

What Every Christian Should Understand about Covenant Theology

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The Bible is 66 books written across 1,500 years by 35 or more authors from three continents. The canon includes a wide variety of genres: history, law, poetry, prophecy, wisdom, the gospels, and apostolic letters.

We treat it like one book, and there's some truth to that; it is all inspired by the Holy Spirit to tell one, grand redemptive narrative. Yet these individual voices and genres makes it difficult to find the singular, unifying story. It doesn't help that we've organized the Bible by genre and length of book instead of chronologically. And in our modern Christian culture, we often only look at a verse or short passage for inspiration, often moving us further away from the broader narrative.

Theologians have tried to find ways to express the unifying themes of Scripture, views to encompass the work of God across time and place. One of those frameworks is covenant theology, which has become an extremely influential perspective in modern Christianity.

What Are the Origins of Covenant Theology?

Covenantal, or simply covenant, theology, came from the early church's effort to understand how God's redemptive plan progressed over time from Genesis to Revelation. The covenantal framework views the whole Scripture through the covenants God made with people. While we find the roots of these thoughts in the first couple of centuries, covenantal theology really rose to prominence during the reformation.

The Bible clearly introduces the concept of a covenant early. A [covenant](#) is a sacred and binding agreement initiated by God between himself and humans. In a covenant, God makes promises and sets conditions, many times affirmed by a miraculous sign or a sacrifice. God made covenants with [Adam](#), [Noah](#), [Abraham](#), Moses, David, and then ultimately the [new covenant](#) through Jesus Christ. These covenants – each and collectively – reveal God’s desire and will to redeem a people for himself. The early church fathers recognized this pattern but didn’t theologially systematize them.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, Reformation leaders and theologians like Bullinger and John Calvin started to frame the biblical canon by the two major covenants, much like Paul does in the New Testament: the covenant of works (or law) and the covenant of grace. The covenant of works refers to one between God and Adam regarding obedience. After the Fall, God promised and later instituted a covenant of grace through faith in a Redeemer, Christ. Later, other theologians added a third, the covenant of redemption, an eternal agreement within the Trinity to save humanity.

This theological system gave a structure for the continuity and unity between the Old and New Testaments. These theologians taught that salvation has always been by grace through faith, and they believed the church exists as God’s covenant people across all history, combining Israel and the church, contrasting with dispensationalist teaching.

Covenant theology influenced and guided Reformed confessions like the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) and the Westminster Confession of Faith. In modern times, theologians have further explored the legal and relational aspects of the covenants in Scripture. Today, this theology continues to impact how people from Reformed and Presbyterian groups look at the unity of Scripture, the church, and God’s promises. Through this framework, Christians can see the work of God and how central Christ is to salvation.

What Bible Verses Support Covenantal Theology?

[Genesis 2:16-17](#) first introduces the idea of an agreement, or covenant, even though it does not use the word. God commands Adam not to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, promising life for obedience and death for disobedience. [Hosea 6:7](#) does look back at this moment and connects it to Israel's disobedience to a covenant. "Like Adam, they transgressed the covenant."

After the Fall, God gives a new promise, a future offspring of the woman who will crush the head of the deceptive and murderous serpent ([Genesis 3:15](#)). This promise points to the future covenant of grace within covenantal theology, revealed through other covenants, each one expanding the redemptive plan of God in Christ.

[Genesis 15](#) more explicitly mentions a covenant, and shows how God makes an agreement with Abraham, promising him numerous descendants, a specific land, and the purpose to bless all nations through the promised one. In the New Testament, Paul refers to this covenant as about Christ, even saying the Bible "preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham" ([Galatians 3:8](#)). These passages show some unity of the covenants.

[Exodus 24](#) entails the Mosaic covenant, the Law of God to govern the life and worship of Israel in the Promised Land. While good and right, the law didn't and couldn't save, but it had a purpose: to reveal sinful hearts and point to the need for a Savior. The traditions and rituals also symbolized much of the substance of the new covenant and Jesus. [Hebrews 9:15](#) explains Christ as the Mediator of the new covenant who redeems those under the covenant of law.

