

God's Covenants with Man

Introductory Observations

No study of biblical theology is complete without an examination of the Scriptural covenants. Unfortunately, this is an area where theological opinions differ widely, leading to confusion and dissension among believers (the shameful irony of the Church's passion for God's Word).

There are disagreements regarding the *significance* of the covenants. Those within the Reformed tradition view "the theological concept of a covenant as *an organizing principle for Christian theology*. The standard form of covenant theology views the history of God's dealings with mankind, from Creation to Fall to Redemption to Consummation, under the framework of three overarching theological covenants: of redemption, works, and grace."¹ By contrast, one may search the pages of Augustus Strong's voluminous *Systematic Theology* and find hardly a reference to the covenants at all. It should also be noted that the theology curriculum offered to this writer at Grace Theological Seminary in the 1970's included no detailed treatment of the covenants in lectures or in print

There are also differences in the number of covenants that are recognized in Scripture. Here is a sample comparison.

*Wayne Grudem*²

1. Covenant of Works
2. Covenant of Redemption
3. Covenant of Grace

*C. I. Scofield*³

1. Edenic Covenant
2. Adamic Covenant
3. Noahic Covenant
4. Abrahamic Covenant
5. Mosaic Covenant
6. Palestinian Covenant
7. Davidic Covenant
8. New Covenant

¹ "Covenant theology," Wikipedia, internet post as of November 1, 2016 (emphasis mine).

² Grudem, Wayne, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), pp. 515f.

³ Scofield, C. I., ed., *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford, 1909), pp. 8f.

*Alva J. McClain*⁴

1. Noahic Covenant
2. Abrahamic Covenant
3. Mosaic Covenant
4. New Covenant

*Craig Blaising and Darrell Bock*⁵

1. Noahic Covenant
2. Abrahamic Covenant
3. Mosaic Covenant
4. Davidic Covenant
5. New Covenant
6. Kingdom

For dispensationalists, the covenants align themselves closely with the dispensations.⁶ The dispensationalist view lends itself to a longer list of recognized covenants. By the same token, covenant theology sees fewer historical segments and therefore recognizes fewer covenants.

Since the term *dispensation* also speaks of a relational arrangement between people, it is easy to see how these terms conceptually overlap. When it comes to theological relationships – that is, to relationships between God and human beings – the notions of dispensation and of covenant are definitely interrelated.⁷

Definition of Covenant

For purposes of this study, we will adopt Grudem's definition: "A covenant is an unchangeable, divinely imposed legal agreement between God and man that stipulates the conditions of their relationship."⁸

However, two additional definitions are worthy of consideration:

⁴ McClain, Alva J., *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Chicago: Moody, 1959), pp. 46f.

⁵ Blaising, Craig, and Bock, Darrell, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, pp. 128f.

⁶ It is the suspicion of this writer that dispensationalists emphasize the biblical evidence for the dispensations and tend to minimize treatments of the covenants precisely because the covenants are so important to their theological "rivals" in the covenant theology camp.

⁷ Blaising and Bock, p. 128.

⁸ Grudem, Wayne, p. 515.

“(Covenant) is similar in meaning to the idea of ‘contract,’ although the two words are not perfectly synonymous, and the differences between them are significant. In the ancient middle east (in which the Bible was written), a covenant was a formal agreement that caused (or implied) several things:

1. First, a covenant defined (or sometimes created) a relationship. This relationship might be between a king and his vassal states, between a deity and his nation, between two humans, etc.
2. Some covenants are conditional (if one party does A, then the other party will do B), just as with a present-day contract. But generally, ancient covenants are unconditional (each party commits to a certain action, regardless of whether the other party keeps the covenant).
3. Covenants often included the slaughter of animals as a symbol of their significance.
4. Unlike present-day contracts, covenants often carried no expiration date. Thus the parties were understood to be bound by the covenant until death (or forever, in the case of covenants with God).
5. A contract is enforced by the civil government; a covenant is regulated by God.
6. A contract involves the exchange of property or actions; a covenant binds two parties together personally.”⁹

“The word covenant, *berit* in Hebrew and *diatheke* in Greek, is used in the Bible to refer to a variety of formal or legal agreements. These agreements, from individual wills, business contracts, territorial deeds, to national constitutions, define relationships between people.”¹⁰

Examination of the Covenants

Of the lists of covenants offered by the theologians quoted above, Scofield’s list is the most extensive with eight recognized biblical covenants. The following discussion examines the salient points and the relative merits of each of these.

