

UNDERSTANDING COVENANT THEOLOGY

By Stu Kerns ©

Introduction

Among Bible-believing Christians there are two primary streams of interpretation: Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology. These words represent two different ways of looking at the Bible. They are both serious attempts to systematically understand God's gift of revelation: the 66 books of the Holy Scriptures.

Dispensationalism claims that the Bible contains two stories, of two peoples, in two volumes (the Old and the New Testaments). The key concept behind Dispensationalism is understanding the correct divisions within the Bible. The key verse for the concept is 2 Timothy 2:15¹, in which the man of God is called to "rightly divide the word of God."²

Covenant Theology claims that the Bible is one story, of one people, in two volumes. This paper is not designed to explain the nuances of Dispensationalism, but rather an attempt to understand the key concepts behind Covenant Theology and to make some practical comparisons between the two systems. For that we must begin at a most basic question: What is a covenant?

I. What is a Covenant?

Covenants are a part of our daily lives. What is a basic definition of a covenant and how does it line up with the Biblical concept?

A. General Concept of a Covenant

The most common covenant of most cultures is marriage, a binding relationship between a man and a woman. In Western marriage ceremonies it has been traditional to make the covenant of marriage "till death do us part."

There are many other binding agreements referred to as covenants, such as legal contracts and community ordinances. However, the marriage contract is closer to the Biblical concept because (1) it is binding relationship, and (2) it is a bond unto death.

B. Biblical Concept of a Covenant

The Hebrew and Greek words for "covenant" are used over 300 times in the Bible. It is a dominant concept of scripture. The Biblical concept of "covenant" is similar to the secular concept. A Biblical covenant is also a binding relationship unto death. However, there are a few differences.

Biblical covenants are *initiated by God*. Also, the *terms are set by God*. He comes to His people and sets the terms of their relationship with Him. When we make covenants we often negotiate the terms of the covenant. In a marriage a couple might create their

own vows, but not in a covenant with God. He initiates and He sets the terms. There is no negotiation!

One theologian summarized a Biblical covenant by describing it as “a bond in blood, sovereignly administered.”³ This definition hits all of the main concepts:

- (1) *A bond*: The covenant defines a binding relationship between two parties.
- (2) *In blood*: It is a bond unto death. Biblical covenants are usually sealed with a sacrifice, reminding the human participant of the serious nature of the bond.
- (3) *Sovereignly administered*: It is initiated by God. The terms are set by God.

There is no negotiation.

One other note: Due to God’s gracious nature, the covenants often have a promise attached to them. There are terms (which are often negative) and promises (which are positive).

II. What are the Covenants of Scripture?

There are seven major covenants in the scriptures: The covenant with Adam before the Fall (Genesis 2), the covenant with Adam after the Fall (Genesis 3), the covenant with Noah (Genesis 6, 8, 9), the covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15, 17), the covenant with Israel through Moses (Exodus 19-24), the covenant with David (2 Samuel 7), and the New Covenant mediated through Jesus (Luke 22:20).

Each of these covenants has (1) a set of terms, (2) a seal in blood, and (3) a promise attached:

Adam, before the Fall

Adam was told to keep the garden (positive term) and to never eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (negative term). He was told that as surely as he ate of the fruit he would die (seal in blood). One might say that there was an implied blessing, that if he kept the covenant he would live forever (promise); but this is implied and not stated.

Adam, after the Fall

In Genesis 3, God sets new terms of his relationship with Adam and Eve. She will have pain in childbearing; he will have sweat and weeds to contend with. They will live in a fallen world (terms). Yet God is gracious in providing for them. In order for their sins to be covered, it will require blood (seal in blood). God Himself makes the first sacrifice as He cloaks them with animal skins. In the midst of all the sad consequences, God offers a ray of hope:

And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel (promise).⁴

Noah

As decadence controls the world God initiates a covenant with Noah. He will save Noah and his family while the rest of the world perishes. Noah is called to build an

ark and to preserve specimens of all the animals God would bring to him (terms). After Noah survives the flood, he offers a sacrifice to God⁵ (seal in blood). God vows never to flood the entire earth again, and He seals the vow with the sign of the rainbow⁶ (promise).

