. It is grace alone that saves, but the grace that saves is never alone (cf. James 2:14-26).

The covenant model vindicates this Reformed understanding of the relation between grace and law. God proclaims his grace in section (B). This is

---

<sup>16</sup> Wright, *God Who Acts* (London: SCM Press, 1952); Wright and Reginald H. Fuller, *The Book of the Acts of God* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1957).

<sup>17</sup> Barr, *Old and New in Interpretation* (London: SCM Press, 1966).

<sup>18</sup> This sort of controversy may have existed during the New Testament period itself; certainly it was a major element in the second century controversy over the views of Marcion.

unmerited favor. He did not choose Israel because they were more numerous than other peoples, but simply because he loved them (Deut. 7:7; cf. 4:37, 10:15). But at the same time, Israel from the very beginning of its existence is to obey God's law (C). Similarly, Jesus makes clear that although salvation is by the free gift of the Father (John 6:65), believers are expected from the very beginning to obey him (14:21-24), so that keeping his words is the test of covenant faithfulness. And, indeed, obeying Jesus brings more grace, more blessing (D). Grace and law are harmonious. They become antagonistic only when someone tries to save himself by his own works.

Indeed, the covenant message of grace (B) is already understood to be the word of the Lord (A). There is no separation here between Lordship and salvation. It is the Lord who accomplishes salvation (Cf. Jonah 2:9). Only the Lord has the requisite authority and power to save his people. To confess trust in God's salvation is at the same time to acknowledge him as Yahweh, the Lord. Similarly in Rom. 10:9, 10, confession of Jesus' resurrection is inseparable from the heart belief that "Jesus is Lord."

(d) Love and Law: The antagonism in modern theology between love and law goes back at least to Schleiermacher.<sup>19</sup> Emil Brunner<sup>20</sup> and Joseph Fletcher<sup>21</sup> are among many well-known theological ethicists of our own century who have urged an ethic of love without any absolute divine legal standards. Surely Scripture puts love in first place as the distinguishing mark of the Christian (John 13:35). But (modern theologians to the contrary) in Scripture the love mandate is part of the law.<sup>22</sup> And Jesus says over and over that if we love him we will keep his commandments (John 14:15, 21, 23f, 15:7, 10, 14; cf. I John 2:3-6, 5:2f, II John 6).

Modern theologians assume too readily that since love and law are not perfectly synonymous, one must take precedence over the other in the Christian life. They assume that the two must conflict with one another at some point. But why should we make that assumption? Is that not a fundamentally atheistic assumption? For if God exists, he is certainly able to create a world in which love and law both dictate precisely the same ethic.

Such assumptions are radically negated by the covenant model. The love command is the first stipulation (C, 1), while what we normally think of as "law" (C, 2) follows that first stipulation. They are together in the body of stipulations, indicating that they are not to be considered antagonistic toward one another. Indeed, the message we receive from the structural arrangement is that love is the general, law the particular. Love is that whole-souled, exclusive loyalty

<sup>19</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (N. Y.: Harper and Row, 1963).

<sup>20</sup> Brunner, *The Divine Imperative* (Phila.: Westminster Press, 1947).

<sup>21</sup> Fletcher, *Situation Ethics* (Phila.: Westminster Press, 1966).

<sup>22</sup> When Jesus cites the two great commandments of loving God and neighbor, he quotes Deut. 6:5 and Lev. 19:18 from the Mosaic law (Matt. 22:37-40).

we owe to our Great King, while the detailed stipulations show us the practical, detailed outworkings of that covenant loyalty. If we love God exclusively, then we will not worship idols, take his name in vain, etc. The details spell out the meaning of love, rather than presenting an alternative ethic which we may or may not wish to choose.

(e) Redemptive Focus and Comprehensive Application: Much has been written in recent years about the "purpose" of Scripture and how that purpose affects the reliability, inerrancy, sufficiency of Scripture.<sup>23</sup> Many have argued that the purpose of Scripture is to present a message of redemption and therefore not to teach us anything of interest to (e.g.) science, history, or philosophy as such. Therefore if there are errors in the details of biblical history, e.g., those do not affect the reliability of Scripture which is only to give us a redemptive message.

This issue is also relevant to those who maintain that "redemptive history" should be the chief or only subject-matter of biblical preaching, as opposed to ethical principles, apologetic defenses of biblical reliability, etc.

There is no doubt that the covenant is redemptive in its thrust. The historical prologue (B) is a message of redemption. It tells of God's grace in redeeming his people from the realm of sin and death. But to proclaim the covenant is not merely to inform people of those redemptive facts. Rather, to proclaim the covenant is to proclaim it in toto: the message of grace together with the obligations which constitute our thanksgiving for grace (C), the consequences of obedience and disobedience (D) and the institutional, social structure which God has planted on earth (E). Further, those obligations are comprehensive: the love commandment requires a radical re-orientation of life so that all things are done to God's glory (Deut. 6:4f; cf. I Cor. 10:31, Rom. 14:23, Col. 3:17, 24). That includes all aspects of life including history, science, philosophy. All human work must be done out of faith, presupposing, embracing all that God has told us in his word.

