

RYAN M. MCGRAW

What Is
**COVENANT
THEOLOGY?**



Tracing God's Promises
through the Son, the Seed,
and the Sacraments

“Covenant theology—an essential dimension of Reformed theology—unites the sixty-six books of the Bible in beautiful, Christocentric harmony. Exploring the covenants of redemption, works, and grace, Ryan McGraw ably sketches the covenant motif from the seed promise in Genesis to the new Jerusalem in the book of Revelation. He demonstrates that grasping covenant theology helps us grow in our understanding of Scripture, our communion with the triune God that produces joy and piety, and our lives as individuals, families, and churches—all to the glory of the one who designed the marvelous plan of salvation. Covenant theology, then, is so magnificent because it is simply gospel theology that inevitably produces Trinitarian doxology.”

Joel R. Beeke, Chancellor and Professor of Homiletics and Systematic Theology, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

“Ryan McGraw skillfully highlights the basics and blessings of covenant theology that first blessed him as he saw unifying themes in Scripture that helped him make sense of the parts. Writing with clarity and conviction, he introduces readers to the unity of the Bible, the triune God, and their implications for Christian living so that they will know God and his people in deeper ways. If you’re looking for a doctrinally sound primer on covenant theology, this is a good place to start.”

Sarah Ivill, author, *The Covenantal Life: Appreciating the Beauty of Theology and Community*

“The Protestant Reformer Martin Bucer, who was such a formative influence on John Calvin, maintained that ‘True theology is not theoretical, it is practical; the end of it is to live a godly life.’ Ryan McGraw’s *What Is Covenant Theology?* exemplifies Bucer’s conviction. Here is theology that is accessible, practical, and pastoral. McGraw has provided Christians with a theological primer that will enrich their lives and stir their hearts and minds to bow down and worship. This is a must read for Christians who desire to grow in the grace and knowledge of God.”

Ian Hamilton, President, Westminster Presbyterian Theological Seminary, United Kingdom

“Ryan McGraw has given the church a clear, concise, and accessible survey of one of the most important teachings in Scripture—the covenants that God makes with human beings. The argument of *What Is Covenant Theology?* is exegetically informed, theologically nuanced, and practically oriented. Whether familiar or unfamiliar with covenant theology, readers will profit from the way that McGraw helps us see the unity of the Bible and the glory of the covenant-making, covenant-keeping God of the Bible.”

Guy Prentiss Waters, James M. Baird Jr. Professor of New Testament and Academic Dean, Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson

“Ryan McGraw has written an excellent introduction to covenant theology—one that, as a pastor, I can hand to anyone in my church who wishes to know more about the covenant concept. While the book has a certain systematic approach, one will also encounter a rich biblical and Trinitarian theology permeating the chapters. I’d like to have written a book like this myself, but there is no need now with this fine contribution to Christian living. And make no mistake, the key to Christian living is understanding God’s covenants.”

Mark Jones, Senior Minister, Faith Presbyterian Church, Vancouver, Canada

“Ryan McGraw’s introduction to covenant theology is wonderful. He takes a complex topic and boils it down to its basics, showing both covenant theology’s distinctive emphases and how those distinctives are a blessing to God’s people. I am confident this will invite many to study covenant theology more deeply and thus understand the Bible more completely.”

Stephen G. Myers, Professor of Systematic and Biblical Theology, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary; author, *God to Us: Covenant Theology in Scripture*

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the Seed, and the Sacraments*

Ryan M. McGraw

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What Is Covenant Theology? Tracing God's Promises through the Son, the Seed, and the Sacraments

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*To Jonathan L. Master,
through whom God showed me covenant faithfulness by
being a friend and not merely a “boss” when I needed him
most in one of the most difficult seasons of my life*

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I dedicate this book to Jonathan Master: You have seen me at my worst and did everything in your power to bring me back to my best. The Lord

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I trust that the Son is pleased in what glorifies the Father in these pages, and that the Spirit with shining the spotlight on the Son. May the Spirit magnify Christ in every reader's heart, even as he did in mine while writing, that together we might thank and love our Father in heaven.

Introduction

Why Do the Basics and the Blessings Go Together?

KNOWING THE BASICS of covenant theology brings great blessings with it. In fact, this book will show that the main blessings of covenant theology lie in its basic principles. Yet it is easy for the average reader to get lost in large tomes on the subject. Serving as a key for reading the entire Bible, “introductions” to covenant theology swell into many pages quickly. This small book aims to introduce readers to the basics of covenant theology in light of the blessings that covenant theology brings. Highlighting some of these blessings shows how covenant theology can strengthen our walk with God, making the path before us a bit smoother and easier. The basics and blessings of covenant theology are inevitably very personal as well.

A Personal Journey

Growing up in a non-Christian home, I knew nothing about the Bible. I did not know who the apostle Paul was until I started reading the New Testament, around the time the Spirit brought me to Christ at age

sixteen or seventeen. The church I attended was dispensational, which taught that God had different plans for the Jews and for the church, resulting in a disjointed reading of the Old and New Testaments.¹ Implicitly, I learned that Christians did not need to keep the Ten Commandments. Theoretically, I was “antinomian,” which describes someone who believes that those justified by Christ do not need to keep God’s law. However, the Holy Spirit often trains our hearts before straightening out our heads. Thus, reading Jesus’s application of the Ten Commandments in the Sermon on the Mount, I found myself praying, “Lord, make me like this!” even though I thought at the time that he was altering or removing the Old Testament law. Covenant theology was the blessing that I did not know I needed in order to read the Bible better and to live well for God’s glory. Gradually, I saw the Son (Jesus), his seed (offspring) in the church, and the sacraments (let’s say *signs* for now) as unifying themes in Scripture that helped me understand the parts.