Abraham

God appears to Abraham twice to make and confirm His covenant. Abraham is called to walk before God and be blameless⁷ (terms). The first issue of the covenant is sealed with a sacrifice, in which God Himself assumes the responsibility to maintain the covenant. As a Theophany⁸ passes through the split portions of the sacrifice we see a beautiful picture of the gospel. In order for our sins to be covered, God will need to take upon Himself a curse (seal in blood).⁹ The promises made to Abraham are lavish, including a land of promise and a countless offspring (promise).

Moses

As God delivers His chosen people from their prophesied bondage¹⁰ He leads them to Mount Sinai. On this mountain God institutes another covenant through Moses. The heart of this covenant is God's Ten Commandments (terms). As Moses calls the people to walk faithfully with God he sprinkles them with blood¹¹ (seal in blood). Through this covenant Israel is called uniquely to be God's kingdom of priests and a holy nation¹² (promise).

David

King David desires to build a house for God, but God instead decides to build a house for David.¹³ God will be a father to David's offspring and obedience is expected; otherwise there will be fatherly discipline¹⁴ (terms). God also makes many promises to David, including the continuation of his line and the continuation of his throne unto eternity¹⁵ (promise). This covenant is unique in that it does not have a seal in blood.

Christ-Mediator of the New Covenant

Jeremiah prophecies about a new covenant that is coming:

“The time is coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers....This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.”¹⁶

Jesus Himself initiates this New Covenant in the upper room with His disciples. The institution of the Lord's Supper is the regular reminder of the New Covenant. We must come to Christ by faith. We must come empty handed. We must trust His sacrifice as singularly sufficient for the forgiveness of our sins (terms). Christ

Himself is the sealing sacrifice (seal of blood), and His sacrifice is once for all, never to be repeated.¹⁷

This covenant with Christ is the one which was foreshadowed by all the previous covenants. They were all arrows pointing God's people to their need of a Savior. The book of Hebrews teaches that the Old Testament saints knew the blood of animals was not sufficient for salvation.¹⁸ They were saved the same way that we are saved: *By trusting alone in God's provision for sin.*

Christ is indeed the fulfillment of all the covenants. He is the second Adam.¹⁹ He continues to uphold the creation until the final judgment.²⁰ He has given us the cleaning of true spiritual circumcision.²¹ He has made the Church to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.²² Christ Himself sits on the heavenly throne as an eternal King²³; He is David's Son and He is God's Son.²⁴ He is the destination and fulfillment of all the Old Testament covenants.

III. The Basics of Covenant Theology

Covenant Theology sees the Bible as one progressing epic of God's saving grace. The books of the Bible are merely chapters in this unified plan of salvation.

A. Covenant Theology defined

A working definition of Covenant Theology could be:

An interpretation of scripture which defines our relationship with God, and unifies the Bible, in terms of God's covenants with Adam, and with the second Adam: Jesus Christ.

Every person's relationship with God can be defined by their relationship with Adam or Christ. The original covenant God made in the Garden of Eden required perfect obedience. When Adam failed the terms, the scriptures say that we all fell into sin with him. This covenant is commonly referred to as the covenant of works. When Jesus fulfilled the terms of perfect obedience, the scriptures say He became a better Adam. He represents the covenant of grace.

B. The Covenant of Works

The book of Romans clearly teaches what theologians call the "federal headship" of Adam. Simply put, he was the representative of all mankind. Paul says it this way:

Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned.²⁵

Every man, woman and child is born into this covenant. Whether we like it or not, Adam is our representative. We are *guilty* of sin even *before* we have sinned.²⁶ Adam's guilt is

upon us. The Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) puts it this way:

The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam, and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience. Man by his fall having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the Covenant of Grace...²⁷

C. The Covenant of Grace

The WCF gives a beautiful description of the Covenant of Grace:

This covenant [of grace] was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel; under the law it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all forsignifying Christ to come....²⁸

This Covenant of Grace didn't start in the New Testament, it started in the Garden of Eden! Through trusting in God's provision for salvation, God's people have always been saved by grace through faith. The Old Testament points *forward* to God's provision, and the New Testament points *backward* to it.

For those who don't like Adam's representation, God has sent a second Adam: Jesus. He was tested just like the first Adam yet He was victorious!²⁹ Jesus offers to be the representative to all who would call on Him. He is the originator and securer of the Covenant of Grace. All of the covenants God made previously were designed to direct and draw men to Christ. As the WCF says, they were the promises, prophecies, sacrifices, types, and ordinances which foreshadowed the Messiah to come. They each drive home the reality that (1) God's terms are beyond our reach, (2) We are in need of a more perfect sacrifice, one that is eternal, (3) There is fellowship with God and blessing by trusting in His provision.