1. The Edenic Covenant (Genesis 1:28-30; 2:8-17)

- The word “covenant” does not appear in the text; but the words of God describe a classic conditional (“If you...then I will...”) covenant. Scofield says:

⁹ “Covenant (biblical),” Wikipedia, internet post as of November 1, 2016.

¹⁰ Blaising, Craig, and Bock, Darrell, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1993), p. 128.

The Edenic Covenant, the first of the eight great covenants of Scripture which condition life and salvation, and about which all Scripture crystallizes, has seven elements. The man and woman in Eden were responsible:

(1) To replenish the earth with a new order – man; (2) to subdue the earth to human uses; (3) to have dominion over the animal creation; (4) to eat herbs and fruits; (5) to till and keep the garden; (6) to abstain from eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil; (7) the penalty – death.¹¹

- Scofield claims that “all Scripture crystallizes” about the eight covenants. In this he echoes the sentiment of the covenant theologians regarding the significance of the covenants, although he departs radically from their shorter list of recognized eras of history (see p. 135, note 9 above).
- Scofield’s outline of the Edenic Covenant would fit the definition of covenant more accurately if he had grouped elements 1-6 together as the “if” portion of the covenant and had listed element 7 as the “then I will” portion.
- Scofield’s treatment of the Edenic Covenant parallels Grudem’s conclusion that it is a “covenant of works.”

“Although the covenant that existed before the fall has been referred to by various terms (such as the Adamic Covenant, or the Covenant of Nature), the most helpful designation seems to be ‘covenant of works,’ since participation in the blessings of the covenant clearly depended on obedience or ‘works’ on the part of Adam and Eve.”¹²

One may expect Scofield to suggest that Adam and Eve were justified by works in the Garden, because later in his notes he suggests that the Dispensation of Law was a system under which the Israelite people were justified by works.

“Grace ... is constantly set in contrast to law, under which God demands righteousness from man, as under grace, he gives righteousness to man.... Law is connected with Moses and works; grace with Christ and faith.”¹³

¹¹ Scofield, pp. 5-6 (note on Genesis 1:28f).

¹² Grudem, p. 517.

¹³ Scofield, p. 1115 (note on John 1:17).

However, it is a bit surprising to discover that Grudem embraces a similar view of the Edenic Covenant, especially when he has elsewhere insisted that justification is not extended on the basis of works.

“God chose us simply because he decided to bestow his love upon us. It was not because of any foreseen faith or foreseen merit in us.”¹⁴

It would seem illogical for God to establish a covenant with Adam and Eve offering them blessing based on works, when the same God has declared repeatedly that “the just shall live by faith” (Habakkuk 2:4; Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38). Rather, it seems more consistent with biblical theology to demonstrate that Adam and Eve were expected to *trust* God in respect to his commands and warning thus being justified by faith (as humans are justified in every other period of history).

- As an essential factor in Bible interpretation, it seems unwise to refer to an arrangement as a “covenant” unless the text clearly describes it as a covenant.
- This arrangement is between Jehovah and the first couple, although its consequences extend to the entire human race.

2. The Adamic Covenant (Genesis 3:15)

- According to Scofield, the second covenant conditions the life of fallen man – conditions which must remain till ... the kingdom age. The elements of the Adamic Covenant are:

(1) The serpent, Satan’s tool, is cursed (v. 14), and becomes God’s illustration in nature of the effects of sin – from the most beautiful and subtle of creatures to a loathsome reptile.

(2) The first promise of a Redeemer (v. 15). Here begins the “highway of the Seed,” Abel, Seth, Noah ... (etc.)

(3) The changed state of the woman (v. 16).

(4) The earth cursed (v. 17) for man’s sake.

(5) The inevitable sorrow of life (v. 17).

(6) The light occupation of Eden (Gen. 2:15) changed to burdensome labour (v. 18, 19).

(7) Physical death (v. 19; Rom. 5:12-21).¹⁵

¹⁴ Grudem, p. 679.

¹⁵ Scofield, p. 9 (note on Genesis 3:15).

- Once again, Scofield has found a “covenant” where the word covenant is not used.
- There doesn’t seem to be any sort of “agreement” between God and man in this passage, but rather a list of curses.

3. The Noahic Covenant (Genesis 9:1)

- The elements are:

(1) The relation of man to the earth under the Adamic Covenant is confirmed (Gen. 8:21).

(2) The order of nature is confirmed (Gen. 8:22).

(3) Human government is established (Gen. 9:1-6).

(4) Earth is secured against another universal judgment by water (Gen. 8:21; 9:11).

