

COVENANTS AND DISPENSATIONS

Part I

by Thomas Ice

The Bible speaks of covenants (Gen. 6:18; Ex. 6:4–5; Jer. 31:31–33, etc.) and dispensations (Eph. 1:10; 3:2, 9; Col. 1:25, etc.). Since the Reformation, the two major systems of conservative Protestant theology have developed around covenants and dispensations. It will be interesting to launch an investigation into these two important biblical items. I want to examine the biblical use of covenants and dispensations and also look at the systems of theology known as covenant theology and dispensationalism.

WHAT IS COVENANT THEOLOGY?

Covenant theology is not a system of theology developed directly from the biblical covenants, as one might first suspect. Instead it is a system of theology based upon speculation about abstract covenants in an attempt to organize Scripture into a system of theology. Charles Ryrie observes: “Formal definitions of covenant theology are not easy to find even in the writings of covenant theologians. Most of the statements that pass for definitions are in fact descriptions or characterizations of the system.”¹ The following is a statement of covenant theology by a proponent:

It represents the whole of Scripture as being covered by two covenants: (1) the covenant of works, and (2) the covenant of grace. The *parties* to the former covenant were God and Adam. The promise of the covenant was life. The proviso was perfect obedience by Adam. And the penalty of failure was death. To save man from the penalty of his disobedience, a second covenant, made from all eternity, came into operation, namely, the covenant of grace. . .

The covenant of grace is treated under two aspects. The first is a Godward aspect, under which it is sometimes called the covenant of redemption. The *parties*, under this aspect, are God and Christ; the *proviso* is the Son’s perfect obedience even to his suffering the penalty of man’s disobedience, namely, death; and the *promise* is the salvation of all believers, *parties* are God and the believer; the *promise* eternal life; and the *proviso* faith in Jesus Christ as the only “work” required of the believer (John 6:29).²

“Covenant theology is a system of theology based on the two covenants of works and grace as governing categories for the understanding of the entire Bible,” says Ryrie.³ Covenant theology is a system of theological reasoning that believes God runs history via a covenant of works, grace and perhaps one of redemption. This is their big organizing principle for all the Bible and history. Covenant theologian, Mark Karlberg tells us, “Biblical history is structured in terms of a series of distinct covenants.”⁴

LACKING SPECIFIC BIBLICAL SUPPORT

Covenant theology has many wonderful aspects to it, like its emphasis upon the grace of God. However, covenant theology is not the product of an inductive study of the Bible. Even though a great deal has been written on the subject of covenant theology by its advocates (usually within the realm of Reformed Theology), I have never found anyone who develops their view of this subject directly from an inductive

study of Scripture. I have never found anyone who points to specific Bible passages and says, "This teaches the covenant of works or the covenant of grace." Instead, the case for covenant theology is normally developed from abstract assumptions made by theologians about how God has conceived His plan for salvation to be worked out in history. One covenant theologian says, "that only (historic) Reformed theology provides the system of doctrine necessary for an exposition of the divine covenants which is faithful to the teaching of Scripture."⁵ Notice he doesn't say that the Bible teaches covenant theology, but rather that it "provides the system of doctrine" that one needs to approach Scripture with in order to properly understand its teaching on this subject. This is a tacit admission that covenant theology is not really taught in the Bible. The subject of covenants in the Bible is well established, but not the system we know as covenant theology.

Some covenant theologians attempt to justify their theology by demonstrating that covenant is a recurrent and important theme throughout Scripture. This is certainly the case! "The Bible is very much a covenant document, as even a cursory reading of Scripture demonstrates," declares covenant theologian Ken Gentry. "That the covenant idea is a dominant biblical theme is held by a host of Bible scholars."⁶ Dispensationalists whole-heartedly agree that covenant is a prominent theme in Scripture, but the real issue is whether the Bible teaches the system known as covenant theology. I agree with Renald Showers who notes, "Covenant Theology attempts to develop the Bible's philosophy of history on the basis of covenants."⁷

THE BIBLICAL ROLE OF COVENANT

Dispensationalists like myself readily agree with covenant theologians about the important role that covenants play in the relationship between God and man in Scripture. Karlberg is absolutely right when he says, "The relationship between God and humanity is, in a word, covenantal. God does not deal with his creation apart from covenant."⁸ I think Karlberg has hit the nail on the head when notes that the role of covenant in God's plan for history is that they mediate the relational interaction between God and mankind. I believe that it is the dispensations (which I will be dealing with in the future) that reveals God's plan for history. Yet, Karlberg has correctly said of covenant theology: "Biblical history is structured in terms of a series of distinct covenants."⁹ In the Bible covenants deal with relationship, while dispensations relate to history. Thus, covenant theology imposes a contrived framework upon the teachings of Scripture relating to God's plan for history, as revealed through progressive revelation and the dispensations.

