

PREMILLENNIALISM AND COVENANT THEOLOGY

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What is Covenant Theology?

The Bible contains many covenants and many dispensations. Those who put primary emphasis on the differences between these covenants and dispensations often are referred to as dispensationalists. Those who see a unity in these covenants and dispensations are called covenant theologians.

Covenant theology understands that God has one over-arching purpose in his dealings with our universe—and that is the establishing of his eternal kingdom through the plan of redemption.

Dispensationalists rather see God's plan as manifold, involving one plan and purpose for his earthly people Israel, and a separate plan and purpose for his heavenly people the church. They see a unity only in the common thread of God's glorifying himself in all his plans. The main distinctive of dispensationalism is the belief that Old Testament Israel is totally distinct from the New Testament church. In fact, the church, in their view, did not exist until Pentecost. Covenant theologians say that the invisible church began with the first saved person (Adam!), and that the visible church as an institution started long before New Testament times, with Abraham.

While dispensationalists divide the Bible into dispensations, covenant theologians detect an underlying unity—all these dispensations, and the biblical covenants which define them, are outworkings of one great covenant of grace. The Westminster Confession of Faith defines this covenant of grace as follows:

Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant [the covenant of works made with Adam], the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace: wherein he freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved; and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto life, his Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe. (7:3)

Reformed theologians often speak of another covenant which undergirds this covenant of grace. That is the covenant of redemption, which was made between God the Father and God the Son before the world began. It is by this covenant that Jesus Christ was ordained to obey his Father, come into this world, and redeem his people to salvation in himself. This covenant provides for Jesus his eternal kingdom, in which his elect ones will find their place of glory and service forever.

There is strong Scriptural support for the covenant of redemption. While Scripture does not name the covenant of redemption as such, it does expressly teach its essential features:

1. God chose the elect to salvation before He created the world. (Eph. 1:4)
2. God chose the elect to be saved in Christ, as their atoning sacrifice. (Eph. 1:4, 5, 6, 7, 11)
3. Christ's death for the salvation of the elect thus was determined before the foundation of the world--a conclusion which Scripture itself supports. (1 Pet. 1:19-20; Rev. 13:8)
4. Christ willingly undertook His humiliation, obedience, sufferings, and sacrifice in response to his Father's will. (John 10:11-18; 17:4, 8, 18, 23, 25)

This submission involved a difficult decision for his human nature, as seen in Lk. 12:50 and John 12:27, and in the Garden of Gethsemane.

5. In obeying this command of the Father, Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of the suffering of the Messiah. (esp. Isa. 53 and NT quotations; Zech. 12:10 and Rev. 1:7)
6. As the Messiah was to receive an eternal kingdom, so Jesus expected to receive it. (Lk. 22:29-30)
7. As a part of this kingdom, Jesus Christ would receive as his own an elect seed, to be saved and glorified, and to be with him forever. (Isa. 53:10-11; Jn. 17:2, 9, 24; Eph. 5:25-27)

This covenant of redemption is the basis for the covenant of grace. God now offers to sinners a way of salvation apart from our own works. We can be saved by faith in God's Messiah. Jesus Christ perfectly obeyed God, and died in our place, so that we can be saved by grace.

The covenant of grace, in operation since the time of Adam, was first revealed in detail to Abraham. It forms the basis of all the major subsequent covenants—those with Moses, David, and the new covenant of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, Jesus and Paul. The true believers of the Old Testament dispensation are one people with the believers in the New Testament period. All are included in the covenant of grace, and thus all are spiritual children of Abraham, sharing his faith and his blessings.

A practical result of covenant theology is infant baptism. If we are one people with Abraham, then we receive the same promises as Abraham. And since those promises were directed to him and his children, Christians today recognize God's claims on their own children. Circumcision was the sign of the covenant placed on the children of believers in the Old Testament; it symbolized their submission to God's covenant, including its threats and rewards.

Baptism is the sign of the covenant in the New Testament; it has the same symbolism as circumcision. When we baptize our children, we recognize God's interest in them and their place in his covenant people. Just as circumcision did not guarantee salvation then, baptism does not guarantee salvation now. But it does symbolize the new covenant and its blessings. When we practice infant baptism, we recognize the unity of the covenant of grace throughout the various dispensations.

What is Premillennialism?

There are many passages in the Bible which speak of a time when Christ rules over the earth, the earth is filled with peace and righteousness, and people recognize Jesus as their Lord. Yet at the same time there still is death and judgment on the earth. In Revelation 20, the apostle John says this period lasts a thousand years. The word "millennium" comes from the Latin word for a thousand (the related word "chiliast" comes from the Greek word for a thousand). The premillennialist believes that Jesus will return to the earth and raise the righteous dead before this golden age of prophecy is fulfilled.

Postmillennialists believe that Jesus will come after this millennium; and amillennialists believe that this millennium already exists, either in the church on earth, or at the present time in heaven.

All dispensationalists are also premillennialists. They see the millennium as adapted for the earthly people of God, the Jews. In their view the New Testament church will have little to do with the millennium; the church will be enjoying fellowship with God in the heavenly Jerusalem, apart from the earth.