Covenant theology came to me in two ways. First, the church I attended inculcated two vital practices: Christians read their Bibles every day, and Christians tell others about Jesus. Consistent Bible reading worked something profound in many people in that church. In my case, Jesus’s teaching in the Sermon on the Mount started to sound a lot like what I was reading in Exodus and Leviticus. People began raising questions about God’s election, human free will, the depths of human sin, the Spirit’s work in people’s hearts, and, ultimately, how the Old and New Testaments fit together. Second, since this church could not answer most of these questions, people found resources like Ligonier Ministries, which led me to works like the

1 For a useful critique of this view, see Keith A. Mathison, *Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1995).

Westminster Confession of Faith, Calvin's *Institutes*, and Charles Hodge's *Systematic Theology*.² Suddenly, I and others began finding answers. Whether such issues related to the unity of the Bible, to the work of the triune God in saving sinners, or to Christian living, covenant theology seemed to answer key questions. Jesus, who saved one church in both Old and New Testament, was the focal point of the Bible, and baptism and the Lord's Supper drove these truths home vividly.

While covenant theology bears almost innumerable blessings, the breathtaking unity of Scripture, the glory of the triune God, and its implications for the Christian life stand out as central ones. In this introduction, I explain each of these areas briefly in a somewhat natural and disjointed way to introduce the plan for the rest of the book. These three blessings lead us to reflect on the basics of covenant theology as they revolve around Jesus Christ, as they affect his church, and as they come home to us in word and sacrament.

What Blessings of Covenant Theology Stand Out?

Covenant theology is a "big picture" issue, describing the relationship between God and his people throughout the ages. It is not merely about some parts of the Bible or specific theological and practical questions. It shows us how to see the unity of the Bible's message, how to read the whole Bible, how to know God, and how to live. When embraced, it deepens our communion (or fellowship) with the triune God and with others in the church. How, then, is covenant theology a blessing?

2 Westminster Assembly, *The Confession of Faith, and the Larger and Shorter Catechism: Agreed Upon by the Divines Assembled at Westminster* (London, 1655); John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960); Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (1871; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999).

First, covenant theology is a blessing because it shows the breathtaking unity of Scripture. From the first promise of the Seed of the woman who would crush the serpent's head (Gen. 3:15) to one of the last promises of God's heavenly dwelling with his people as their God (Rev. 21:3), covenant theology pulls together everything in between. The result is that we view the Bible more like a grand epic narrative than a collection of short stories. God's promise to undo the ruin that Satan brought through sin is like a seamless thread that ties together all the pages of Scripture. In this light, the promise to Abraham that in his Seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 22:18) fits both Genesis 3:15 and Galatians 3:14, in which "the blessing of Abraham" applies to believers now. The Seed of the woman's suffering in the place of his people resurfaces in important passages like Psalm 22, Isaiah 53, and Romans 16:20. Moses's leading the people out of Egypt, and everything else he did, flowed from God's remembering his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Ex. 2:24–25). David looked to God to forgive sins and change hearts (Ps. 51), and he pleaded that the Deliverer would come through one of his descendants (2 Sam. 7; Pss. 89; 132). Solomon celebrated God's faithfulness in establishing his Seed (of the woman) over the ends of the earth, bringing blessings to all nations (Ps. 72). Peter urged believers to look to Christ's return, teaching them that God preserves the world now for the sake of the elect, just as he did in Noah's covenant in Genesis 6–9 (2 Pet. 3:8–9). Covenant theology is a blessing because all of Scripture, no matter what book we find ourselves in, reminds us of other parts. The entire book is about God's covenant with his people, always pointing them to Christ (Luke 24:44–46). Not only does the Old Testament fit with the New but

the New starts to look like an inevitable result of the Old, without which the story would be incomplete.

The breathtaking unity of Scripture should fill us with awe and wonder. Many people ask how the Bible can be God's word when men wrote it. How can we expect any kind of unified message from men, who wrote parts of the Bible in different centuries, resulting in alleged contradictions? Yet seeing the theme of God's covenant, which he placed clearly throughout Scripture, shows that allegations of contradictory messages by many authors stem largely from ignorance of what the Bible actually teaches. My favorite example was reading Isaiah 53, about the suffering "servant," to a Muslim while I was in college. He rejected the idea that Christ was God and that he suffered in the place of sinners. Yet when I read the text to him, he thought I was reading from the New Testament, only to be surprised that Isaiah seemed to describe Christ's sufferings more vividly, in some respects, than Matthew and Paul. God's word is breathtaking. Whatever difficulties we perceive at first in particular parts of Scripture start resolving themselves when we understand how the parts fit into the whole. Christ is the central theme of God's relationship to his church, in both Testaments. Sacraments like circumcision, the Passover, baptism, and the Lord's Supper simply illustrate the point and drive it home. God's consistency in the Bible is both spiritually breathtaking and invigorating.

