



Two Covenants

To understand the cross we must understand God's covenant

One of the fundamental themes of the Westminster Confession that many today see as outmoded is its covenantal understanding of the Bible. Few theologians treat it with the seriousness that it deserves, and many, even evangelicals, believe that it is fundamentally incompatible with the thought of John Calvin, the father of Reformed theology.

The reasons why it has been discarded, despite having such strong advocates as B.B. Warfield, W.G.T. Shedd and Louis Berkof in the 20th century, are many and varied. Probably the most potent force behind its gradual disappearance has been the change in understanding of the origin of man that has taken place since Darwin. The growing authority of science has meant that a doctrine rooted in the historicity of Adam has fallen into general disfavour. But there are also voices within the Reformed community who impugn covenant theology on the grounds that it seems to establish man's relationship with God on the basis of law, not grace. Does covenant theology deserve such bad press?

First, let's see why this is an important issue. Covenant theology is the biblical framework in which we understand the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It answers questions like: Why did Jesus have to come to earth? Why did he have to keep the law? Why did he die if he was without sin? Importantly, it explains for whom he lived and died.

The Bible teaches that life can only be explained in terms of a covenant which the Trinity — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — made between themselves before the world began (John 17:2,4,5). This covenant of redemption included God's choosing of a people to be saved (Eph 1:4 — the elect), the agent of salvation (Eph. 3:11 — Christ) and through whom it would be applied (2 Thess. 2:13 — the Holy Spirit). The essence of this covenant was Jesus' willingness to become our representative and our righteousness through His earthly life of obedience to God's law and His atoning death as a propitiation to appease God's wrath against sin. As a result, the Father conferred a kingdom upon Jesus where He will rule over His elect people (Luke 22:29). Consequently, the eternal covenant finds its expression in redemptive history through two covenants called the covenant of works and the covenant of grace.

A careful reading of Scripture confirms the Confession's teaching that *"life was promised to Adam, and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience"* (WCF7:2). Romans 5:12 teaches that Adam was our representative and, as such, entered into a covenant (of works) with God, whereby he was offered eternal life predicated upon his perfect personal obedience. At the same time, there was the possibility of death and judgment if he disobeyed. Scripture teaches us that Adam, our representative, broke the covenant and so sin, death and judgment came upon us all (Hos. 6:7, Rom. 5:12,18, 1 Cor. 15:42-49).

Since we are condemned in Adam as covenant breakers and unable to be justified by the law, the Bible introduces us to a new hope in Genesis 3:15. We are promised someone who would crush Satan's head and as our representative would obey God's commands, keep His covenant and then die for our sin. Reformed theology calls this the covenant of grace.

The covenant of grace, then, spans the whole of redemptive history from Genesis 3:15 till the coming of the Lord. Whereas in the covenant of works salvation was to be merited by works, in the covenant of grace it is received by faith alone in the works of Christ. Though there are many covenants (Noah, Abraham, Moses, David etc), covenant theology teaches that each of these

covenants are in fact administrations of the one covenant of grace that reach their fulfillment in Christ as the second Adam. It is through faith in Christ as the second Adam, especially in His life, death and resurrection, that God's people (the elect) receive eternal life.

Importantly, covenant theology teaches that Jesus, as the second Adam, came to save lost sinners (1 Tim. 1:15). His work is not simply to open up the possibility of salvation, but to save completely those who come to God through him (Heb. 7:24ff). That is why the writer of Hebrews can say that by His blood He has obtained eternal redemption for those He represents (Heb 9:12). His intercession for His people never fails (John 17:2, 4, 6, 9; Rom. 8:32-34).

One of the interesting things about those who deny covenant theology is that they can never guarantee that Christ's death actually saves anyone without introducing the heresy of universalism. In dumping covenant theology, they offer us an atonement that doesn't really atone. If Christ died for all men, but all men are not saved, what did His death really achieve? Yet, covenant theology assures us that Christ's atonement definitely atones (Is. 53:11; John 10:11, 15). John Owen reminds us that we have only three alternatives: either Christ died for *"all the sins of all men, or all the sins of some men, or some sins of all men."*

Clearly, if it is the last, none of us will be saved. If it is the second, then Christ's death actually saves the elect as covenant theology teaches. If it is the first, then all men are going to heaven, even those who have chosen not to — a rather strange result, to be sure.

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