

Covenant Theology

A framework for understanding the Bible as understood by a dumb guy.

Covenant Theology (CT) is a system of connecting and interpreting Biblical themes that seeks to take, as a whole, the message of God's Word in a means that most effectively allows that Word to reveal itself in relation to itself. My best understanding is that, with CT, the idea that Scripture interprets Scripture is most thoroughly and accurately accomplished. What CT does not do is provide an exclusive claim to correctly exegeting the Gospel in order to reach the world. Other systems, including Dispensational Theology (DT) have no less success in proclaiming Christ and Him crucified for our sins to unbelievers.

Something that captures the essence of God's consistency throughout scripture: Adam and Eve were clothed by God immediately after they sinned and the Church at the end of the age will be clothed in Christ when all sin is taken away. The garden was closed to us and the Earth was cursed. The Earth will be made new and the garden open to us again in the end.

My conviction is that God has dealt with His creation, throughout eternity, in the framework of covenants. From the first breath of Adam, God has operated within a covenant relationship with Man. Before that, God in the three Persons of the Trinity even made the Covenant of Redemption. Ephesians 1:3-14 illuminates this concept using the terms "before the foundation of the world," "predestined," "His will," "purpose." As an aside, this passage also affirms the Trinity as a fact, that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, which is fundamental to the Christian faith.

So CT can be divided into three basic covenants. Redemption, Works and Grace. Redemption is the governing covenant, made within the Trinity, wherein God would create a people to redeem for Himself. Following are the two subordinate covenants. Works is the covenant made first with Adam and actually satisfied in Christ's obedience unto death. Grace is the covenant that, based on Christ's satisfaction and atonement, is made with all who are predestined to believe.

Within the two subordinate covenants are other supporting covenants from God, including the Noahic, Mosaic, Davidic and so-on. These, if taken as relative to Grace and Works, are connected either to God's requirements for His people (law/works), which will be accomplished in Christ, or as related to promise of the advent and accomplishment of Christ Himself. All of this finds its fulfillment in Christ in the New Testament (New Covenant) wherein the covenants are restated from the perspective of that fulfillment (as opposed to the hope and expectation looking forward to God's fulfillment of redemption in the OT).

Here is where I think the meat is in CT. If we have brought aboard the idea that God operates with His people in and through covenants, we must look to the NT to explain fully what the OT, having a limited insight on what the fulfillment of God's promises really means, could not. CT does not bridge the gap of the OT and NT but rather sees the two as a flowing, historical narrative in its entirety. It is not individual packets of data that contribute to a textbook, rather a comprehensive message that centers on the person and work of Christ, reasoning the origins, starting conditions, requirements, ongoing progress through history and end result of the whole story.

God's intention is for man to have fellowship with Him. "The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever." Adam started in this plan of God with conditions set upon him. When Adam failed to uphold the Covenant of Works, God set about with promises that He would, in His mercy, accomplish the requirements for men Himself. This means the Covenant of Works does not terminate, though men cannot satisfy its demands. It also means that the Covenant of Grace is equally persistent, since God's expressed will depends on it if God is to have what He purposed, Man's chief end.

All of this leads me to look at the NT in view of covenants, and also as fulfillment of the OT. In the NT, it is apparent that God's covenantal dealings with His people have not ceased in any way. Certain administrations either changed or were superseded (obsolete administration via the Ceremonial Law, Mosaic Covenant), but the NT continues in presentation and application of Covenantal language and administration.

I believe a clear example of this continuation is in the repeated inclusion of children and households and constant comparison of Israel as a body of people, historically in national Israel, to spiritually in True Israel. This is most critical in Acts where the church is being established in its infancy. In defense of this view, I must assert that any deviation from covenant dealings should become apparent with obvious clarity in this book first and foremost. Instead, Acts seems to replicate the covenantal means by which God deals with His people. Specifically, Peter's speech in Acts 2:38-40, 3:17-26 are covenantal in their language. Acts 3:25-26 connects Abraham and Gospel explicitly enough that we can say CT is the Gospel. It's all about God's promise to redeem His creation, stem to stern.

