

My VOICE ... by Les Lofquist

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6/18/2011 4:39:43 PM

Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism

Covenant Theology and Dispensational Theology figure prominently in contemporary evangelicalism. Adherents on both sides attempt to be Bible-based, Christ-centered, and God-honoring. But there are distinctions that sometimes get lost in discussions today. For example, the terms "Covenant Theology" and "Reformed Theology" are frequently used interchangeably as if they were equivalent. If it was once true that Reformed Theology was equivalent to Covenant Theology, it no longer is the case.

Strong advocates of Reformed Theology do not always hold to Covenant Theology. Dr. John Piper of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis and Dr. Al Mohler of Southern Baptist Seminary of Louisville both refer to themselves as Reformed, Calvinistic Baptists (as did Charles Spurgeon) yet all three oppose the infant baptism of Covenant Theology. The late Reformed expositor Dr. James Montgomery Boice was pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia; in his eschatology Boice was Premillennial (see his book *The Minor Prophets*) and pre-tribulational (see his book *The Last and Future World*), yet he baptized infants into the Covenant of Grace. Not all Calvinists are Amillennial or Postmillennial in eschatology and baptize infants (see Piper or Mohler). Neither are all Premillennialists Dispensational (see Boice or George Eldon Ladd). Precise identification is necessary in order to be accurate.

CRUCIAL DISTINGUISHING ISSUES

There are four crucial issues to differentiate between the terms Reformed Theology, Covenant Theology, and Dispensational Theology. These issues are as follows:

1. Hermeneutics: Is the theology based upon a normal, literal understanding of Scriptural language or upon allegory, spiritualizing, and figurative language? Is the Old Testament always interpreted through the New Testament or by the historical, literal, grammatical rule of interpretation?

2. Ecclesiology: Does Israel equal the church? When did the church begin? Did the church begin with Abraham or in the time described in the Book of Acts?
3. Soteriology: Is Limited Atonement (or Particular Redemption) taught in the Bible? What is the extent of Christ's atonement, or for whom did Christ die?
4. Eschatology: Does the nation Israel have a national future as a political entity in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy? Are the promises made to Israel being fulfilled by the Church today?

Almost everyone who calls himself Reformed or Calvinist would believe in Limited Atonement. But not everyone who holds firmly to that position in soteriology would agree to a Covenant position in hermeneutics, ecclesiology, and eschatology. Many Reformed Calvinists would not adopt Covenantal positions. Also, many Covenant theologians attempt to deny credentials to the Reformed, Calvinist position for those who agree with them in soteriology but disagree with them in the other three issues. For one example see the article "How Many Points?" by Dr. Richard A. Muller (*Calvin Theological Journal*, Vol. 28 [1993]: 425- 33) where Muller insists that Calvinism remain a consistent system of hermeneutics, soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology. Michael Horton in his book *God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology* boldly states that "reformed theology is simply covenant theology" (p. 11), yet he documents numerous individuals firmly in the Reformed tradition who reject or strongly question one or all of these covenants (pp. 78-107).

We must be accurate whenever we attempt to use these labels. If you fail to make the above distinctions it reflects poorly upon your understanding of the issues. However, for the purposes of this article, we will paint with a broad brush and overstate for the point of introduction. It is my desire to simply and, with fairness, introduce the issues involved.

DEFINITION OF COVENANT THEOLOGY

Every Bible believer understands that there are a number of covenants in Scripture. This is not what distinguishes Covenant Theology. What does distinguish it is the view that covenants are the interpretive framework for understanding all the Bible. They teach that the concept of covenant is the theological structure by which the entire Biblical text organizes itself.

Covenant Theology is distinguished by the place it gives to two main covenants: the Covenant of Works (Law) and the Covenant of Grace (Gospel), both of which become

the all-encompassing basis for and substance of all God's dealings with man. Many add a third covenant, the Covenant of Redemption which is the agreement between the Father (giving the Son as Head and Redeemer of the elect) and the Son (voluntarily taking the place of those whom the Father has given him).

Covenant Theology teaches that the Covenant of Works (Law) was the agreement between God and Adam, promising life to Adam for perfect obedience and death if Adam failed. Adam did sin in the Garden, and thus failed to meet the requirement of the Covenant of Works.

Covenant Theology teaches that the Covenant of Grace (Gospel) is defined as the agreement between the offended God and the offending sinner. God promises salvation to the elect through faith in Christ and the sinner accepts this believingly, promising a life of faith and obedience.

Covenant Theology teaches that there is only one people of God and that the Church is the fulfillment of Israel in New Covenant prophecy. Covenant Theology acknowledges some kind of uniqueness of the Church, especially in its "post-Pentecost phase," but it teaches all believers before and after Pentecost are in absolute continuity. This aspect of Covenant Theology has great consequence for eschatology.