Second, covenant theology is a blessing because it highlights the glory of the triune God. This point may take a while for many of us to appreciate. Whether or not we realize it, we come to the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit (Eph. 2:18). Salvation is about the glory of the triune God, and covenant theology is the vehicle through which God reveals himself and his saving message. The Father saves

us, through the Son, by the Spirit (Eph. 1:3–14) so that by the Spirit, through the Son, we come to the Father. Paul summarized the gospel in terms of God’s sending his Son to become man, whom the Spirit vindicated, so that we might believe in him (1 Tim. 3:16). We often undercapitalize on the vital importance of the Trinity in Christian faith and life because no one has taught us what to look for in the Bible. Yet covenant theology is like painting a verbal picture of God; the one God of Israel shows us over time that he is Father, Son, and Spirit, inviting us into intimate fellowship with himself.

How does covenant theology relate to the Trinity? The simple answer is that God’s story, which he tells through covenant relationships, is ultimately about himself. The gospel is about God, and the more fully we grasp the gospel, the more clearly we see God. An illustration can show how easily we lose sight of this fact. What often happens when someone asks a believer to give their “testimony”? Is it not common to hear people talk about what a mess their lives were before Jesus came along? They were drug addicts, homeless, in prison, suffered from depression, and so on, and now they could not make it a day without Jesus. Yet if we ask them who Jesus is, maybe they cannot say much about his divine identity; his two natures; his office as prophet, priest, and king; or his humiliation and exaltation. Testimonies can quickly become more about us than about the God who saves us, devolving into stories that are not too different from people trusting a “higher power” through groups like Alcoholics Anonymous. Yet Paul did not testify to himself; he testified to Christ Jesus as Lord (2 Cor. 4:5). Covenants are first and foremost about God. The Old Testament primarily tells us what God is like through his names, attributes, and works, with a gradually increasing focus on the work of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit in saving us. Teaching us who God is more fully,

it was virtually impossible for the New Testament writers to explain the promises of the new covenant without Trinitarian terms. Our baptism (which is a covenant sign) is one of the greatest proofs of the fact (Matt. 28:19). Baptism places God's "name" on us, telling us that God must be our Father, that Jesus must be our Savior, and that the Spirit must dwell in our hearts. The sacraments direct us to the Son so that we might be God's seed. Covenants testify to the triune God, leading us to echo the Bible in glorifying the triune God.

Third, covenant theology is a blessing because it helps us learn to live the Christian life. We will see that covenants include parties, conditions, promises, and sanctions (or consequences for unbelief and disobedience). Thinking about walking with God in every part of life, we should want to trust, love, and obey him. Covenants teach how to do so in light of our relationship with God (parties), what God wants us to do in that relationship (conditions), how to live by faith in Christ (promises), and how to keep moving toward heaven (sanctions). When you read the Ten Commandments that God gave Israel, for example, the most important questions to ask are, What kind of relationship did these people have with God, and what kind of relationship do I have with God? God redeemed or saved them from Egypt by his grace, and God graciously redeems me from my sin in Christ. The God who saved them commanded them to obey him because they loved him, and so he does with me. If the relationship is basically the same in both cases, then loving the law of the Lord becomes a great means of loving the Lord of the law (Ps. 119 throughout).

Covenants clearly teach us how to live with other Christians in the church. The church is the Son's seed, which he plants, waters, and nourishes through word and sacrament. God covenants with groups of people and not merely with individuals. Baptism and the

Lord's Supper, as signs pointing us to what God's promises mean, remind us that we not only hope in Christ but are in the Christian life together for the long haul. And are we not thankful that we do not have to live the Christian life alone? Covenant theology teaches us to live the Christian life in the right context, and to love the church of Christ as we increasingly love the Christ of the church. Covenant theology leads us by the hand to think about Christian living, both for individuals, families, and churches. It teaches us the practical uses of the sacraments and the importance of public, family, and private worship, bringing God's blessings to every area of life. Christ is the Son, who is the hero of the story; we are his seed, or children, living together in his church; and the sacraments point to our relationship with the Son and his seed at the same time.

What Is the Plan for the Rest of This Book?

The rest of this book explains more fully why covenant theology is a blessing in relation to the Bible, the Trinity, and the Christian life. These blessings (unity, Trinity, and Christianity) turn out to be the basics of what we need to know about covenant theology as well, with the Son (covenant Savior), the seed (covenant church), and the sacraments (covenant signs) appearing regularly at key points in the story. While this book cannot answer every question about covenant theology, it aims to show you why this teaching is a God-given blessing to believers. Due to how much ground it covers, I have devoted three chapters to the breathtaking unity of Scripture, one to the Trinity, and one to the Christian life. Each of these chapters includes study questions that promote reflection and good conversation with others about what the Bible teaches. The final chapter answers questions related to common issues that arise when studying covenant theology, and the

recommended reading resources provided in the back of the book help readers go further and dig deeper.

The bottom line is that covenant theology helps us read well, praise well, and live well. As you read this book, pray that the Spirit would enable you to see the unity of Scripture, to love the glory of God, and to live the Christian life.

Questions

1. Summarize what you currently know about covenant theology. What unanswered questions do you have?
2. Why is studying covenant theology worthwhile?
3. How can seeing a unifying theme in Scripture be helpful as you read through the Bible?
4. How can covenant theology help you pursue a deeper relationship with God?
5. What is your view of the role of the church in the Christian life? How important is the church in your walk with God?