Now, it must be understood that God's covenants are not administered in a way that saves His people. People are saved by the person and work of Christ. This presents a problem for us when we look at the Law and the Church. Covenant is the promise; Christ is fulfillment of that promise. In whatever administration of whatever covenant (circumcision, nation, ceremony, Law, church), the center of all is Christ Himself.

We tend to assume or presuppose that the Elect comprise all of God's covenant community. Especially in the New Testament where fulfillment, if taken incorrectly, seems to say that salvation is the mark of the church. This is simply not so. God's covenant community consists of both regenerate and unregenerate people. Not all of OT Israel was elect, nor are all members of the NT church elect. Not even all of Christ's 12 disciples were elect (Judas). This situation is because both Israel and the church are houses of people who are in covenant with God, not explicitly regenerate. God expects something from these people (belief and obedience) and so He has dealt with both spiritual conditions equally throughout history. In other words, elect and non-elect within the covenant community are dealt with through judgment.

Elect are judged via Christ's substitution and non-elect are judged via the absence of Christ's substitution but both are called, warned, disciplined and served within the covenant framework. Note that Isaac's sons were absolute indications of this consistency: both sons were included in covenant administration and yet Jacob was loved while Esau was hated. The New Testament includes a similar situation wherein Peter and Judas both betrayed Christ. One was forgiven and the other condemned but

both were in the position of disciples of Christ.

Luke 19:44, 23:28, Acts 2:39, Romans 9:7, 1 Cor 7:14, Ephesians 6:1, 2 John 1:4, John 4:53, Acts 10:2, Acts 11:14, Acts 16:15-34, Acts 18:8, 1 Cor 1:16, 1 Cor 16:15.

In the church, we see a correspondence to Israel. The church is Israel fully realized. This makes sense if we consider the nature of both New Testament Church and Old Testament Israel and see their positions in the covenants.

Israel is God's People. They are His people. A holy nation. Exodus 6:1-9.

The Church is God's people. They are His people. A holy nation. Hebrews 8:1-13.

Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed." So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. *Galatians 3:7-9*

Both are given rules to live by and ordinances that set members apart from the outside. Circumcision and ceremonial law, the temple and priesthood served Israel for their identification, purification and instruction. Baptism and the Lord's Supper serving the Church for their identification, purification and instruction. Note that Christ is ultimately the source of regeneration and forgiveness in both.

The Old Testament covenantal administration was a shadow of what Christ would do perfectly. From circumcision to sacrifice, from kings to prophets and judges, Christ is all of them now.

Similarly, both were required to accomplish God's will. They both were to believe and obey Him.

This tells me that there may be differences in the way God dealt with His people economically, the fundamental essence of His people has not changed. Though the Old Covenant was outward in application, being written on stone and practiced in ritual and the New Covenant is inward, written on the hearts of men, the elect in Israel are saved in the same fashion as the elect in the church. God calls them to repentance and to trust in Him for new hearts, forgiveness, and to supply that obedience that cannot be accomplished by the people.

So, by way of that, certain principles should stand in the New Testament. For instance entry into the church is administered by the church just as entry into Israel was administered by Israelites. Specifically, Israel had ritual requirements to bring outsiders into the covenant community. Converts were required to be circumcised and comply with the ceremonial law. Similarly, church members are to be baptized and must comply with church order and conduct. The feasts of the OT are replaced by the Lord's Supper in the NT. He, as it were, satisfies all the feasts in His flesh and blood.

God Himself did not step in to handle the initiatory rites of the Israelites. He had priests to do that. He has always worked through men for His purposes. This, of course is supported by the idea that He chooses men to proclaim the Gospel. We have no problem with preachers preaching but so often,

there is great distress when someone claims more than that; that the Church actually has the keys to the Kingdom. God has always run the system through His people. Christ chose out 12 apostles for the administration of His New Covenant.

The apostles established the church and here we are today, that same church (at least theoretically now), doing what God has purposed all along. I think our American individualism, Kantian philosophy and all that's gone on in the last 200 years has done great damage to the idea of the church, but if we are honestly looking at the Bible, it's not hard to see what God means for His covenant people to be doing.