Covenant Theology also teaches that water baptism of infants is the sign and seal of the Covenant of Grace today replacing ritual Old Testament circumcision. Infant baptism certifies one's entrance into the Covenantal community.

THE HISTORY OF COVENANT THEOLOGY

Fully systematized Covenant Theology is somewhat recent in history, like all systematic theology systems. According to Former Calvin Seminary President and Professor of Systematic Theology Louis Berkhof, "In all the Church Fathers the covenant idea is not found at all" (*Systematic Theology*, p. 211). There are no references to Covenant Theology in any of the great confessions of faith until the Westminster Confession in 1647, and even then, it was not fully developed until later by various Reformed theologians. This teaching does not specifically appear in the writings of Luther, Zwingli, Calvin or Melancthon which seems very curious given the fact that these men are the chief foundations for Reformed theology.

According to Berkhof, Kaspar Olevianus (1536-1587) was the real founder of Covenant Theology "in which the concept of the covenant became for the first time the

constitutive and determinative principle of the whole system" (*Systematic Theology*, p. 211).

After Olevianus, the German theologian Johannes Cocceius (1603-1669) became responsible for advancing and popularizing this teaching. Cocceius expounded the concept of two covenants (Works and Grace) and made these covenants the basis and substance of all God's dealings with man regarding redemption.

Herman Witsius (1636-1708) was mainly responsible for extending the Covenant of Grace back into eternity. He linked the covenant idea with the eternal decrees. This caused some Covenant theologians to introduce the third covenant: the Covenant of Redemption, made in eternity past between the persons of the Godhead which is the basis for the Covenant of Grace.

Covenant theology came to the USA with the Puritans through the writings of Herman Witsius, whose ideas were championed in the new world by John Cotton and other American Puritans.

The concepts came to full development in America by the Princeton theologians Charles Hodge, A. A. Hodge, B. B. Warfield, Geerhardus Vos and J. Gresham Machen and in the Netherlands, by Herman Bavinck. They taught what has become the classic understanding of Covenant Theology: the Covenant of Redemption (between Father and Son), the Covenant of Works (Law), and the Covenant of Grace (Gospel). B. B. Warfield asserted that the "architectonic principle" of the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1647 is the systematic theology he called Federal Theology, today most commonly known as Covenant Theology. Some well-known Covenant theologians today include R.C. Sproul, J. Ligon Duncan, Vern Poythress, Meredith Kline, Michael Horton, Greg Bahnsen, J. I. Packer, and O. Palmer Robertson.

THE PROPOSED BIBLICAL BASIS FOR COVENANT THEOLOGY

The ideas contained in the Covenants of Works and Grace are not unscriptural ideas, but it cannot be demonstrated that they are systematized and formalized into the all-encompassing system of Covenant Theology as claimed by the Covenant theologians. In fact, the terms "covenant of works" and "covenant of grace" never appear in Scripture. Appeal is often made to the following Scriptural passages as proof of the two covenants:

[Deuteronomy 30:15-20](#) for the Covenant of Works (but the promise of life found here is not as a reward for obedience but for life in the Promised Land). Also cited are

passages like [Hosea 6:7](#); [Romans 2:6-9](#); [5:12-21](#); and 7:10 (but upon closer scrutiny, these are not relevant).

For the Covenant of Grace, appeal is made to [Genesis 3:15](#); [Isaiah 53:10-11](#); [Luke 22:20](#); [Romans 5: 12-21](#); [1 Corinthians 15:22](#); [Galatians 3: 15-29](#) (but upon inspection these as well are not relevant). The system must be deduced.

In each case the covenant idea is a conclusion logically deduced from selected Scriptures without direct Scriptural teaching. Berkhof admits this throughout his discussion on pp. 211-217 but is untroubled: "it is perfectly true that no such promise is explicitly recorded, but it is clearly implied" (*Systematic Theology*, p. 213).

Of course the idea of covenants is a very basic idea in Scripture and there are a number of specific covenants revealed in the Bible. Yet, the Bible does not explicitly mention a covenant of works or a covenant of grace, and to see this as the all-encompassing system requires a real hermeneutical stretch.

THE HERMENEUTICS OF COVENANT THEOLOGY

As a result of the idea of the Covenants of Works and Grace, Covenant Theology has made its most basic principle of Bible interpretation to be the rule of always interpreting the Old Testament by the New Testament (rather than the historical, literal, grammatical rule of interpretation). Using this understanding of Bible interpretation, Covenant Theology often leads to artificial exegesis and overdependence on figurative language, typology and allegory. They are forced to assign meaning to certain words that cannot be considered common or ordinary. For example, according to Covenant Theology, in the Old Testament the word "Israel" can mean the nation of Israel or the Church because their theology dictates that the saved of all the ages belong to the same body.

