

Reformed Theology is Covenant Theology

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The Scriptures were written over thousands of years, by many human authors, to meet the needs of God's people in different times and places. Despite the diversity that resulted from these variables, biblical faith is highly unified. Behind the manifold details of Scripture is a rather simple, straightforward theological organization shaped by what Reformed theologians have called covenant theology.

Traditional Covenant Theology

While John Calvin himself acknowledged the importance of God's covenants from time to time in his commentaries, he did not draw attention to their significance for the organization of Scripture as a whole. Yet, within one generation Reformed theologians began to see that the theology of the bible gives a central role to divine covenants. Since that time, it has been nearly impossible to separate Reformed theology from covenant theology.

The pinnacle of these early developments appeared in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* in 1646. It expresses a way of looking at covenants that we may call traditional covenant theology. In brief, the *Confession* speaks of God condescending to reveal himself to humanity in two covenants: the "covenant of works" in Adam and the "covenant of grace" in Christ (WCF VII).

This traditional twofold approach to covenant theology highlights at least two central teachings of Reformed theology. On the one hand, the covenant of works draws attention to the fact that humanity's relationship with God was based entirely on human works before Adam fell into sin. Of course, Adam failed and cast all human beings as well as the entire creation under God's curse.

On the other hand, the covenant of grace points to the Reformed teaching that salvation for human beings and the restoration of creation has always been entirely dependent on God's grace in Christ. From the first promise given to fallen Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:15, to the last chapter in Revelation there has been only one way of salvation. The *Confession* admits that this long history is

“commonly called the covenant of grace” (WCF, emphasis mine).¹ In other words, the phrase “covenant of grace” is theological terminology and not found in the Bible, much like the word “Trinity.” Even so, the doctrine of the covenant of grace expresses the teaching of Scripture that salvation throughout the Old and New Testaments is in Christ alone.

Although the contours of this twofold approach to divine covenants have characterized Reformed theology through the centuries, covenant theology has never been static. Throughout the centuries Reformed theologians have explored different aspects of covenant theology in a variety of ways. During the second half of the last century, covenant theology made some rather dramatic advances in at least two areas that we will sketch in this article: first, covenants and the history of salvation; second covenants and personal salvation.

Covenants and Biblical History

In the first place, recent covenant theologians have explained more thoroughly the prominence of biblical covenants in biblical history by discerning their function in the kingdom of God. Reformed theology has always emphasized that in a broad sense, God is the sovereign king over all of creation. Everything has been, is and will be the kingdom of God because he is sovereign over all. At the same time, Reformed theologians have also noted that the Bible speaks of God’s kingdom more narrowly. In this sense, the kingdom of God is an earthly reality that develops throughout the history of salvation. Biblical covenants are a vital feature of this developing kingdom of God.

Jesus spoke this way about God’s kingdom when he taught his disciples to pray, “your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” (Matt. 6:10). Jesus’ words reflect the biblical teaching that God’s kingdom comes where his will is obeyed and that we should pray for God’s kingdom to come to earth as it already is in heaven. In God’s heavenly throne room, every creature perfectly

¹ Classical statements of covenant theology can be found in the British Westminster Confession of Faith (see chap. 7, 8, 19). Also see: the writings of such theologians such as John Owen, *Biblical Theology, and An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Johannes Cocceius in *The Doctrine of the Covenant and Testament of God (Summa doctrinae de foedere et testamento dei, 1648)*, Francis Turretin, in his *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Hermann Witsius in *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man* and in the writings of Jonathan Edwards in *Collected Writings of Jonathan Edwards* (Vol. 2, Banner of Truth, p. 950). In the United States, the Princeton theologians (Charles Hodge, A. A. Hodge, B. B. Warfield, Geerhardus Vos, and J. Gresham Machen) and, in the Netherlands, Herman Bavinck followed the main lines of the classic view, teaching the Covenant of Redemption, the Covenant of Works (Law), and the Covenant of Grace (Gospel) as well.

obeys God, but on earth creatures rebel and evil kingdoms rise to oppose him. So, Jesus taught his disciples to long for earth to become like heaven, a place where God's will is universally obeyed. The New Testament explains that Jesus began the last stage of this worldwide kingdom when he was here on earth. Ultimately, the kingdom will come to all the earth when Jesus returns in glory. Until then, Jesus taught his followers that the coming of the kingdom is to be their top priority: "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness," (Matt. 6:33).

The priority Jesus gave to God's kingdom on earth reflects the prominence of several closely related themes in Scripture. In the first place, the most frequent way God reveals himself in the Bible is as the King. He is the supreme King who relentlessly moves history toward the time when he will take his throne on earth and fill the world with his visible glory. At that time, all creatures, both physical and spiritual, will acknowledge that he alone is the Creator and King. Rev 21:5, "He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." In the final analysis, this is what we mean when we say that God made all things for his own glory (Is. 43:1-7; Rom. 11:33-16, etc.).