Here is where baptism of children comes in. Israel was dealt with as a holy *people*. The Church is also a holy *people*. The fundamental unit of God's operation in the OT was with families, or households, though of course there were individuals with whom God dealt. Entire families, starting from the garden, were objects of God's covenantal dealings. Usually, promises made were on the basis of the belief of a *head* of a family. A believing adult would be the criterion that admitted an entire household into covenant relationship with God.

There is no indication in the New Testament that this has changed. Granted there is no outright statement to either side of the baptism argument, but it remains, absolutely, the responsibility of the side that affirms a change to consistent practice to prove the fact that God at some point ceased to deal with families as his primary unit for covenants. Therefore, if the Church operates on the same premise as Israel, meaning maintaining membership rules and proceedings for entry and following practice, the Church is in the business of serving families the covenant sign and seal of membership.

Since there is such consistency throughout the Bible, interpreting eschatology is to be considered with attention to consistency as well. This is why CT looks at New Testament and Old Testament language for correlation. Revelation, being the important case, is frequently treated with great disrespect to the masses of prophetic texts in the OT. Instead of taking apocalyptic language properly, as largely symbolic, temporal/spacial attributes are forced on the text. This creates so much ambiguity that Revelation becomes just what Scripture claims it is not. Scripture is to be legible. Revelation is a letter which was written to the seven churches in Asia Minor *for those churches' benefit*. The garbled, confusing interpretation generally held of Revelation today reduces its value to Asia Minor of 70 A.D. to cryptic nonsense. We must realize the amazing parallels in the language of Revelation with that of OT prophecy and the apocalyptic writing of the day.

The problem with Ezekiel 40-48 and so on is difficult enough. I have to say that, though I haven't studied enough on eschatology to be considered a worthy source, there is a valid perspective related to Revelation. The vision-related high mountain in both books indicates just that, a vision, a prophetic indicator that the text is to be handled symbolically, not literally. The dealings with sacrifices later in the Ezekiel passage are hard, but they certainly, if taken literally, seem to claim that God intends for sacrifices, sin offerings to be re-instituted. That falls flat. Christ finished sacrifices off for good. Doesn't this whole passage actually sound just like Revelation? "Son of man, look with your eyes..." And then

Revelation 7, John is told what he'll see, the 144,000 of Israel, and then what happens when he actually looks? He sees...*all* the saints. Every one of them.

How is this apocalyptic thing relevant to the discussion? CT seeks to interpret Scripture with Scripture, maintaining continuity where possible. When we look at Revelation through the lens of symbolic language that is used in other Biblical prophecy and related writings we see that redemption's story builds and builds upon itself from the beginning in a series of historical events all with a consistent spiritual theme. Christ is victorious. We are forgiven. God is sovereign. All those things did not suddenly appear out of thin air in the NT. They were suggested and looked for and shadowed from the beginning.

Yes, this negates a return to Israel. If read in the fashion I believe is correct, Israel's due was met as God promised. They received the Land. They, as God told Moses in Deuteronomy, were a stiff-necked people and would not keep the Covenant He'd given. Therefore, they did not keep the Land. But their rest in Him, the eternal rest was never removed. Those of Israel, true Israel, rest in Him now. They are part of the royal priesthood of the saints. They are with those of us in the New Testament church who have fallen asleep and await God's final judgment. It is inconsistent with the lay of Scripture to believe that God would have two means of redemption for two different peoples. He has said there is only one way to the Father, and that is by Christ. There was but one Christ, whose work was efficacious for both Old Testament saints and New Testament Saints. Israel is no more as a temporal or geographic national theocratic people who are chosen by God. Israel is now fulfilled in Christ and we, as much as Abraham, are in Christ.