(5) A prophetic declaration is made that from Ham will descend an inferior and servile posterity (Gen. 9:24, 25).

(6) A prophetic declaration is made that Shem will have a peculiar relation to Jehovah (Gen. 9:26, 27). All divine revelation is through Semitic men, and Christ, after the flesh, descends from Shem.

(7) A prophetic declaration is made that from Japheth will descend the “enlarged” races (Gen. 9:27). Government, science, and art, speaking broadly, are and have been Japhetic, so that history is the indisputable record of the exact fulfilment of these declarations.¹⁶

- This is the first use of “covenant” in Scripture. In the interest of exactness in biblical interpretation, it would seem reasonable to limit our list of covenants to situations which are actually described as covenants.
- Technically, the covenant in this text is God’s unconditional promise that he will never again bring a universal flood upon the earth, with the accompanying sign of the rainbow. The prophecies, while important, are not essential elements of the covenant.
- This covenant is between Jehovah and Noah, but it pertains to the entire human race throughout the remainder of history.

4. The Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 15:18)

- The covenant is in seven parts:

¹⁶ Scofield, p. 16 (note on Genesis 9:1).

- (1) "I will make of thee a great nation." Fulfilled in a threefold way: (a) In a natural posterity – "as the dust of the earth," (Gen. 13:16; John 8:37) viz. the Hebrew people. (b) In a spiritual posterity – "look now toward heaven ... so shall thy seed be," (John 8:39; Rom. 4:16, 17; 9:7, 8; Gal. 3:6, 7, 29), viz. all men of faith, whether Jew or Gentile. (c) Fulfilled also through Ishmael (Gen. 17:18-20).
- (2) "I will bless thee." Fulfilled in two ways: (a) temporally (Gen. 13:14, 15, 17; 15:18; 24:34, 35); (b) spiritually (Gen. 15:6; John 8:56).
- (3) "And make thy name great." Abraham's is one of the universal names.
- (4) "And thou shalt be a blessing" (Gal. 3:13, 14).
- (5) "I will bless them that bless thee." In fulfilment closely related to the next clause.
- (6) "And curse him that curseth thee." Wonderfully fulfilled in the history of the dispersion. It has invariably fared ill with the people who have persecuted the Jew – well with those who have protected him. The future will still more remarkably prove this principle (Deut. 30:7; Isa. 14:1, 2; Joel 3:1-8; Mic. 5:7-9; Hab. 2:22; Zech. 14:1-3; Mt. 25:40, 45).
- (7) "In thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed." This is the great evangelic promise fulfilled in Abraham's Seed, Christ (Gal. 3:16; John 8:56-58). It brings into greater definiteness the promise of the Adamic Covenant concerning the Seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15).¹⁷
- Though the passage doesn't use the word "covenant," it describes a common contractual ritual used in the ancient Middle East, in which the two parties walk between the pieces of the sacrificial animal, thus binding themselves to the contract. It often has been noted that, in this case, only Jehovah passed between the parts of the sacrifice, signifying this as an unconditional covenant.
 - This covenant is between Jehovah and Abraham, but it includes all who would be born into Abraham's family.

5. The Mosaic Covenant (Exodus 20)

- Scofield: The Mosaic Covenant, (1) given to Israel (2) in three divisions, each essential to the others, and together forming the Mosaic Covenant, viz.: the Commandments, expressing the righteous will of God (Ex. 20:1-26; the "judgments," governing the social life of Israel (Ex. 21:1-24, 11); and the "ordinances," governing the religious life of Israel (Ex. 24:12-31). These three elements form "the law," as that phrase is generically used in the New Testament.... The Christian is not under the *conditional Mosaic Covenant of works*, the law, but under the unconditional New

¹⁷ Scofield, pp. 24-25 (note on Genesis 15:1).

Covenant of grace (Rom. 3:1-27; 6:14, 15; Gal. 2:16; 3:10-14, 16-18, 24-26; 4:21-31); Heb. 10:11-17).¹⁸

- Notice Scofield's insistence that the Mosaic Covenant created a system of justification by works! Again, this is in opposition to the clear biblical teaching that justification has always been by faith (see page 137 above).
- This "covenant" (if it legitimately may be called a covenant) is between Jehovah and his chosen people Israel.