Covenant Theology and the Unity of Scripture

HAVE YOU EVER STRUGGLED to understand what is in the Bible? God could have said anything that he wanted to, so why do we have so many laws about sacrifices in Leviticus? Why are there ten chapters of genealogy starting 1 Chronicles? How do we piece together the picture of God appearing in fire and darkness on Mount Sinai with the account of Jesus coming as the light of the world? How can reading the Bible help me live life day to day when I just don't see how so many of its details are relevant to, say, caring for my children today or going to work or school? Finding unifying themes in the Bible, especially as they relate to who God is, who we are, what our problem is, and what God has done about it may not give us what we are looking for as we read Scripture, but they direct us instead to what we need. We need a God who shows us his Son, our Savior, as we live our lives as part of his church. As we will see below, God made his Son the centerpiece of the biblical message.

Covenant theology helps us see the breathtaking unity of Scripture, making all the parts begin to fall into place over time. The best thing

is that the more often we read the entire Bible, with covenant theology in hand, the better the parts will start explaining each other. We can see this fact by asking what a covenant is, how covenants unify the theme of the Bible, what the divisions of the covenant of grace are, and how covenants help us read the Bible with spiritual joy in Christ.

What Is a Covenant?

In order for a definition to be helpful, it needs to be broad enough to pull in everything to which it applies, and it needs to be narrow enough to distinguish concepts from each other. If we define a triangle as a shape, then our definition is too broad because squares and circles are shapes too. Yet defining triangles as isosceles is too narrow because not every triangle has two sides that are the same length. However, defining a triangle as a polygon with three edges and three vertices shows that a triangle is a specific shape.

The same rule applies to defining *covenants*. If we define covenants too broadly as mere relationships, then we cannot distinguish covenant relationships, for example, from my relationship with my neighbor's dog. Defining covenants too narrowly, however, as "a bond in blood sovereignly administered" rules out some biblical applications of the term covenant, as with marriage, David's covenant with his friend Jonathan, and many others.¹

For these reasons, older Reformed authors defined covenants, more or less, as agreements or contracts that bind two or more parties together by promises, conditions, and sanctions.² While every definition

1 O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1980), 4.

2 One of my favorite examples of how this broad definition includes all kinds of covenants is Patrick Gillespie, *The Ark of the Testament Opened, or, The Secret of*

of *covenant* is likely imperfect to some extent, this one at least takes into account every use of the many uses of the word in Scripture, especially in the Old Testament. For example, David and Jonathan were parties in the covenant between them. Jonathan promised loyalty to David, and David promised to preserve Jonathan's family when he became king. God bore witness, implying judgment (sanction) against either side if one of them broke the conditions of the covenant (1 Sam. 20). The two men already had a relationship as friends, but now they were bound in covenant through an oath, establishing a special kind of relationship with special obligations.

God's covenants with his people are contracts or agreements as well. Revolving around promises through God's oaths (which make promises in God's name and with God as witness), covenants include demands, whether repentance³ toward God and faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 20:21) or living blameless (sincere) lives before God (Gen. 17:1), sanctioning those rejecting God's terms. Calling God's covenants "contracts" or "agreements" is not demeaning to God because he does not have to bind himself to anyone in a special covenant relationship.⁴ He is God, and we must believe and obey him, whether or not he

the Lords Covenant Unsealed: In a Treatise of the Covenant of Grace, Wherein an Essay Is Made for the Promoving [sic] and Increase of Knowledge in the Myserie of the Gospel-Covenant Which Hath Been Hid from Ages and Generations but Now Is Made Manifest to the Saints (London: R.C., 1661).

- 3 Repentance means turning from sin, turning to God in Christ, and turning to new godly practices in the place of those sins. Jesus is the pivot on which repentance turns since it is only in Christ that we find forgiveness for our sins and the ability to turn from sin as he gives us the Holy Spirit to help us.
- 4 See Westminster Confession of Faith 7.1 (hereafter cited as WCF): "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." In *Creeds*,

promises to give us anything in return (Luke 17:10). Unlike human beings, God is free to make covenants with us, but we are not free to refuse them once he makes them. Lots of examples would strengthen this definition of covenant, and its advantages are that it has stood the test of time, that it is easy to understand and remember, and that it reflects every use of “covenant” in the Bible.

How Do Covenants Unify the Themes of the Bible?

Sometimes the best way to make sense of what we find in the Bible is to step back and look at the big picture. As Fred Sanders remarks, we see the triune God best by rereading the Bible in light of the whole.⁵ Once we see the end of the story, then we can better appreciate all the parts that led to the end. We understand the Bible better generally when we reread it repeatedly. The sacrifices in Leviticus and genealogies in Chronicles tell us more about what God is like and what he is doing after we read Hebrews and Matthew, for example. On a broader level, the Bible tells us ultimately that the Bible’s story begins before the Bible. The story of God’s covenants flows from eternity to eternity, through what people have called the covenants of redemption, works, and grace. While some of the parts of this story will not be as obvious as others initially, they become clearer as we see how these three covenants (one in eternity and two in history) pull in the entire narrative. In each of these three cases, the Bible does not use the term *covenant* right away. Though this can appear to give us a false start, the next chapter illustrates why the rest of the

Confessions, and Catechisms: A Reader’s Edition, ed. Chad Van Dixhoorn (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 195 (hereafter cited as CCC).

⁵ Fred Sanders, *Fountain of Salvation: Trinity and Soteriology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021), 199.