Bear with me as I trace out this problem with Israel for a moment. It does weigh heavily on the issue of hermeneutics and rightly presenting the Gospel. I assert that Israel, as a nation, has no position in the end times. Romans 11 is a major source of contention for both sides of the National Israel argument and so I'll argue from here. This issue of grafting in is one of faith, not genetics or creeds. Paul is dealing with gentiles here, driving them to a right view of their inclusion in the Covenant. It really was a mystery for the gentiles (and, I would presume, the Israelites) that it did appear that Israel had been rejected completely. But we have to look at it all like this: Israel, speaking of her elect, had never been rejected and never will be. Israel is in Christ, meaning all those who are true sons of Abraham are true Israel. Simply enough, we don't need to pull out of all this the idea that Israel has been "hardened" for a set period and will be revisited savingly as a nation. They, meaning every single one who believes, who is given to Christ by the Father, will be saved -- *un-hardened*.

This grafting is literally an extension of the Gospel, the Covenant, to the Gentiles. The Gentiles are grafted in while national Israel, those pharisees who saw their circumcision and genetic heritage as their connection to God, was seemingly shorn from the tree. In truth, no unbelieving Jew has ever been in the equation. God has a bottom line, which is belief. He's never offered another way of salvation. The regenerate have always, in every case, called out to God for mercy, believed, repented and obeyed. If we look at it this way, it makes no sense that God would suddenly, at some point in time, sort out the genetic remnant Israel for a grand conversion or revival. Today, Jews can no longer trace their parentage back that far anyway. The greatness of this passage, Romans 11, is to show how glorious God's work is in saving the gentiles. And just as great is the clear teaching that not all Israel has fallen away for good.

Some will be grafted back in, not because they're Israelites, but because they *believed*.

Why is this so important to the Gospel? Because Christians have become so wrapped up in eschatology that they will fight and die for their particular view. End-Times theories have been devised and marketed with such vehemence that their proponents will reorder their view of Scripture in any way possible just to make it all fit. This results in such travesties as the "Left Behind" series, but more insidiously, leaves believers with a sense of fear or great uncertainty about what's coming next. Up until last year, I lived with a perpetual sense of disorientation concerning prophecy and the apocalypse. This was not due to a lack of study, rather, it was due to as careful a study as I could manage, facilitated by numerous sources from all sides of the eschatology spectrum.

Here's what brought me to what I'm convinced is the right view of Scripture. The exposition of John's Revelation and related passages, *without* the obsession over Israel. If we take Romans 11 and conclude that Israel is Elect Israel, and apply that faithfully to eschatology, everything falls together. With this approach, Revelation really was written to the seven churches in Asia Minor, *for their benefit* and subsequently for the benefit of all believers thereafter. In a nutshell, Asia Minor were witnesses to the beginning of the end. They were seeing all the judgements and persecutions being poured out before them and so are we. Catastrophes, plagues, misery, men running from God, men praying to God for mercy, persecution, often of entire states, it's all right here and has been for the last 2,000 years. Temple gone, the greatest upheaval and destruction in the history of Israel, the eradication of the religious theocratic nation's spine, all point to what Revelation says. And it makes sense that way.

Regarding the problem of assurance, I think there is little difference in the outworking of either the Dispensational or CT perspective. Both positions have flaws that are similar, but ultimately both believe that a regenerate man is held not by his own faith or works but by God and rests assured in the promises and integrity of God Himself. We trust that our belief is in the truth because of the historical events concerning Christ which correspond to the sensible and believable promises surrounding His life of obedience, demonstration that He is God, his death and resurrection.

Where DT tends to focus on the view that "once-saved-always-saved", praying the prayer and really believing in the heart that a man has invited Jesus to come into his life as personal Lord and Savior, there is often a false sense of security in that having prayed the prayer and "done the deed" there is eternal security. This fails to account for apostasy flat out. DT makes the assumption that church membership is for the regenerate only.

Otherwise, in a DT church, the believer is repeatedly immersed in the faithfulness of God and His promises for assurance of being elect.

Where CT fails is often making the assumption that a member, baptized as a child is certainly regenerate, or elect, the church does something similar to what DT does in promising a "grown-up-born-again" (GUBA) eternal security by reference to baptism. This obviously is just as incorrect as getting someone to say the sinner's prayer and blam call them saved.