6. The Palestinian Covenant (Deuteronomy 30:3)

- Scofield: The Palestinian Covenant gives the conditions under which Israel entered the land of promise. It is important to see that the nation has never as yet taken the land under the unconditional Abrahamic Covenant, nor has it ever possessed the whole land.... The Palestinian Covenant is in seven parts:
 - (1) Dispersion for disobedience, v. 1 (Deut. 28:63-68. See Gen. 15:18, note).
 - (2) The future repentance of Israel while in the dispersion, v. 2.
 - (3) The return of the Lord, v. 3 (Amos 9:9-14; Acts 15:14-17).
 - (4) Restoration to the land, v. 5 (Isa. 11:11, 12; Jer. 23:3-8; Eze. 37. 21-25).
 - (5) National conversion, v. 6 (Rom. 11:26, 27; Hos. 2:14-16).
 - (6) The judgment of Israel's oppressors, v. 7 (Isa. 14:1, 2; Joel 3:1-8; Mt., 25:41-46).
 - (7) National prosperity, v. 9 (Amos 9:11-14).¹⁹
- This passage, while the subject of much debate among evangelicals regarding the time and nature of its fulfillment, does take the form of a conditional covenant ("if you ... then I will").
- This covenant is between Jehovah and Israel.

7. The Davidic Covenant (2nd Samuel 7:8-17)

- According to Scofield, this covenant ("upon which the glorious Kingdom of Christ is to be founded") secures the following:
 - (1) A Davidic "house"; i.e. posterity, family.
 - (2) A "throne"; i.e. royal authority.

¹⁸ Scofield, p. 95 (note on Exodus 20:1, emphasis mine).

¹⁹ Scofield, p. 250 (note on Deuteronomy 30).

(3) A kingdom; i.e. sphere of rule.

(4) In perpetuity; “forever.”

(5) And this fourfold covenant has but one condition: disobedience in the Davidic family is to be visited with chastisement, but not to the abrogation of the covenant (2 Sam. 7:15; Psa. 89:20-37; Isa. 24:5; 54:3). The chastisement fell; first in the division of the kingdom ... and finally in the captivities. Since that time but one King of the Davidic family has been crowned at Jerusalem and he was crowned with thorns. But the Davidic Covenant confirmed to David by the oath of Jehovah, and renewed to Mary by the angel Gabriel, is immutable (Psa. 89:30-37), and the Lord God will yet give to the thorn-crowned One “the throne of his father David” (Luke 1:31-33; Acts 2:29-32; 15:14-17).²⁰

- This covenant is between Jehovah and David.
- This covenant has elements both conditional and unconditional.

8. The New Covenant (Hebrews 8:8)

- The New Covenant, Summary: (1) “Better” than the Mosaic Covenant, not morally, but efficaciously (Heb. 7:19; Rom. 8:3, 4). (2) Established on “better” (i.e. unconditional) promises. In the Mosaic Covenant God said, “If ye will” (Ex. 19:5); in the New Covenant He says, “I will” (Heb. 8:10, 112). (3) Under the Mosaic Covenant obedience sprang from fear (Heb. 2:2; 12:25-27); under the New from a willing heart and mind (v. 10). (4) The New Covenant secures the personal revelation of the Lord to every believer (v. 11); (5) the complete oblivion of sins (v. 12; Heb. 10:17; cf. Heb. 10:3); (6) rests upon an accomplished redemption (Mt. 26:27, 28; 1 Cor. 11:25; Heb. 9:11, 12, 18-23); (7) and secures the perpetuity, future conversion, and blessing of Israel (Jer. 31:31-40)... The New Covenant is the eighth, thus speaking of resurrection and of eternal completeness.²¹
- The New Covenant (see also 1st Corinthians 11:25) is between Christ and whoever will believe/receive him (John 1:12).

Practical Implications of the Covenants

1. God’s warnings are not to be _____.

²⁰ Scofield, p. 362 (note on 2nd Samuel 7:4).

²¹ Scofield, p. 1297 (note on Hebrews 8).

2. God extends grace even in the midst of _____.
3. Not everything is a _____, but some things are.
4. God's promises are more powerful than man's attempts to _____ them.

Recommended Reading

Scofield, C. I. *Holy Bible, Scofield Reference Edition*. New York: Oxford, 1909.

Blaising, Craig A., and Bock, Darrell L. *Progressive Dispensationalism*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993.

McClain, Alva J. *The Greatness of the Kingdom*. Chicago: Moody, 1959.

Assignments for the Next Module – 1/7/17 -- “The Doctrine of Angels, Demons, and Satan”

1. Read Grudem's *Systematic Theology*, chapters 19-20.
2. Outline the chapters.
3. Identify any difficult or controversial issues raised in the chapters.
4. From the material in the assigned chapters, identify one issue that you would like to pursue for further study sometime.