SUMMARY: COVENANT THEOLOGY

Covenant Theology is of recent origin. It did not originate with the initial Reformers but is an amplification by Cocceius in the 17th century of the original idea of Olevanius. This concept was given more full expression in the Westminster Confession and then completely developed by later Reformed theologians in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The theological covenants upon which the teaching is based are not specifically revealed in the Bible. Other covenants are specifically revealed but the two (or three) basic covenants upon which the entire system is based are not even mentioned in the Bible. They must rely upon deduction and logic applied to certain Scriptural passages to

explain their covenant view as well as their view on soteriology (Limited / Particular Atonement).

The hermeneutical system of Covenant Theology leads to an artificial exegesis and often forces the reading of the New Testament back into the Old Testament.

Covenant Theology teaches that salvation in every age was exactly the same. However, they also teach that salvation came by keeping the Law since the Law was a declaration of the will of God for man's salvation and sins could be forgiven by the ritual law. Therefore, Covenant Theology inadvertently teaches two ways of salvation: one by law and one by grace. "Grace offers escape from the law only as a condition of salvation - as it is in the covenant of works - from the curse of the law, and from the law as an extraneous power" (Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 291). Isolated statements like that may appear to offer two methods of salvation and are certainly capable of misunderstanding and misrepresentation.

OBSERVATIONS ABOUT COVENANT THEOLOGIANS

I have benefited from many of my associations with Covenant Theologians. Also, many of the most valued books in my library have been authored by them. Based on this experience, I have made some *general* observations about those who hold to Covenant Theology.

Respect for the Authority of God and His Word

Covenant theologians have an immense respect for the King of the Universe and His authoritative rule over His creation. They are meticulous exegetes of the Bible in Hebrew and Greek and their theological works are extremely valuable. They have a passion for holiness that is truly inspiring. They are careful thinkers regarding the application of church history and theology to recent issues of the past decade such as ecumenism, Promise Keepers, Evangelicals and Catholics Together, market driven church growth strategies, worship and music issues, and the Emergent Church.

Christ-Centered Preaching

I enjoy listening to many of the sermons of our brothers who hold to Covenant Theology, especially when they preach on Christ's person and work. This is because their sermons are so often Christ centered. They correctly understand the Bible's teaching on the nature and depravity of man and the glorious nature of God's great work of salvation.

Tremendous Awe of God in Worship

You find no silly, shallow trivializing of God in their worship services. They never throw a cream pie in the pastor's face when the Sunday School attendance record is broken. Rarely do you hear them sing cheaply sentimental songs about My-Daddy-in-Heaven or shallow choruses about God-as-my-Boyfriend. They exalt God as the King of the universe.

Dignity of the Role of Pastor

Because of their respect for God, His Word, and the worship service they have a high regard for the office of pastor. You see few of their men chasing the latest fads in a worldly quest for relevance because they emphasize the pastor as the shepherd of souls and they honor the memory of great men of God in past history.

These are reasons to appreciate and respect our Covenant brethren! Yet despite the above observations, it is surprising also to make these observations below about Covenant theologians.

Blurring of Bible Distinctions

Covenant Theology is forced to gloss over many of the Bible's distinctions because it teaches there are really only two major covenants: the Covenant of Works (which ended in Eden) and the Covenant of Grace. They teach that all believers since Abraham are in the church and effectively eliminate the distinction between Israel and the church. According to them, everything in Scripture can be placed into their overly simplified, two covenant system.

Hermeneutical Confusion

In order to explain the many Bible distinctions, Covenant theologians resort to an over dependence on allegorical hermeneutics, often ignoring the clear, simple language of Scripture (most especially with the unconditional kingdom promises of God to Israel). The doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture, which teaches that the Bible's language is plainly understandable, is often overlooked in Covenant Theology. Life-long IFCA International member Dr. John Walvoord once was asked: "what do you predict will be the most significant theological issues over the next ten years?" His answer included the following: "the hermeneutical problem of not interpreting the Bible literally, especially the prophetic areas. The church today is engulfed in the idea that one cannot interpret prophecy literally." This most certainly is the trend today. Covenant theologians want to blend literal and non-literal hermeneutics. According to Dr. Walvoord, it cannot be legitimately done, without producing confusion and contradiction.

Appeal to Man's Pride and Elitism

I have observed that Covenant theologians often appear elitist. I conclude this because of their ability to explain God and His eternal ways to their own satisfaction and because their theologians appeal frequently to deductive logic and history and use Latin terms, all of which connote astuteness and intelligence. Covenant theologians seem eager to explain all that God does, even such profound truths as the precise details of election and the specific order of the decrees in the pre-Creation mind of God. They can neatly arrange and explain these majestically mysterious events. Also, Dispensational pastors often do not appear to be highly trained scholars and pale in comparison to the credentials and appearance of the run-of-the-mill Covenant pastors. Combined with things like the old-fashioned Clarence Larkin Dispensational books and charts, Dispensationalists make easy targets for those who are already predisposed toward intellectual elitism. I have always been surprised to observe how condescending Covenantalists are toward Dispensationalists, even to the point of intolerance and near hostility.