So the covenant is redemptive, but not in any narrow sense; not in any sense that forbids God to speak to us on certain subjects. Even more fundamental to the covenant than the emphasis on redemption is the declaration of God's Lordship (A). And that Lordship is absolutely comprehensive.

I would offer a similar response to the related question of whether revelation consists of "events" or of "timeless truths" (see also (b) above). God's Lordship itself is certainly eternal; but the application of that Lordship to our situation is of course conditioned on our history. Our relation to God depends on how in history we have responded to him; and further revelation always presupposes these events. His covenant law is a reflection of his eternal

---

<sup>23</sup> Some examples: G. C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), Dewey Beegle, *The Inspiration of Scripture* (Phila.: Westminster Press, 1963), Jack Rogers and Donald McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979).

character; but it also relates that eternal character to the concrete situation of God's people. And although God is changeless, the specific applications of his law do change from one situation to another.

(f) Judgment and Blessing: Nineteenth century liberalism uniformly disparaged the idea of divine judgment. Barth and Brunner restored the discussion of judgment to centrality (as did, in a different way, the consistent eschatological school of Weiss and Schweitzer and the recent theologians of hope and liberation). But even this more recent theology regards judgment either as a mere symbol or as an event fully or largely overcome by grace.

We all wonder, of course, how a God of love can send people to Hell. It is not wrong to rethink this matter from time to time. What the covenant structure reminds us is that God is a God of both justice and blessing and that neither of these is to be compromised. If we do not understand completely how grace and retribution can coexist, we must accept both on faith, trusting that God knows better than we what is truly just and what constitutes mercy.

(g) God's Word and Man's Response: Much has been written about the relation between revelation and the human response to revelation. Most theologians since Schleiermacher have said that revelation does not exist without human response, for only when man responds is there true communication. Indeed, that response must be one of faith, or else the communication has not been properly received. Since revelation according to these theologians is nonpropositional, it is virtually defined by them as that event in which faith is aroused.

Conservatives have objected that in Scripture itself "revelation" is used in various senses. Certainly there is one sense in which revelation is inseparable from response; that is the sense in which revelation is defined as individual illumination, as in Gal. 1:16, Eph. 1:17, Phil. 3:15, and, I believe, also in Matt. 11:25-27. However, this is not the same sense in which "revelation" is used, e.g., in Rom. 1:18; for there revelation is given precisely to those *without* faith so as to leave them without excuse. Further, "revelation," with its apocalyptic connotations is not the only, or the standard term used for divine-human communication in Scripture. Much more common is the phrase "word of God" which, of course, applies to publicly written documents as well as to divine communication with prophets, and which never (so far as I can see) refers to inward illumination. Even more obviously does this argument apply to terms like "law," "statutes," "testimonies," etc.

The confusions over this point are linked to the widespread ignorance and neglect of the covenantal model. For within the covenant there is a clear relation between divine revelation and human response. God is the author of the covenant document and identifies himself as such (A). The history,

laws, sanctions and administrative ordinances are by his authorship. But the covenant *requires* a response by the vassals (D), and the nature of that response will lead to curse or blessing. Further, in the ratification of the covenant, the vassal takes an oath, agreeing to the treaty conditions (cf. Deut. 27:12-28:68). And future covenants will record the enacting of blessing and curse sanctions as prologue to the New Covenant.

Such is the fundamental relation, in Scripture, between divine revelation and human response. Of course, just as the curse sanctions of the covenant are borne by Jesus on behalf of God's elect, so the elect also receive a special kind of revelation: a communication of the spirit eliciting faith. All of this happens by God's grace. Thus there is more than one kind of revelation within the covenant. The actual publication of the covenant document is available to all who can read or hear. But inward illumination is only for those whom God has united to Christ by grace.

(h) History and Eschatology: Since the time of Schweitzer and Weiss, who argued that Jesus' message was wholly eschatological, many have sought to understand the relation of history to eschatology in Scripture. To what extent is Christian faith oriented toward once-for-all past events, and to what extent is it oriented toward the future? "Future-oriented" theology has been highly popular recently, under the names of the theology of hope<sup>24</sup>, liberation theology<sup>25</sup>, and in the neo-Hegelian theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg.<sup>26</sup> The earlier existential theologians, such as Rudolf Bultmann, presented the gospel as a kind of "openness to the future," somewhat anticipating the more recent developments.

In the covenant structure, however, there is no hint of any tension between concerns with past and future. Past events are the necessary conditions for bringing the covenant into being (B). Indeed, the covenant servant of Yahweh always looks back with thankfulness on the grace given in past history. Yet there are also in the covenant present (C) and future (D, E) foci. In the present, we look to God's law to know how he wants us to live. We look forward to the outworking of God's covenant sanctions, and we expect in the future to have continued access to the covenant by God's own administrative arrangements. The future focus within the covenant does not conflict with the focus on the past. On the contrary, the past events are the foundation for God's future working.