Bible's story does not make sense without these covenants holding the rest of the parts together.

Beginning at the end of the Bible can help us get started. Describing the “holy city, new Jerusalem” (Rev. 21:2), coming down from heaven, Revelation 21:3 says, “And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.’” All God’s covenants with his people promised eternal life in his presence, making him our God and us his people, requiring faith and obedience, and threatening judgment against apostasy⁶ and disobedience. At the end of the story, we see that God has always been, and always will be, true to his word. He is our God, we are his people, and he dwells among us. Through faith in God’s promises, with repentance and obedience to his commands, we escape the wrath to come and enjoy everlasting life, which is knowing him (John 17:3). We should always look forward to this final installment of God’s covenant as we read our Bibles, live the Christian life, and use every Lord’s Day (Sunday) to look to the final day of the Lord. God’s unified covenant story in Scripture leads from eternity to eternity. Doing so helps us appreciate the main “stages” of the plan in the covenants of redemption, works, and grace. God planned to be with us, we left him, and he brings us back to himself in Christ through the Spirit.

The Covenant of Redemption

We assume a lot when we tell people about the gospel. Knowing who God is, we know who we are, what our problem is with God, and what God has done to save us. Yet people who don’t know what

⁶ Apostasy is the act of falling away from or rejecting profession of faith in Christ.

God is like don't really know who they are, what their problem is, or even the fact that they need salvation. Regardless of where we start in talking to unbelievers, our challenge is to bring them up to speed in all these areas. Yet sometimes Christians need to be brought up to speed too. If we finish our Bibles and pay attention well, then we realize that something important came *before* the foundation of the world in Genesis 1:1. The *covenant of redemption* tells us what that is.

The covenant of redemption is the first stage of the unified message of Scripture. This covenant is between the persons of the Trinity in eternity. Redemption means “the act or process of buying back,” and in this context it refers to God’s covenant to send Christ to do what needed to be done to purchase our salvation and buy us back from the consequences of our sin. We don’t pick up the covenant of redemption from the first pages of the Bible, but, like the Trinity, it becomes clear when we reread the book. The parties in the covenant of redemption are the Father and the Son with the consent of the Spirit. The Father promised the Son, on the condition of his incarnation, to give him the nations as his inheritance (Ps. 2:8), to exalt him with the name above every name (Phil. 2:9–11), to give him the Spirit to pour out on the church (Acts 2:33), and many other things that Christ alone can claim. The Son became man, negatively, to take up the conditions of becoming a curse for his sinful people, who broke God’s law. Positively, the Son as man came to do God’s will (Ps. 40:8) and to fulfill “all righteousness” for his sinful people or seed (Matt. 3:15; cf. Heb. 2:13). The covenant of redemption includes us, but only as the objects of the Son’s work and as part of his reward. This is why some have called this covenant “the covenant of the Mediator.”⁷ It is more about

7 Reformed authors have given the covenant of redemption various names like the covenant of suretyship, the covenant of the mediator, and the counsel of peace. *Sure-*

the Savior than it is about the saved. The Father designated the Son to save his seed, to whom he would later speak in word and sacraments.

We are not parties in the covenant of redemption, which is unconditional respecting God's elect people. It is eternal, and it shows the single will of the triune God exercised from the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit. The relations among the persons of the Trinity are eternal and unchangeable, not covenantal. God does not agree to become triune. Rather, he does what he does because he is who he is. Yet the covenant of redemption shows how the single will of God is exercised from the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit for our salvation. Rather than God having three wills, this is more like the divine will in origin, in action, and in perfection. This covenant is distinct from any covenants God made in history because the Father promised things to the Son that no one else can claim, because the Son fulfilled conditions and bore sanctions that no one else could bear, and because Christ "purchased" and sends the Spirit in a way that no one but God can send. The covenant of redemption is not the covenant of grace, which is a historical story rather than an eternal plan, but the covenant of redemption is the foundation of the covenant of grace.⁸ Just as we cannot build a good house without a solid foundation, so we cannot build a covenant theology without a stable foundation in the triune God. God's plan to save his seed, through his Son, is the foundation for calling them by word and Spirit and sealing them with sacraments.

tyship means that Christ is our surety, standing in our place before God. *Mediator* means roughly the same thing, Jesus mediating between God as the offended party and us as the offending party. *Counsel* refers to the intra-Trinitarian covenant, and *peace* refers to the result of Christ being surety and mediator between us and God.

⁸ For more about the covenant of redemption, see J. V. Fesko, *The Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption* (Fearn, UK: Christian Focus, 2016).

The Covenant of Works

Moving from the heights of eternity to the depths of the earth, God's first covenant in history is often called the *covenant of works*. This refers to God's covenant with Adam and Eve, from whom everyone else came. People have called it a covenant of *works* not because the first couple's obedience was somehow worthy of reward from God but because he promised them life if they kept trusting him and obeying him. The book of Genesis, where this covenant appears, sets the stage for the Bible's story, leaving room to fill in the details more clearly as the story unfolds.