[Jeremiah 31:31-34](#) and [Ezekiel 36:26-27](#) both prophesy the new covenant, not like the law. The new promised inner change, forgiveness, and intimate knowledge of God. Jesus institutes himself and his blood as the new covenant at the [Last Supper \(Luke 22:20\)](#). Hebrews has three chapters (8-10) explaining how Jesus fulfills and expands upon the old covenant, becoming the complete and perfect High Priest and final sacrifice.

To finish the unity, [Revelation 21:3](#) provides us a view of the end of the story, with the ultimate redemption of all creation, including a new humanity from the new covenant. “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man.” The eternal covenant fulfills God’s desire to be with his people forever.

What Are the Main Scholarly Criticisms of Covenantal Theology?

While any respected theologian or scholar will see the covenants in the Scripture, not all agree with the Reformed interpretation seen in covenantal theology. Many agree with the strengths of covenantal theology, especially the Christ-centered focus and biblical continuity, but they also criticize certain aspects.

Dispensational theologians argue the covenant theology places a false framework on Scripture, reading covenants into passages where the Bible doesn’t really name them. Particularly, they criticize the “covenant of works” with Adam and the Garden, a stretch. God did give commands to Adam, but the Bible never refers to it as a covenant until much later, in Hosea, and the New Testament writers didn’t include it in their rejection of works-based covenants like they did with Moses.

In addition, some theologians challenge the blurring of Israel and the Church. Covenant theology teaches the Church is a continuation of Israel.

Dispensationalists and other evangelicals argue this view overlooks or reinterprets specific promises to the physical people of Israel and applies them to the Church. The New Testament makes a distinction between Israel and the Church that covenant theology doesn’t take into account.

Some scholars question how covenantal theology doesn’t explore the differences between the various covenants, lumping it all together instead of finding the unique roles each one played (Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, etc.). Critics believe this leads to a misunderstanding of God’s work through people and times and purposes.

Others have congregational concerns, like connecting infant baptism to Jewish circumcision. The New Testament baptism applied to repentant

believers exclusively, and it is separate from the old covenant. Also, some worry how covenant theologians have too much reliance upon documents like the Westminster Confession, using it to interpret the Bible instead of allowing the Bible to speak for itself.

What Can Christians Learn from Covenantal Theology?

Despite criticisms, many of them valid, we can still learn from such depth of work and thought from fellow Christians, even if we may disagree with some of their conclusions.

First, we must realize God does work by covenants. The Bible clearly distinguishes between people of a covenant and others, not of value but purpose and deliverance. Too often, modern Christians don't focus on the will of God through covenants and his reason for establishing them. Exploring the covenants reveals more about God and his will.

Second, we learn God is relational. He doesn't remain distant. After Adam and Eve's Fall, he could have left humanity and creation to destruction. Instead, he got involved and initiates covenants, promises and binding agreements to express his desire to be with us. In every covenant, the Lord clearly commits himself to his people. These covenants aren't simply contracts. They express his love, grace, and how he fulfills his own word.

Third, we see that God acts to bless and save. He promised [Noah](#) life after the Flood. The Father gave Abraham the hope of a nation, in order to bless all people. Yahweh gave Moses a law to guide Israel to live heavenly principles on earth. Through David, God promises an eternal Son and King. All these progress and lead to Christ, who fulfills them all — the Seed of Abraham, the better Moses giving a better covenant, and the forever King from David's line. God's heart is to redeem. His mercy triumphs over judgment.

Fourth, covenantal theology rightly exalts the necessity and wonder of the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ stands firmly at the center of the redemptive story, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. Whether or not we agree with every aspect of covenantal theology, we can affirm and be encouraged by

what the framework affirms: God has had a plan since the beginning, one of salvation and love, and he will be faithful to bring it to pass through his Son, Jesus.

Through Jesus, God reconciles all people and creation back to himself. God's plan is to "unite all things in Him, things in heaven and things on earth" ([Ephesians 1:10](#)). We live today as part of this redemptive story. We are secure, forgiven, and called to the Father's mission.

Covenant theology reminds us how the Christian life doesn't depend upon us or what we do, but on what God has promised and will accomplish.

Peace.