IV. Covenant Theology v. Dispensationalism: One Plan or Two?

This brings us to the central question between dispensationalists and covenant theologians: Does God have one plan of salvation and one people or does he have two plans of salvation and two peoples? These questions each deserve discussion.

A. A Brief History of Dispensationalism

Dispensationalism was first popularized in America by C. I. Scofield when he published the Scofield Bible [OSB] in 1909. This Bible included marginal notes which supported many of the tenets of Dispensationalism. This school of thought was developed further and better systematized by Charles Ryrie in his 1965 book *Dispensationalism Today*. Only two years later, in 1967, a newer edition of the Scofield Bible [NSB] was

produced. This updated version corrected some of the theological views which even dispensationalists recognized as incorrect.

B. One Plan of Salvation or Two?

The OSB gave clear impressions that Old Testament saints were saved by something other than faith in God's provision of a Savior.³⁰ Modern dispensationalists are very clear in affirming that "the basis of salvation always remains the same [throughout the Bible]. Man is saved only by believing in the atoning death of Christ."³¹ All Bible-believing Christians should agree wholeheartedly with this statement.

C. One People of God or Two?

The question remains, however, as to whether God has two purposes for two distinct peoples, or one purpose for one people. Louis Sperry Chafer characterizes that answer this way:

The dispensationalist believes that throughout the ages God is pursuing two distinct purposes: one related to the earth with earthly people and earthly objectives involved, which is Judaism; while the other is related to heaven with heavenly people and heavenly objectives, which is Christianity.³²

The covenant theologian takes a completely different view. God is doing one work, with two peoples he has joined into one. The two--believing Jews and Gentiles--are organically joined together. The scriptures teach that through the New Covenant God has grafted the believing Gentiles into the great olive tree of Israel.³³ There are not two separate peoples of God, but one. The New Testament makes this truth abundantly clear (emphasis mine):

This mystery is that through the gospel *the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body*, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 3:6)

There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28)

I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until *the full number of the Gentiles has come in*. (Romans 11:25)

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (that done in the body by the hands of men)--remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from *citizenship in Israel* and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have

been brought near through the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, *who has made the two one* and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility. . . . Consequently, *you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household.* (Ephesians 2:11-14, 19)

Keep in mind that all of these letters are addressed to Christians. Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. Their struggle was not with how to build an entirely new people of God, but how to incorporate the believing Gentiles into the existing household of believing Jews. This was how Paul planted his churches, first going to the synagogue and attracting all the believing Jews, then completing that core group with all the Gentiles who had faith.³⁴ This process is described by Paul as a “grafting” of wild olive branches into the well rooted olive tree of Israel. There are not two trees, but only one!

It is not surprising then that titles which are given to Israel are also given to the Church. Jeremiah prophesies about the new covenant and declares that God will make this covenant with “the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.”³⁵ But Jesus applies that covenant to the church.³⁶ The author of Hebrews makes it explicitly clear that the prophecy made by Jeremiah is to be applied directly to the Church.³⁷ The Church is referred to as a “chosen people”, “a holy nation”, “a royal priesthood”, and “a kingdom of priests.”³⁸ All these titles are special names God Himself had given to Israel.³⁹ These descriptions are correct because the believing Gentiles have been engrafted into believing Israel.

D. Abraham's offspring: Israel and the Church

The New Testament not only grants all Christians the titles and privileges of Israel, but also the titles and privileges of Abraham. Those who have Christian faith are regarded as Abraham’s offspring. The scriptures define more clearly what it meant to be a true Israelite, and what it means to be a true Christian. In the Old Testament there were many who were descended from Abraham, received circumcision, and called themselves a Jew; but only those who had the faith of Abraham were truly saved. So it is also in the New Testament. There are many who are raised in the church, baptized, and call themselves a Christian, but only those who have the faith of Abraham are truly saved. From Genesis to Revelation, those with the faith of Abraham are the true people of God, the heirs of all the promises God made to Abraham (emphasis mine):

A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, *a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly*; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. (Romans 2:28-29a)

Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. (Galatians 3:7)

If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:29)

Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all *Abraham's offspring*--not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. (Romans 4:16)

For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but *it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring.* (Romans 9:6-8)

This issue is at the core of Biblical interpretation. Dispensationalism says that God has two different plans for two different peoples. Covenant Theology says that God has one plan for one people: The spiritual offspring of Abraham. To these people belong the promises and inheritance of Abraham.