Like most things in Genesis, God did not reveal the covenant of works in explicit words, but he drops us into a narrative filled with covenant ideas. The parties of the covenant of works were God and Adam. The tree of life embodied its promise (Gen. 2:9), symbolizing eternal life in God's presence (see Rev. 22:2–3, where the end of the story helps us understand the beginning again!). Perfect obedience was the condition of the covenant, to which the tree of the knowledge of good and evil pointed (Gen. 2:9). Though this tree looked like the others in the garden of Eden (Gen. 3:6), what made it special was that God said not to eat its fruit. What greater test could God give Adam and Eve of whole-soul committed obedience to himself, since the command rested on nothing more than God's authority? Just as young children sometimes need to obey their parents because they love and trust them, even if they don't understand their commands, so we must always trust and obey God simply because he is God. Death was the sanction of the covenant, warning that Adam would surely die if he ate from the wrong tree (Gen. 2:17). Though God did not use the word *covenant* in Genesis 2 or 3, what more details could we need

to find a covenant here? Adam and Eve did not deserve everlasting life for their obedience because they owed obedience to their Creator regardless. Sometimes people have called this covenant a “covenant of life”⁹ due to its implied promise. Most have called it a covenant of works with respect to its condition. Either way, the covenant of works went beyond Adam and Eve’s general relationship to God as their Creator. They should have trusted and obeyed God because he is God; by covenant, God promised them a reward for doing so.

The covenant of works did not end well. Barely two chapters into the Bible, everything goes sideways. When Adam and Eve sinned by eating the forbidden fruit, they “died.” Again, Genesis shows this in an understated, implicit, and gradual way. The first couple likely did not understand what death meant, since it was not a part of human experience in the garden, yet death came in many forms. God cast them away from the tree of life, barring the way back with a well-armed angel (Gen. 3:24). The world became less hospitable to human life, and Adam’s labor over the ground as well as Eve’s labor in bearing children brought pains with them. Their first son murdered their second (Gen. 4:1–16), and the list of their descendants bore the chilling refrain “and he died” (Gen. 5). Showing that Adam’s sin did not affect his heart and life alone, generations of his children mimicked his sin and built on it until “every intention of the thoughts of [man’s] heart was only evil continually” (Gen. 6:5). God then wiped out the world through a universal flood, showing that sin brought his wrath and curse. Is this not a realistic description of the world we live in now? Do we not see a collapsed world under a broken covenant of works in hard jobs, painful childbirth, illness and death, broken families, war, natural

9 Westminster Shorter Catechism (hereafter cited as WSC) q. 12 (CCC 413).

disaster, and a host of opinions about religion? The covenant of works can help us show nonbelievers that the Bible accurately describes and explains the world as it really is.

Man's environment, relationships, and course of life were tainted with the death of sin, and man's heart was dead toward God—and so remains (Eph. 2:1). The natural climax to this litany of death in the early chapters of Genesis was the death of the world through a universal flood. While the flood waters washed away almost all sinful humanity from the world, this dreadful judgment did not wash away the filth of man's heart (Gen. 8:21). And so the world continues. Death begins in the heart, and our bodies and environment bear symptoms that all is not right with the world because people are not right with God.

To make sure we are clear at this point, how did mankind “die” in the garden? We died spiritually, losing upright hearts, being cast out of God's life-giving presence. We die physically; the life spans of Adam's children even gradually decreased. We continue to die daily, through the sufferings of this life, even in common tasks like work and childbearing. And, unless God does something to save us, we will die universally (and eternally), just like the world died in the flood. Putting things more theologically, without Christ we are dead in Adam because we sinned in Adam (Rom. 5:12). Human beings are in trouble because they bear “the guilt of Adam's first sin, the want of original righteousness” (which was part of Adam's nature at creation), and the corruption of their whole natures, which the church has “commonly called original sin.”¹⁰ Original sin does not mean the first sin committed by human beings, but it describes the origins of sin in every one

¹⁰ WSC q. 18 (CCC 414).

of us because of what Adam did. This point will come back even more clearly as we continue to listen to God's covenant story below. When we see and feel the miseries of sin, when we hate our jobs, struggle through childbirth, fear "natural" disasters, are repulsed by war and death, and attend funerals, then we should see a broken covenant of works as the culprit.

Some people object to the idea of a covenant of works because the term does not appear in Genesis 2–3. Yet without the covenant of works, we cannot adequately understand the covenant of grace in Christ, which we need so desperately. Looking at the whole Bible, we should realize that we are "overhearing" a conversation between God and Adam about a covenant in Genesis 2–3. A friend of mine illustrates this fact by asking how we would interpret an overheard phone conversation if we heard someone using terms like "bride," "groom," "bridesmaids," "best man," and "invitations." How could we not conclude that they were talking about a wedding? Likewise, when we overhear all of the parts of a covenant in Genesis 2 (parties, promises, conditions, and sanctions), we should understand what God is talking about, even if the word *covenant* is not there.¹¹

Something even more powerful and important helps us along, however. At the first Lord's Supper, which is a sacrament or covenant sign of God's promises, Christ called his finished work on the cross "the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20). What Christ did fulfilled a covenant, and we enter this covenant when we receive Christ. Yet just like the Bible's story in the Old Testament becomes clearer as we keep reading, so later parts of the New Testament clarify and explain

¹¹ This illustration comes from J. V. Fesko in a conference talk at the Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary Spring Theology Conference, "The Covenant of Redemption," March 2021.

earlier ones. In Romans 5:12–21, Paul explains both Genesis 2–3 and what Jesus did in the Gospels by drawing important parallels between our relation to Christ and our relationship to Adam. Through Adam’s unrighteous act, many became sinners. Through Christ’s righteous act on the cross, and through his righteous life, many were made righteous (Rom. 5:19). This gives us two sides of an equation. On the one hand, when Adam sinned, God counted (or imputed) his sin to his people. On the other hand, when Christ obeyed, God counted (or imputed) his righteousness to his people. Adam and Jesus have a unique relationship to people that no other human beings have. Both acted in the place of their people, and their actions brought consequences, whether bleak or glorious, on the entire group. This is why Paul added elsewhere that just as all who are in Adam die, so all who are in Christ are made alive (1 Cor. 15:22). If our relationship to Christ as our representative is by covenant, then how can our representation in Adam not be? The sacrament of the Lord’s Supper shows our covenant relation to the Son as his redeemed seed, who saves us from being Adam’s lost seed.