And the future orientation of the covenant is not vague in the way that Bultmann's "open future" is, or as the unspecified futures of Moltmann and Pannenberg. God tells us, making some allowances for mystery, what is going to happen. We can confidently look forward to God's future in a way in which we certainly cannot look forward to Bultmann's.

<sup>24</sup> J. Moltmann, *The Theology of Hope* (N. Y.: Harper, 1967).

<sup>25</sup> As in G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1973).

<sup>26</sup> E. g. his *Jesus, God and Man* (Phila.: Westminster Press, 1968).

(i) Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: The covenant model cannot do everything, and I don't think that it leads to any radically new insights into the sovereignty/responsibility question. However, it does speak to those theologians (especially of the "process" tradition) who would insist that God's plans are changeable and dependent upon man's decisions. The covenant model does, as we've seen (esp. (g) above), put a great emphasis on man's responsibility, but also on the sovereignty of God who identifies himself as Lord, who unilaterally establishes the covenant morality, who declares what will happen in the future. To be sure, the covenant sanctions (D) are dependent upon whether man responds in obedience or disobedience. But the divine plan is fully set in either case. God will not have to make new plans in order to deal with some unforeseen possibility.

(j) Nature and Scripture: Far from nature and Scripture being two competing sources of revelation as in much theology, God appears in the covenant as the controller of nature, the one who establishes its course. Nature therefore behaves as the covenant document says it will. It confirms, but never contradicts, the written covenant. And only those who see nature through the "spectacles" (Calvin) of the covenant document see nature aright. Thus the covenant calls the created world ("heaven and earth") as witnesses (Deut. 4:26, 30:19, 31:28, 32:1) together with the chief witness which is the covenant document itself (Deut. 31:14-29). Cf. Rom. 8:19-22.

We have seen, then, many ways in which the covenant model displays the unity-in-difference of various aspects of scriptural revelation. It is not necessary for theology to posit disunity and then to pick and choose what elements it prefers. Rather, to do so is to ignore or violate the basic structural principle of the biblical genre.

### 3. Perspectival Relationship

A third way in which the covenant structure shows the unity of Scripture is by the "perspectival" relation of its elements to one another.

It is possible to divide Scripture into various parts, each reflecting a particular element of the covenant structure. The revelation of the Name (A) would include passages like Ex. 3:14, 6:1ff, 33:19ff, 34:6f, Isa. 40:25ff, 41:1-4, Mal. 3:6, John 8:58, etc. The Historical Prologue (B) would consist of the historical books of the O. T. and the Gospels of the N. T. (But notice that categories (A) and (B) already overlap.) The Law (C) would include the O. T. *torah*, the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) and other ethical portions of Scripture. The Sanctions (D) would include some passages in Psalms and Proverbs and other books, particularly prophecy and apocalyptic. Administration

(E) would also be found in the Pentateuch, in passages like Matt. 18 and the Pastoral Epistles.

But when you think more deeply about it, the following thought occurs: One cannot really get a full understanding of the Name of God (A) except by understanding the totality of Scripture. The whole Bible, then, is the revelation of the divine Name. Same for history. The full history of God's people includes the laws God gave them, the poetic, wisdom, prophetic and apocalyptic literature that molded their thinking. Similarly for law; for the application of God's laws requires an understanding of our historical circumstances. To know what God requires of us, we must know where we are in the history of redemption. Same for sanctions and administration.

So the whole Bible is a revelation of God's name; it is all history; it is all law; it is all sanctions; it is all administration. Each element of the covenant is a way of looking at the whole Bible. Each element includes all the others.

The point is not that the various elements of the covenant are synonymous. History is not synonymous with law, etc. But for us, *understanding* history is the same as *understanding* law. We cannot understand and use one part of God's revelation adequately if we neglect others. Of course, we do learn by bits and pieces, and the most fragmentary knowledge of God's book is better than nothing, if it is part of a process of continuing study under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. But theologians often make serious blunders by arbitrarily chopping the Scriptures into segments and reporting on those segments in isolation.

I think that this "perspectival relation" of the various covenant elements is a further testimony to the unity-in-diversity of Scripture. To pit these elements against one another as modern theologians like to do is to miss something very important.

This covenantal model may suggest other "perspectival" ways of looking at the text. For instance, consider the discussion over whether God's revelation is "propositional truth." I would say that "propositional truth" is one perspective on Scripture; but Scripture also contains questions, imperatives, poetry, etc. Yet, to understand the propositional message God gives to us, we must study the whole Bible-- commands, questions and poetry as well. So in a sense the whole Bible is propositional. But the whole Bible is also command (it demands something of us), question (it solicits an answer), poetry (it engages our deepest selves).

## Conclusion

In all these sorts of ways, the covenant model helps us to view Scripture as a unity, amid the undoubted differences among its authors and books. God

the three-in-one has given his revelation to us as a unity-in-diversity. Thus he manifests the unity of his speech to us ("I am the Lord") in all its manifold applications. Truly the word of God is *rich*. If it is simple enough for little children, it also contains depths challenging to the brightest scholars. And for all believers it sets forth a reliable, clear, unified expression of our sovereign God.\_