E. Should Scripture be *Divided* or *United*?

While the dispensationalist divides the scriptures up into seven different administrations, the covenantalist unifies all of the Old Testament covenants as road markers, pointing God's people to the Messiah to come. Though there are many covenants, they all reflect and enlarge the covenant of grace which God established in Genesis 3. All mankind falls under one of two covenants: (1) The covenant of works: established through Adam and based on perfect obedience, or (2) The covenant of grace: established through Christ and based on faith in Him alone as the perfect sacrifice for sin. We all, by nature, are under the covenant of works.⁴⁰ By faith in God's provision we can enter into the covenant of grace, just as the Old Testament saints did.

V. What Difference Does It Make?

Is this an abstract theological issue or does it have some practical impact for discipleship and Christian living? Both the dispensationalist and the covenantalist would say there are important consequences to adopting each viewpoint:

A. Old Testament / New Testament Relationship

If we divide the Bible (dispensationalism), then the Old Testament has very little relevance to the New Testament believer. Of course the Old Testament is full of examples of who God is and how He operates in the world. Of course the Old Testament gives me important historical data, but it is not fundamentally *my* story. It is the story of ancient and future Israel, not *me*.

However, if we unite the Bible (covenantalism), then the Old Testament becomes a *personal* history. By faith, I am Abraham's offspring, an heir to his promises. The Old Testament is the story of *my* people, and the patterns established there are the building

blocks of everything taught in the New Testament. In fact, the Old Testament patterns are *binding* unless the New Testament explicitly states that they are no longer in effect. This can best be illustrated by briefly examining the practices of baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the Christian's relationship to the law:

(1) Baptism

What does the New Testament primarily tell us about baptism? (a) It is a visible sign that God places upon His people,⁴¹ (b) It is to be administered to Christians and often their households,⁴² (c) It is to be done in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,⁴³ (d) It pictures our spiritual cleansing and our identification with Christ,⁴⁴ and (e) It is an act of obedient discipleship, not a saving grace.⁴⁵ With this basic set of information evangelicals have split over the appropriate administration of baptism.

If we look only at the New Testament data and divide away the existing Old Testament patterns, then there are arguments to be made for believer's immersion as the Biblical model for baptism. After all, we are "buried" with Christ in baptism⁴⁶, and Peter clearly says to "repent and be baptized."⁴⁷ This would be impossible for an infant.

But what if the Old Testament patterns are used as a guide and framework for the New Testament commands? Covenant theology reminds us that the New Testament was not formed in a vacuum, but among Jews who would have seen the fulfillment of their covenantal hope in Christianity. The Old Testament rite of circumcision was hotly debated in the New Testament community. Paul argues authoritatively that circumcision is no longer binding,⁴⁸ and speaks of baptism as a spiritual circumcision.⁴⁹ What were the patterns connected to circumcision? (a) It was a visible sign God placed upon His people, (b) It was to be administered to God's people and their households, (c) It pictured their spiritual cleansing and their identification with God, (d) It was an act of obedient discipleship, not a saving grace, and (e) It involved the shedding of blood. The covenantalist sees these same principles established in the sacrament of circumcision, with one exception: baptism doesn't involve bloodshed. Christ's blood has been shed "once for all"⁵⁰ and any rituals involving blood are now fulfilled in Him. They are no longer appropriate.

If baptism is the New Testament counterpart to circumcision, then we would expect to see similar patterns in its implementation. With a closer examination of the text, this is exactly what we see. Peter tells the great crowd at Pentecost to repent and be baptized, because the "promise is for you and your children."⁵¹ The book of Acts records household baptisms. Paul tells the Philippian jailer to "believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household."⁵² The letters to the saints include sections devoted to children.⁵³ In light of the Old Testament patterns and the New Testament information, the weight of evidence would be heavily tilted toward baptism of believers and their children.