While no one can earn eternal life again through the covenant of works, we cannot fully grasp the way to life in Christ without it. In the covenant of redemption, the Father planned to send the Son to “save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21), with the Spirit’s help and blessing (Isa. 11:1–6; John 3:34). As our prophet, priest, and king, Christ bore the sanctions of the broken covenant of works through his sufferings, and he fulfilled its conditions in our place through his obedience. Though the Bible says far less about the covenant of works than it does the covenant of grace—to which we turn next—we must keep the covenant of works in mind so that we can understand the problems that the covenant of grace solves.

The Covenant of Grace

Our friendships say a lot about who we are. For example, the righteous should choose their friends carefully, knowing that the ways of the wicked lead them astray (Prov. 12:26). Friendships can make or break people, shaping who we are and making us better or worse for the experience. We tend to become like our friends, and our friends become like us. The covenant of grace is about making enemies with sin and Satan, and restoring friendship with God and his people, making us ultimately like Christ, who laid down his life for his friends (John 15:13).

Most of the Bible is about the covenant of grace, and the covenant of grace is about Christ (the Son). Westminster Larger Catechism 31 says, “The covenant of grace was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in him with all the elect as his seed.”¹² We need a better representative than Adam; we need new hearts, and we need to be like God. Put differently, we need Jesus to be our Savior, the Spirit to dwell in our hearts, and God to be our Father. Genesis 3:15 through Revelation 22 is a single story about how God does this great work. Genesis 3:15 gives us the basic ideas of the covenant of grace, serving as a gateway into the rest of the Bible, making it a key to seeing the breathtaking unity of Scripture. This may be both the most basic and most blessed verse on covenant theology in the Bible.

To understand Genesis 3:15, we need to get oriented to who’s who. The text says,

I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring;

¹² Westminster Larger Catechism (hereafter cited as WLC) q. 31 (CCC 345).

he shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise his heel.

There are three contrasts in this text: the woman and the serpent, the Seed and the serpent, and the Seed and the seed.¹³ “Offspring” in the ESV and “seed” in my translation mean the same thing here. First, beginning where the problem started, Eve fell into sin by making friendship with the serpent and eating the forbidden fruit. God would put an end to this alliance by putting “enmity” between the serpent and her, breaking her friendship with sin and Satan. “Enmity,” like the word “enemy,” means the opposite of friendship. By sinning, Eve acted in enmity toward God, treating Satan as her friend, but God would break this relationship. Second, skipping to the end for a moment, the serpent would crush the Seed’s heel, while the Seed would crush the serpent’s head. Translating the idea here can be tricky, but “bruise” is a bit weak. “Crush” ups the stakes a bit more appropriately. The Seed is singular, and he singularly suffers and undoes the curse of sin that the serpent brought on humanity. Since the serpent would crush the Seed’s heel but have his head crushed, the serpent gets the harsher outcome of the encounter. Third, in the middle of the verse the seed is also plural, pitting Satan’s (or the serpent’s) people against the woman’s people. This sets the pattern for the division of nations in Genesis, pitting the seed of the woman against the seed of the serpent. Just as the church is associated with Christ, so the world is associated with Satan. This is where the notorious ten chapters of genealogy in 1 Chronicles becomes relevant. Chronicles, and other places in the Bible, mark off the serpent’s seed from the woman’s seed, which marks the division between the world and the church. Though

¹³ See John White, *A Commentary upon the Three First Chapters of the First Book of Moses Called Genesis* (London: John Streater, 1656), on Gen. 3:15.

sacraments come later in the story, they will point to the Son saving the seed, following the outline established in this verse.

So how does Genesis 3:15 put the covenant of grace in a nutshell? When God saves sinners, he ends our alliance with sin and Satan, like he did with Eve. He does so by sending the Seed, the Christ, to destroy death (1 Cor. 15:54), Satan (Heb. 2:14), and the works of the devil (1 John 3:8). Yet the Seed represents a seed (Ps. 22:30). What Christ did, he did for and in the place of his people, affecting the whole group, which we call the church. Christ saves his people from their sins (Matt. 1:21), keeping them in the world while they are not of the world (John 17:15). It takes the rest of the Bible to show how Genesis 3:15 is a unifying thread running through the whole.