In the second place, the biblical teaching about God's kingdom explains the prominence of human beings in Scripture. For a book that may rightly be characterize as God-centered, the Bible spends a lot of time, perhaps more time, focusing on human beings. Why is this so? It is because God created the human race as his royal image, his vice-regents, and made us instrumental in bringing his kingdom to earth. He first put Adam and Eve in the garden and told them to multiply and subdue the earth, making the entire earth as suitable for God's glorious presence as the Garden itself (Gen. 1:26). He repeated this mandate after his judgment against sin in Noah's flood (Gen. 9:1). He multiplied the chosen people Israel and planted them in the Promised Land so that they would lead other nations toward this goal (Gen. 12:3). Of course, human beings failed miserably in their call to prepare the creation for God's glorious presence. So, the second person of the Trinity became flesh. He became human not only to atone for the sins of God's people, but also to accomplish humanity's purpose as the second and last man Adam (1 Cor. 15:45, 47). He now rules over creation until all of his enemies are put under his feet (1 Cor. 15:25). Then he will return and make all things new.

In the third place, the prominence of covenants in Scripture also grew out of their function in God's kingdom. During the last century, a large number of international treaties from the kingdoms that surrounded Old Testament Israel were discovered, translated and interpreted. These treaties contain solemn oaths, sacred rituals, legal regulations and references to blessings and curses that great kings or suzerains used to govern their subservient kings and nations. In effect, great emperors established these treaties to administer their growing empires.

It was not long before biblical scholars began to notice remarkable parallels between these ancient international treaties and biblical covenants. The oaths, rituals, regulations, and blessings and curses of God's covenants followed patterns that were very similar to ancient international treaties. For this reason, we now understand that when God entered into covenants, he acted in ways that people in the biblical world immediately understood. He acted as their divine emperor who administered his expanding kingdom on earth through covenants.

Although the traditional division between the covenants of works and grace expresses important theological ideas, viewing divine covenants in Scripture as royal administrations helps us understand why God entered into six major covenants in Scripture. The emphases of these covenants fit perfectly with God's purpose of spreading his kingdom throughout the earth through his image. God entered covenant with Adam, establishing the foundational concepts of the purpose of creation and the role of humanity on earth (Gen. 1-2; Hos. 6:7, etc.). He established covenant with Noah, promising stability in creation so that humanity could fulfill his kingdom purposes (Gen. 9:9). He called Abraham and his descendants into covenant with the promise that they would lead humanity in its kingdom task (Gen. 17:2). In covenant with Moses, God established the law that would guide his special nation (Ex. 19-24). God entered into covenant with David to make his family as the permanent dynasty over his redeemed people (). In the New Covenant in Christ, God reversed the corruption of sin and eternally secured the success of his kingdom (2 Sam. 7:4-17). Time and again, the Scriptures refer to these covenants as characterizing God's dealings with humanity because they were fundamentally designed to be historical administrations of God's kingdom.

The biblical theme of God's kingdom brings together the theological system that holds together the entire Bible. God is the king who guides his image by covenants to spread his kingdom throughout the earth. This straightforward theological organization lies behind every portion of Scripture.

Covenants and Personal Salvation

As important as it is to see how recent covenant theology helps us understand biblical history, we should also delight in the fact that it sheds light on what the Scriptures teach about personal salvation, how men and women are redeemed from God's judgment to become heirs of his kingdom. Once again, recent archaeological discoveries have helped us see this facet of Reformed theology more clearly.

As we have noted already, God's covenants in Scripture paralleled international treaties between human emperors and their vassal kingdoms in the ancient Near East. There are many ways to summarize the dynamics of these arrangements, but for our purposes, we may describe the inner workings of these treaties in this

way. First, these international treaties emphasized the benevolence of the great king toward his servant kings and their nations. They declared how kind he was and how fortunate they were for being in his favor. Second, ancient international treaties stressed the requirement of loyalty from lesser kings and nations. The great king was showing much kindness toward them and they owed him their loyal service. Third, international treaties included consequences for loyalty and disloyalty. Blessings would come to those who were faithful to their emperor, but curses would come to those who were not. This threefold dynamic of benevolence, loyalty and consequences was indisputable in the days of the Bible. No relationship between any great king and his vassals existed without them.²

Interestingly enough, when we explore the Scriptures with this threefold dynamic in mind, we find that all biblical covenants are very similar to each other. Of course, there are important distinctions to be made, but the fundamental patterns are the same. First, God is always the benevolent King who initiates and sustains his covenant people throughout their relationship with him. Second, God explains how loyalty is required from the people of his covenants. Third, at every stage of history blessings are prescribed for those who are faithful to the covenant and curses are prescribed for those who are unfaithful.

These three covenant dynamics provide the covenantal background for the classical Reformed outlook on personal salvation. At first glance, they may appear at odds with the classic Reformed doctrine of *sola gratia* or “grace alone.” *Sola gratia* would seem to imply that salvation is entirely unconditional and that

² Without a doubt there are positive correlations between the divine covenants with Abraham and David and ancient Near Eastern Royal Land Grants. These connections should be explored even further. But it is precisely here that past assessments run into difficulties. Most reflection in our circles on these matters is based on early research into Royal Land Grants. In more recent decades, Old Testament scholars have more fully assessed their content and function in the ancient Near East.