An example of how covenant theology can lead to a distortion of what the Bible actually teaches is found in the way that they normally deal with issues relating to national Israel. Since covenant, specifically the covenant of grace provides the organizing structure for their view of history, everything must be seen in terms of such a paradigm. Since their goal for history is personal salvation within the current age and since this age is the climax of history, then there can be no future for national Israel. The details of Old Testament prophecy, nowhere contradicted in the New Testament, speak of a future time of blessing for national Israel when she returns to the Lord in obedience. Yet these Old Testament prophetic details are interpreted as merely allegorical illustrations or types of personal salvation for the New Testament believer. Covenant theology's presupposition of theological order requires a certain kind of interpretive approach (due to its theological reductionism) and isolates theological order from historical development. When the Old Testament passages are read

historically, instead of through the soteriological lens of covenant theology, then they clearly speak of a future time of national Israel's blessing as head over all the nations.

The biblical role of covenant is not to provide a framework for biblical history, instead, it is to define relationships between God and mankind that He is working out through a diverse plan for history as expressed through the various dispensations. Covenant theology distorts both the covenants and God's revealed plan for history.

WHAT IS A BIBLICAL COVENANT?

Most covenant theologians do a good job of defining a biblical covenant. Gentry tells us the following about covenant: "The Hebrew *berith* occurs 285 times in the Old Testament, while the Greek word *diatheka* appears thirty times in the New Testament."¹⁰ "Essentially, 'covenant' is a bond or relationship between two parties," declares Karlberg. "In the covenants between God and humanity, the Lord God sovereignly imposes the terms of these arrangements in accordance with his own will and good pleasure."¹¹

What is the nature of the biblical covenants? First, covenants are contracts between individuals for the purpose of governing that relationship. God has bound Himself to His people and swore to keep His promises so that He can demonstrate in history that He is faithful. Second, relationships in the Bible, especially between God and man are legal or judicial. Since there is a legal aspect they are mediated through covenants. Covenants usually involve intent, promises, and sanctions.

There are three major kinds of covenants in the Bible:

- The ROYAL GRANT Treaty (unconditional)—a promissory covenant that arose out of a king's desire to reward a loyal servant.

EXAMPLES:

The Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 12:1–3; 15; 17:1–21)
The Davidic Covenant (2 Samuel 7:4–17)

- The SUZERAIN-VASSAL Treaty (conditional)—bound an inferior vassal to a superior suzerain and was binding only on the one who swore.

EXAMPLES:

Chedorlaomer (Genesis 14)
Jabesh-Gilead serving Nahash (1 Samuel 11:1)
The Adamic Covenant (Genesis 2:15–25; Hosea 6:7)
The Noahic Covenant (Genesis 8:20–9:17)
The Mosaic Covenant (Book of Deuteronomy)

- The PARITY Treaty—bound two equal parties in a relationship and provided conditions as stipulated by the participants.

EXAMPLES:

Abraham and Abimelech (Genesis 21:25–32)
Jacob and Laban (Genesis 31:44–50)
David and Jonathan (1 Samuel 18:1–4; cf. 2 Samuel 9:1–13)
Christ and Church Age believers, i.e., "friends" (John 15)

There are at least eight covenants in the Bible as follows:

- The EDENIC Covenant (Genesis 1:28-30; 2:15-17)
- The ADAMIC Covenant (Genesis 3:14-19)
- The NOAHIC Covenant (Genesis 8:20—9:17)
- The ABRAHAMIC Covenant (Genesis 12:1-3, etc.)
- The MOSAIC Covenant (Exodus 20—23; Deuteronomy)
- The DAVIDIC Covenant (2 Samuel 7:4-17)
- The LAND OF ISRAEL Covenant (Deuteronomy 30:1-10)
- The NEW Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-37, etc.)

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

¹ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, [1966], 1995), p. 183.

² George N. M. Collins, "Covenant Theology" in Everett F. Harrison, *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1960), p. 144.

³ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 183.

⁴ Mark W. Karlberg, *Covenant Theology in Reformed Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000), p. 11.

⁵ Karlberg, *Covenant Theology*, p. 11.

⁶ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1992), pp. 107-08.

⁷ Renald E. Showers, *There Really is a Difference: A Comparison of Covenant and Dispensational Theology* (Bellmawr, NJ: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, 1990), p. 8.

⁸ Karlberg, *Covenant Theology*, p. 11.

⁹ Karlberg, *Covenant Theology*, p. 11.

¹⁰ Gentry, *Dominion*, p. 107.

¹¹ Karlberg, *Covenant Theology*, p. 11.