A few examples have to suffice here, promoting clear eyesight to see the breathtaking unity of Scripture rather than commenting on the entire Bible. First, Hebrews 2:14 says that Christ died “that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil.” Destroying the devil explains what crushing the serpent’s head means in Genesis 3:15. Drawing parallels to lots of other related verses shows what this entails. Satan was the “strong man” who bound people in the misery of sin. Now Christ has bound him, plundering his goods (Matt. 12:29). The false “ruler of this world,” Satan, is “cast out” (John 12:31) through Christ’s death on the cross. Though Satan walks about like “a roaring lion” seeking to devour people (1 Pet. 5:8), he is a defeated enemy who has “great wrath” because “he knows that his time is short” (Rev. 12:12). When the Seed of the woman crushed the serpent’s head, Satan’s relationship to the world changed. Though he remains active, he is not alive and well. Jesus destroyed, bound, crushed, and cast him out. As we know by experience, as well as from Scripture, he is not bound or destroyed in a way in which he does

nothing. We often wish this were the case! Yet Christ bound him “that he might not deceive the nations any longer” (Rev. 20:3). While we might struggle with such bold statements, we should never underestimate how far and wide the Spirit has spread the gospel to this day, beginning in the book of Acts. Satan is like a fatally wounded warrior, who knows that he is already dead, yet who hates his enemies so much that he continues to claw after them until his dying breath. Both the spread of the church and its suffering through history exemplify these facts. A worldwide church is a clear indicator that the Seed of the woman has crushed the serpent’s head, which should encourage us to pray and persevere in a world that is hostile to Christ and his gospel.

Second, Paul told the church in Rome that “the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet” (Rom. 16:20). This statement takes Christ’s victory over Satan from the end of Genesis 3:15 and combines it with the separation of the woman’s seed and the serpent’s seed in the middle. Christ gained victory over sin, death, and Satan for his people, and his people share in his victory over Satan. Through sin, Satan was our “father,” and when we sinned we did his will instead of God’s (John 8:44). Friendship with the world, the flesh, and the devil is enmity with God (James 4:4). Now that Christ is on our side and has made us his friends, our victory over Satan is sure. What greater encouragement could we have in our personal battles against sin and through the church’s fears of wars, rumors of wars, opposition, and persecution?

Third, both the Seed and the seed tie together the covenant of grace nicely in Galatians 3. Without getting into every detail, the fact that Paul has God’s covenant dealings with Abraham and Moses as well as Genesis 3:15 in view makes this example powerful for pulling large sections of the Bible together. In Galatians 3:16, Paul writes, “Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say,

‘And to seeds,’ as of many, but as of one, ‘And to your Seed,’ who is Christ” (NKJV).¹⁴ Jesus Christ is the Seed of the woman who would crush the serpent’s head. Yet later in 3:29, Paul adds, “And if you *are* Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed” (NKJV). This “seed” is the church, which stands against Satan’s seed in the world. Appealing to a sacrament, or covenant sign, Paul brings God’s covenant promises home by saying, “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (3:27), making Jews and Gentiles, slaves and freemen, men and women “all one in Christ” (3:28). The Son saves his seed, sealing them in a sacrament, because the Seed of the woman crushed the serpent’s head. Paul explains in this chapter God’s intent in the Mosaic law by appealing to God’s covenant with Abraham, which clearly uses the terms of and applies the promise of Genesis 3:15.

Ideas like this should encourage us because what is true of Christ becomes true of his people. God would as soon reject the Son’s seed as he would reject his Son. Our friendship with God is just as secure as Jesus’s place with God. Genesis 3:15 showcases the breathtaking unity of Scripture in ways that few other verses (if any) can. God makes friends with us, through his Son, and by his Spirit. Jesus’s work results in crushing our enemy, forgiving our sins, changing our allegiances, and making us like God again. Because the Seed of the woman saved his seed by crushing the serpent’s head, we have a friend who changes both where we stand with God and what we are like in our lives.

Conclusion

How do we see the breathtaking unity of Scripture through covenants so far? Though we have not yet looked directly at texts where the term

¹⁴ While the ESV translation “offspring” is correct, the NKJV, which is equally correct, stresses the “seed” parallel I am making here.

covenant appears (and they are many!), the covenants of redemption, works, and grace give us a map to lead us through the whole Bible. In the covenant of redemption, the triune God planned to save elect sinners, and Christ agreed to stand in their place. The covenant of works shows how and why they need to be saved, and the covenant of grace shows how they come to receive Christ for salvation. Christ is the hero of the covenant of grace, and most of the Bible tells the story, either of what he would be and do or who he is and what he has done. The goal of the covenant of grace is to make those who were God's enemies through the covenant of works his friends in Christ, who fulfilled the covenant of redemption.

So, do you struggle with what is in the Bible? Maybe the solution lies in learning what to look for. Ultimately, we cannot read the Scriptures to learn how to be better wives, husbands, parents, children, employees, and friends if we lose sight of who God is, who we are, what our true problem is, and what God has done about it. This is precisely where covenant theology gives us what we need, pulling our relation to God into all other areas of life and directing us to see Christ through every book of Scripture. We look next at the "divisions," or stages, of the covenant of grace.

Questions

1. What should a good definition do? Give some examples of defining something too broadly or too narrowly.
2. Which definitions of *covenant* take in all kinds of covenants in the Bible? What alternative definitions have you heard, and what are their advantages and disadvantages?

3. In your own words, what are the covenants of redemption, works, and grace? Who are the parties in each? What are their promises, conditions, and sanctions?
4. Why is the covenant of works still relevant to us today since we cannot gain God's favor through our obedience?
5. Describe some ways in which Genesis 3:15 is so helpful in understanding and applying the whole Bible. How can this text help you explain the Bible's story in your Bible reading and family worship?