Here is where eternal security or assurance of salvation really resides, and I believe the core of CT maintains this based on the Westminster Confession and Catechisms which are the “statement of faith” in the Presbyterian Church. Assurance is found in the wealth of Scripture that demonstrates God is the savior of His people and will not forsake them. The Holy Spirit is given as the seal, down payment, for our eventual eternal life in Christ. The effectual call that brings about regeneration, faith, repentance, a new heart of flesh in place of the stone one, results in the Spirit applying salvation. The Spirit witnesses with ours as we walk with Christ and assures us of our secure position in Eternity.

One thing I have noticed in the Reformed circle is that great attention is given to a continual declaration of the Gospel *to the members of the congregation*. The reason for this is not to repeatedly save our members but to continually bring them back to that which saves them. The Scripture is filled with both promise and warning and this is to good effect. There *are* those who are members of the church (all churches) who are not regenerate and since they are in the covenant community we are absolutely responsible to call out to them with the Gospel every time they are under the preaching of the Word. Also, just as important, the warnings in the Word are written quite directly to warn the people that they must walk in God's law, that they are at risk of losing their assurance if they do not live a life of continual repentance and faithfulness.

We've all experienced it, I'm sure, those times where it just didn't seem as true and trustworthy as it should, our faith. We've found ourselves too undeserving of mercy and grace to trust in God's promise. This is considered to be expected in the Reformed system. We sin and damage our clean view of God. We grieve the Holy Spirit and what else could occur but we fall away from our full trust and assurance in God. It would be ridiculous to think that in our blackest moments of self-righteous sinfulness the Holy Spirit would be most likely to pause everything and give us a good word of encouragement that we're eternally secure. No, rather, the best tool for a wayward child is that insecurity, shame, fear and discipline of a damaged relationship. Hence the warnings.

Does this limit or remove the sense of Eternal Security? No, it is the perseverance of the saints. It is our continuing growth in the faith that assures us and it depends on far more than the individual. This also is why I think CT is a better system in that the entire church is centered around the Gospel and the Law and knows perseverance needs outside help, encouragement, exhortation and routine discipline. I cannot see my own growth in Christ quite often due to the weeds in my life. I often am brought low due to the weight of my own sin and the only help is when a brother comes alongside to show me where Christ is evident in my life and encourage me. I think, at least in my little experience here, that the Reformed have nailed assurance with their view of the Church, her mission and administration of the Covenant, her government and her in-depth involvement in all aspects of families in her membership.

As far as the Gospel, I'm not sure where some have come across the idea that CT presents a different or flawed message. It rather concerns me that such a thing is being taught, especially in the churches which I still hold in high regard for the hard-working, faithful people who have come from them. There is only one Gospel and I wonder how anyone has come up with the notion that CT does not teach it.

I'll simply note that, in this very day, MacArthur and Sproul can share the same pulpit to preach the

same call to repentance. Duncan, Mahaney, Piper, Dever, Mohler, they can all hang out together and millions listen to them or read them. They're the great men of God in our day. They argue on secondary issues like paedobaptism or cessationism, but I haven't heard any of them come at another for teaching a contrary gospel.

The Gospel is that Christ died for our sins, rose again on the third day and ascended into heaven. He was truly man and truly God, lived a perfect life, sinless, under the Law, fulfilling the Covenant of Works where we could not. He suffered as a man, suffered the full penalty for our sins, being cursed on the Cross as prophesied, facing the full wrath of God. His accomplishments are effective for all who believe in Him, all who have been granted to Him by the Father, both prior to and following the Cross. We will be united with Him the Lamb who was slain, Christ the Victor, the Lord of Glory, for we are the Bride of Christ comprised of all the elect from all ages, on the day of judgment. Our great hope is that we will reign with Him in the new heaven and new earth and enjoy His presence and glorious rule forever. Those who do not belong to Him, who are delivered up to be vessels for God's wrath will be cast into the lake of fire, hell, for all eternity to suffer His judgment and wrath and they will endure His glorious rule forever.