More recent research has indicated that Land Grants were by no means unconditional. [For the sake of convenience I depend heavily on the summaries included in the fine research of my friend Gary Knoppers. See: Gary Knoppers, "Ancient Near Eastern Royal Grants and the Davidic Covenant: A Parallel?" *JAOS*, Vol. 116, No. 4. (Oct. - Dec., 1996), pp. 670-697]. They were not promissory in the sense that perpetual possession of properties was unconditionally guaranteed. On the contrary, when ancient kings made Land Grants, they did so conditionally. This historical reality calls into question the use of Land Grants as frameworks for understanding the covenants with Abraham and David as unconditional. God of Covenant, by Richard Pratt, [Reformed Perspectives Magazine](#), Volume 10, Number 5, January 27 to February 2, 2008.

any thought of human loyalty would smack of a works-based righteousness. But upon reflection this is hardly the case.

In the first place, every dimension of a person's salvation is a display of the gracious, unmerited benevolence of God. Our calling, regeneration, faith, repentance, justification, adoption, sanctification and glorification are the application of divine grace to individuals who have been unconditionally elected for salvation solely on the basis of Christ's merit (*solo Christo*).

In the second place, Reformed theology has stressed the necessity of loyalty to God in the doctrine of sanctification. Of course, none of us reach perfection in this life, but we will see changes taking place as the Spirit of God conforms us to the image of Christ. While justification is the work of the Trinity alone, both God and human beings are active agents in the process of sanctification. As John Murray once put it, "Our whole being is intensely active in that process which has as its goal the predestinating purpose of God that we should be conformed to the image of his Son."

The necessity of covenant loyalty to God is also expressed in the traditional Reformed doctrine of perseverance of the saints. As the saying goes, "We are justified by faith alone, but faith that justifies is never alone." James put it this way, "In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (Jam. 2:17). This is why Paul exhorted the Philippian Christians to "continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12). The sanctification of those who have been regenerated, effectually called, and justified through saving faith is guaranteed by the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit. Those who do not persevere demonstrate that they were never regenerated, effectually called or justified. As John Murray commented, "those united to Christ by the effectual call of the Father and indwelt by the Holy Spirit will persevere unto the end."

In the third place, Reformed theology has always affirmed that the consequences of blessings and curses come from God in response to loyalty and disloyalty. The Scriptures teach time and again that blessings and curses still come upon on the image of God.

On the one hand, unbelievers receive curses and blessings from their king. In God's providence unbelievers often experience temporary covenant curses in this life, but sadly these covenant curses are mere preludes to the eternal judgment to come, if they do not turn to Christ. Unbelievers also receive temporary blessings from God, but if they do not come to Christ for salvation, these temporary blessings store up wrath for their eternal judgment.

On the other hand, the consequences of curses and blessings also apply to true followers of Christ, but in strikingly different ways. In God's providence, even those who have come to Christ in saving faith still experience temporal curses of God in this fallen world. We also face all kinds of disappointments, sickness, and

even physical death. Even so, we have the joy of knowing that this side of our Christian experience is actually kind discipline from God. As the writer of Hebrews put it, “you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: “My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son” (Heb. 12:5-6). As discipline for our sanctification, these experiences store up eternal blessings for us in the kingdom of God. Christians also receive many temporary blessings from God in this life. He guarantees the blessing of his Holy Spirit, but God also lavishes other blessings as well. These temporary blessings are delightful preludes to our wondrous eternal blessings.

Although covenant consequences still apply to all images of God in these ways, there is wonderful news to be believed and proclaimed throughout the world. Jesus came to this earth to receive the consequences of God's covenants himself. On the one hand, the blessing of salvation is gained by Christ because he was perfectly loyal to his King, God the Father. His perfect righteousness earned him the reward of sole vice-regency over God's kingdom. As John put it, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever” (Rev. 11:15).

On the other hand, Jesus' loyalty to God was so thorough that he voluntarily received God's covenant curses on behalf of his people on the cross. Our violations of God's covenants brought us under the sentence of death, but Christ has made atonement on the cross for those who believe in him.

For this reason, when men and women come to Christ in faith, we are joined to Christ in his death and resurrection. We die to the curse of sin; we have the righteousness of Christ imputed to us. We are raised to newness of life and become joint heirs with Christ of the new heaven and earth (Rom. 8:17).

Covenant theology rightly understood, helps us see the ways in which every portion of Scripture ties together. As administrations of God's kingdom, covenants teach us how God directs the history of salvation toward the glorious end when God's kingdom will come to earth as it is in heaven. As expressions of our relationship with God, biblical covenants help us grasp how our personal salvation relates to the dynamics of God's benevolence, human loyalty and the consequences of blessings and curses. Reformed theology has always sought to be biblical in both of these arenas and for this reason, we may say with confidence that Reformed theology is covenant theology.

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