(2) The Lord's Supper

As Jesus gathers with His disciples to celebrate the Jewish Passover, He infuses the Passover meal with new meaning. The meal is to be the seal of a new covenant. This is the covenant which Jeremiah prophesied about. Paul makes it clear in 1 Corinthians 11 that this new celebration is to be an ongoing ordinance in the life of the Church.

This new sacrament isn't created from thin air; it is the fulfillment of an age old Passover ritual. It is impossible to understand the full significance of Christian communion without seeing it as the fulfillment of the Jewish Passover.

(3) The Christian's Relationship to the Law

The dispensationalist teaches that all of the Old Testament laws are in no way binding on the Christian. The legislation of Israel is only for Israel. The Church is governed only by Christ's law of love.

The covenantalist teaches that the laws of Israel form the basis for God's moral expectations for the Church. Again, the patterns of the Old Testament carry on, unless the New Testament explicitly overturns them. The laws of Israel were generally divided into three categories: (a) the civil law, (b) the ceremonial law, and (c) the moral law, otherwise known as the Ten Commandments.

The civil laws of Israel are no longer in effect because the Church is not a political institution. The ceremonial laws are expressly overturned through God's vision to Peter. God instructs Peter to take and eat meats which were unclean because He had now declared them to be clean.⁵⁴

Paul also goes to great lengths to explain that the ceremonial laws of Israel are no longer binding.⁵⁵ The logical question is this: If the Church is a clearly separate institution, why would Paul need to correct the assumption that the Old Testament patterns are to continue? It was only natural for the early Church to see Christianity as the fulfillment of Judaism, not something completely different.

However, the moral law continues to define God's standards of conduct for His people. It is affirmed, not overturned. Jesus even expands on it, teaching His disciples that it is not enough to keep the moral law in the flesh, but it must be maintained in the spirit too. Jesus also gives us a quick summary--from the Old Testament--of the two tables of the law: (1) love the Lord your God with all you heart and soul and strength, and (2) love your neighbor as yourself.⁵⁶ The Ten Commandments, and these summaries, are designed to do two very different things: (1) expose our sinfulness and need for a Savior⁵⁷, and (2) provide a model for righteous living.⁵⁸ The moral law still has an important role to play in the life of the believer. The New Testament affirms that critical role.

B. Eschatology (the "end-times")

The dispensationalist tends to be woodenly literal when looking at Old Testament prophecies. They believe the prophecies are made to Israel and may only be literally

fulfilled in the nation of Israel. The covenantalist, however, is willing to see potential words of prophecy, which were directed toward Israel, fulfilled in the Church. Why? Because the apostles apply prophecies in this way.⁵⁹ The scriptures themselves teach us, by example, how to interpret. Theologians call this *the analogy of faith*. The goal is always to interpret the Bible in the way that it interprets itself.

The dispensationalist believes that many of the promises made to Israel have been “put on hold” during the era of the Church, only to be fulfilled at some point in the future. This leads them to a strict Premillennial view of the end-times. They believe God has unfinished business with Israel.

The covenantalist believes that God has essentially fulfilled all His promises to Abraham and Israel, and that the eternal aspect of His promises will only be fulfilled in the new heavens and new earth. However, the Old Testament clearly indicates that the primary promises of God have already been fulfilled:

Not one of all the LORD's good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled. (Joshua 21:45)

You know with all your heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the LORD your God gave to you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed. (Joshua 23:14)

Not one word has failed of all the good promises he gave through his servant Moses. (1 Kings 8:56)

Believing that God's promises have primarily been fulfilled through the nation of Israel and the Church, the covenantalist is not locked into a particular view of the end-times. Covenantalists may be premillennial, amillennial, or postmillennial. The authors of the Westminster Confession of Faith--an extremely detailed exposition of covenantal theology--say very little about eschatology. They affirm that Christ will return again as judge, and then comes the end. This is the position of the historic creeds of the Church.⁶⁰

C. General Optimism v. General Pessimism

The dispensationalist believes that the rapture of the Church and establishment of the millennial kingdom is the next great phase on the calendar of history. Time is short and there is no time to waste on earthly matters. The Church is a heavenly and spiritual institution whose primary duty is the saving of the lost. Christ is waiting to establish His throne and is currently only interested in spiritual matters. These kinds of factors lead to a neglect of the culture and a general pessimism about the earthly future. The motto of dispensationalism is: “Why polish brass on a sinking ship?”