Danger for Children and Grandchildren

Because of their fundamental misunderstanding of circumcision and baptism, they believe that children of professing Christians are in the covenant upon their baptism as infants. Because of this doctrine, they do not press their children to trust Christ as Savior: infant baptism is an assumption that these children will be saved. Calvin wrote, "God pronounces that he adopts our infants as his children before they are born, when he promises that he will be a God to us and to our seed after us. This promise includes their salvation" (*Institutes*, IV, 20). Former Calvin Seminary President and Professor of Systematic Theology Louis Berkhof (in *Systematic Theology*, p. 288) wrote that the infant children baptized into the covenant are assumed to be regenerate unless they show evidence they are not. The same concept was taught by B.B. Warfield (in *Polemics*, p. 390). There is great peril for all falsely secure children and grandchildren who are really trusting their infant baptism and not in Christ. By personal observation, I believe this breeds a pseudo-Christianity in many.

Suspicion About Decisions for Salvation

When Covenant Theology grows in dominance in a church, there also grows a suspicion toward any call to trust Christ since this is seen as a human infringement on God's saving activity. There will be great expositions of the Bible but no invitations to trust Christ, no calls for any decisions. This appears to be a logical outcome of their theology as well as an over-reaction to Arminian evangelistic techniques. Compare the evangelism and mission activity of Dispensationalists versus Covenantalists.

Dispensationalists seem more eager to evangelize the lost while Covenantalists seem more eager to proselytize untaught and unlearned Dispensationalists. One of my Covenant friends actually told me: "you Baptist Churches are like Kindergarten - a great place to start. But we'll teach them everything else beyond Kindergarten." Look at history and see the Covenantalists' recurring suspicions toward decisions / evangelism / missions. The most familiar example is William Carey's denominational leaders saying "young man, if God wants to save the heathen He is able to do so without your assistance." There are some rare exceptions, men like George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, and D. James Kennedy. But just try to name many in the Covenant camp who are out there evangelizing the lost as opposed to proselytizing and correcting the poor, unlearned Dispensationalists.

Historic Misapplications / Misappropriations

History demonstrates that the blurring of the Bible's distinctions can lead to serious misapplications. If the church can claim all the promises of God in the Old Testament for today, Dutch Reformed Boers can colonize the Zulus in South Africa and put those pagans to the sword as "we Israelites / Christians conquer the land like Joshua" (see James Michener's novel *The Covenant* for a vivid description of this theological misapplication in South Africa's history). The same can be seen in United States history and our nation's dealings with the Native Americans. History records the tragic misappropriation of many of the Reformers. For example, between 1542-46 under John Calvin there were 58 executions in Geneva, which was a town of only 20,000 people (Phillip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 8, p. 492-493). The most famous execution is Calvin's burning at the stake of Michael Servetus for heresy. One girl was beheaded in Geneva for striking her parents, to vindicate the Fifth Commandment (Schaff, Vol. 8, p. 491) and in 1545 more than twenty men and women were burned alive in Geneva for witchcraft (Schaff, Vol. 8, p. 492). Calvin himself reported: "A conspiracy of men and women has lately been discovered, who for the space of three years, has spread the plague through the city by what mischievous device I know not. After fifteen women have been burnt, some men have even been punished more severely, some have committed suicide in prison, and while twenty-five are still kept prisoners - the conspirators do not cease" (*Opera*, XII.55, cited by Schaff, Vol. 8, p. 492, footnote 27). All of these tragic actions were taken because of Calvin's severe misappropriation of Scripture.

CONCLUSION

We in IFCA International believe that Scripture must be interpreted in a way consistent with its context. It is critical to know the author, intended audience, and historical background of each passage being interpreted. The historical and cultural setting will

often reveal what the correct meaning of a passage is. It is also important to remember that Scripture interprets Scripture. That is, often a passage will cover a topic or subject addressed elsewhere in the Bible. It is important to interpret all of these passages consistently with one another.

The doctrine of perspicuity asserts that Scriptural passages can be plainly understood. This means the reader can understand a passage in its normal, regular, plain, literal meaning unless the context of the passage indicates it is figurative in nature. A literal interpretation does not eliminate the possibility of figures of speech being used. Rather, it encourages the interpreter not to read figurative language into the meaning of a passage unless it is appropriate for that context.

Our brothers who adhere to Covenant Theology have much to commend and respect. But they are not consistent with Scripture in their hermeneutics, ecclesiology, and eschatology. This is why IFCA International believes Dispensational Premillennialism is more consistent and to be preferred.

- Les Lofquist