On the other hand, many covenant theologians are amillennialists. They believe that the Old Testament promises of the coming kingdom speak in spiritual terms of the New Testament blessings we receive in the church. If so, there is no need for a future Jewish kingdom to be established before the final judgment and the eternal state.

Can a covenant theologian also be a premillennialist? We say, "Yes!" The future millennium is not a step back into Judaism, as dispensationalists would believe. Rather, it is progress toward the future perfect eternal state, the "coming ages," in which the Lord rules over his people and in which "his servants will serve him." The kingdom of God is eternal; it is not limited to the thousand years of the millennium. The millennium is only the first stage of Christ's eternal kingdom. Only in covenant theology can the millennium attain its true significance.

Relation of Covenant Theology to Biblical Covenants and Dispensations

Covenant theologians understand that there are several biblical covenants and dispensations. At different times God directed his activities among us in different ways. From the time of Adam's fall until Abraham God dealt especially with individuals and individual

families. Certain godly individuals stand out: Enoch, Noah, Job, and Melchizedek are examples. With Abraham God established a chosen family and nation, and instituted circumcision as his covenant sign. Reformed theologians have seen in the covenant with Abraham the beginning of the visible, organized church on the earth, with its possession of the word of God, the sacraments, and the means of discipline. When God revealed his law to Moses a new dispensation began, with an established priesthood, the tabernacle and temple system, and the national structure of civil laws. Finally, when Christ came, we entered a new dispensation, with the breaking down of the barrier between Jew and Gentile, the abrogation of the Mosaic ceremonial laws, the dissolution of Israel's civil structure, and the new sacraments of the New Testament.

The Westminster Confession of Faith recognizes these dispensations when it says that the Old and New Testaments are not "two covenants of grace differing in substance, but one and the same under various dispensations" (7:6). Yet, as can be seen, the Confession places all these dispensations under the one covenant of grace. This is the key for covenant theology. The biblical covenants, and the dispensations that come from them, are all related to the covenant of grace, which in turn brings in the promised kingdom, the rule of Christ over his redeemed people.

The Place of the Resurrection

The biblical covenants promised that the Old Testament patriarchs would personally take part in the possession of the land of Canaan and in the enjoyment of God's covenant blessings. God promised this particularly to Abraham (Gen. 17:8), to Isaac (Gen. 26:3), and to Jacob (Gen. 28:13). Centuries later God called Moses to bring back his people to the promised land, and he referred those promises at the burning bush (Ex. 3:6). Moses and Joshua led the children of the patriarchs into Canaan, but not the patriarchs themselves; they had already died. When Jesus defended the resurrection against the unbelieving Sadducees, he gave this verse from Exodus as proof that there would be a resurrection (Mt. 22:31-32). Note this--Jesus claimed that God's words to Moses proved not that Abraham's, Isaac's, and Jacob's souls were alive, but that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would be raised from the dead. Only by a physical resurrection could they attain the promise made by God in his covenant.

In the New Testament the resurrection is something to be gained (Lk. 20:35). John calls it the "resurrection of life" or the "first resurrection" (Jn. 5:29; Rev. 20:6). It is in the resurrection that we find the Christian's hope. The blessings of this life, even being with Christ in our death, are wonderful in themselves; but it is the resurrection that brings us our joy and fulfillment. It is the goal to which we strive; it is the revelation in us of the power and glory of God. It is in the resurrection that we find fellowship with Christ and all the saints, our final contentment.

If the covenant promises are fulfilled in the resurrection, the consequence is premillennialism. The other major systems, amillennialism and postmillennialism, require the covenant promises to be fulfilled prior to the resurrection. Premillennialism is not only consistent with covenant theology, it also is most consistent with biblical theology.

The Covenant of Grace and the Promised Kingdom

If this covenant of grace really is true, then those biblical covenants which lead to the messianic kingdom are all a part of this over-arching covenant. The covenants with Abraham, Moses, and David, and the new covenant, are just steps to bring in the promised messianic kingdom, involving the salvation of all God's elect. This prophesied kingdom of God is not a segmented part of God's purpose in Scripture; it is the goal of Scripture. The first words of Jesus' preaching in the gospels and the last words of Paul's in Acts are about the kingdom of God.

The covenant of grace provides the unifying center for the biblical covenants and dispensations. While there is progress through the different dispensations, they point to a common goal. The old covenant sacraments of circumcision and the Passover sacrifice are replaced by the new covenant sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, but the significance of these is the same. They are all sacraments of the covenant of grace.

Charity and Theology

As one reads the discussions on these doctrines, he quickly becomes aware that theologians from all the major orthodox positions are seeking to follow the truth of Scripture as they understand it. The doctrines of the church, the covenants, and the last days are woven all through Scripture, and it is possible to make convincing cases for differing viewpoints in these matters. For this reason, it is important that we carry on these investigations and discussions in a spirit of Christian charity and with a willingness to change when shown to be in error in any particular point. Eschatology should not become a battleground in our churches.

On the other hand, it is comforting to us who are premillennialists to know that this understanding of the millennium is consistent with both the promises of the biblical covenants, and the tenets of covenant theology.