The covenantalist believes in the current Lordship of Christ and His cultural mandate.⁶¹ God's people are called to be salt and light.⁶² Though we will not experience the fullness of Christ's rule until He comes again, we can expect a measure of success in winning souls *and* in transforming the culture. The two go hand in hand. Christ Himself taught us to pray “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”⁶³

This perspective leads to a general optimism. The gospel is spreading. The kingdom is spreading. Though the final stage of the kingdom will not be in place until Christ returns, we ought to expect some sort of spiritual *and cultural* progress in the world until that day. Jesus said that He would build His Church and “the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”⁶⁴ He describes a Church on the offensive; one that is bashing down Satan’s strongholds.

D. View of the Old Testament

The old school dispensationalist would have argued that the entire Old Testament (and the New Testament, up to Acts 2) is directed toward Israel, not the Church. In this train of thought many pastors would preach and teach primarily from the New Testament letters. The Old Testament is used only for occasional illustration and character studies.

The covenant theologian recognizes himself as a child of Abraham.⁶⁵ This is not the story of an ancient people, it is *a personal spiritual history!* We cannot understand the New Testament without the enlightenment, history, patterns, prophecies, shadows and context of the Old Testament. Without the Old Testament we lose 75 percent of all that God wants to communicate to His people.

The Old Testament also provides a road map pointing to Christ. We see Him so clearly in the covenants established, and in the pictures and shadows of scripture. Christ is the cleft of the rock.⁶⁶ He is the sacrificial lamb. He is the Messiah sent to deliver us from bondage. He is the King to whom the world turns for wisdom and tribute. The Old Testament is a beautiful spiritual history with a thousand road signs pointing God’s people to the Messiah to come.⁶⁷

This is the goal of covenant theology: To unify the entire Bible into one great drama of redemption, with Jesus Christ as the shadow and fulfillment of all history. He is Lord yesterday, today, and forever.

Epilogue: Common Questions & Answers

Several miscellaneous questions raised toward covenant theologians are worthy of individual comment:

A. Is God Finished with Israel?

The dispensationalist is adamant that God has much unfinished business with the nation of Israel. Is God finished with Israel? Opinions among covenantalists are varied.

Some would say that God now treats the Jews like any other people group. They have no special status. Others would look at a text such as Romans 11 and conclude that God does have a special future planned for Israel. Many believe there will be a significant number of Jewish converts just before the second coming of Christ.

B. Why is Covenant Theology the Minority View Among Evangelicals?

Though covenant theology is currently the minority view among evangelicals, it was the dominant view only a few generations ago. The founders of America, the pilgrims, were almost exclusively covenantal.

In the 20th century a debate began. It is referred to as the Modernist - Fundamentalist Controversy. Many mainline church leaders were questioning the accuracy and veracity of the Bible. They often spiritualized away the miracles of the Bible in favor of humanistic or rationalistic interpretations. The supernatural elements of the scriptures were written off as allegorical.

The Fundamentalists that opposed this Modernistic approach included both early dispensationalists and covenantalists. They both held to the “fundamentals” of Christian orthodoxy. However, many dispensationalists questioned the covenantalists’ view of scripture, because the covenantalists allowed for a certain amount of allegorical interpretation. Even today some dispensationalists question the covenantal use of allegory and symbol as valid tools of interpretation.

More and more people today are rediscovering covenant theology and its influence is growing. Our hope is that there would be a spirit of brotherhood between these two evangelical camps, as their goals are the same: The faithful interpretation of God’s word, the effective evangelism and discipleship of God’s people, and ultimately the Glory of God’s name.

C. Is Allegorical Interpretation Ever Correct?

Allegory is an interpretive tool that can be extremely helpful, but it can also be abused. The goal of interpretation is to read each passage and glean from it what God is trying to communicate. Clearly, God used many authors, styles and methods in producing the scriptures. Allegory is one of those styles.

Paul teaches in Galatians that the historical account of Sarah and Hagar is an allegory to help us understand the difference between law and promise.⁶⁸ He uses the Greek word “allegoreo” from which we get the English word “allegory.” The Old Testament is filled with accurate history which often also serves as an allegory for the Christian experience. The Passover is an allegory of how the blood of Christ protects us from the wrath of God. The exodus is an allegory of how God delivers His people from the bondage of Satan into His Kingdom of promise. The reign of Solomon is an allegory of the final reign of Christ: It will be a time of peace and all nations will honor Him as their Lord.

Allowing for allegory does not in any way diminish the historical accuracy or truthfulness of the scriptures. The goal is to interpret the Bible the way it interprets itself, which sometimes includes allegory.

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¹Scotfield puts it this way: “The word of truth, then, has right divisions, and it must be evident that, as one cannot be ‘a workman that needeth not to be ashamed’ without observing them, so any study of that word which ignores those divisions must be in large measure profitless and confusing.”

²The Greek word *orthotomeo* has a range of meaning, but from the context seems to mean “correctly interpret” as opposed to “divide.”

³Covenant Theologians are indebted to O. Palmer Robertson’s book *Christ of the Covenants*.

⁴Genesis 3:15.

⁵Genesis 8:20.

⁶Genesis 9:13.

⁷Genesis 17:1.

⁸A “Theophany” is a visible manifestation of God, usually from the Old Testament.

⁹The confirmation of the covenant in Genesis 17 also involves blood through the covenant sign of circumcision.

¹⁰Genesis 15:13-14.

¹¹Exodus 24:8.

¹²Exodus 19:6.

¹³2 Samuel 7:11b.

¹⁴2 Samuel 7:14.

¹⁵2 Samuel 7:16.

¹⁶Jeremiah 31:31-33.

¹⁷Hebrews 10:10.

¹⁸Hebrews 10:1-4.

¹⁹1 Corinthians 15:21-22.

²⁰2 Peter 3:6-7.

²¹Colossians 2:11.

²²1 Peter 2:9; Revelation 1:6.

²³Acts 2:36; John 18:37.

²⁴Psalms 2; Hebrews 1:1-13.

²⁵Romans 5:12.

²⁶Psalms 51:5.

²⁷WCF, VII:ii,iii.

²⁸WCF, VII:v.

²⁹Hebrews 4:15; Matthew 4:1-11.

³⁰In reference to the new covenant, Scotfield wrote, “no longer legal obedience saves.” (p.1115, note 1, emphasis

mine); In speaking of the Mosaic covenant, Scofield wrote that Israel “exchanged grace for law.”

³¹J. Vernon Mcgee, commentary on 2 Timothy 2:15 (p.467).

³²*Dispensationalism Today*, p.45.

³³There are not two trees, there is one tree, into which the Gentiles have been grafted. (Romans 11:17ff).

³⁴Acts 14:1; 17:2.

³⁵Jeremiah 31:31.

³⁶Luke 22:20.

³⁷Hebrews 8:6ff.

³⁸1 Peter 2:5,9; Revelation 1:6; 5:10; Colossians 3:12.

³⁹Exodus 19:6; Deuteronomy 7:6.

⁴⁰Romans 5:12,18-19.

⁴¹Acts 2:38.

⁴²Acts 16:15, 31.

⁴³Matthew 28:19.

⁴⁴Acts 22:16; Colossians 2:12.

⁴⁵Galatians 2:16; Romans 3:28.

⁴⁶Colossians 2:12.

⁴⁷Acts 2:38.

⁴⁸Galatians 5:2-6.

⁴⁹Colossians 2:11-12.

⁵⁰Hebrews 10:10.

⁵¹Acts 2:39.

⁵²Acts 16:15, 31-33.

⁵³Ephesians 6:1-3.

⁵⁴Acts 10-11.

⁵⁵Romans 14; Colossians 2:16-17.

⁵⁶Matthew 22:34-40; Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18.

⁵⁷Romans 3:20.

⁵⁸Psalms 119:105.

⁵⁹Acts 2:14-21 is one excellent example of this; there are many others.

⁶⁰The Apostles' Creed [2nd century A.D.]: “(Christ) ascended into heaven. From thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.”; The Nicene Creed [A.D. 325]: “(Christ) shall come again, with glory, to judge both the living and the dead.”

⁶¹Acts 2:33, 36.

⁶²Matthew 5:13-16.

⁶³Matthew 6:10.

⁶⁴Matthew 16:18.

⁶⁵See section IV:D of this paper.

⁶⁶Exodus 33:22.

⁶⁷Luke 24:27, 44.

⁶⁸Galatians 4:21-31.