



R E M E D I A L
Christianity

Correcting Deficiencies in Popular Christianity

#12—So What's a Covenant?

With Study Questions

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So What's a Covenant

Now it happened in the process of time that the king of Egypt died. Then the children of Israel groaned because of the bondage, and they cried out; and their cry came up to God because of the bondage. ²⁴ So God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. ²⁵ And God looked upon the children of Israel, and God acknowledged *them* (Exodus 2:23-25).

In the same manner *He* also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me" (1 Corinthians 11:25).

A Covenant

I forget the question but I remember the answer the pastor gave. It was "because we serve a covenant God." I wasn't sure what he meant by that answer. When I was a Baptist one man asked me, "Why do you think our children are excluded from the covenant?" I had no idea what he was talking about.

So what's a covenant? Here is a word used no less than three hundred times in the Bible. There are people of the covenant (Genesis 9:9); the sign of the covenant (Genesis 9:12); the establishment of the covenant (Genesis 17:17); the keeping of the covenant (Genesis 17:9); the breaking of the covenant (Joshua 7:11); there's God remembering His covenant (Exodus 2:24); the blood of the covenant (Exodus 24:8); the book of the covenant (Exodus 24:7); the vengeance of the covenant (Leviticus 26:25); the ark of the covenant (Numbers 10:33); and so on. The entire Bible is often thought of as broken into two parts – the old covenant and the new covenant.

I am not sure, for me, if it was a matter of being remedial as much as just pure ignorance of what this is all about. You'd think that something so prominent in the Bible would be a matter of emphasis for Christians, but I was lost. And the times I heard teaching on the covenant (usually by people with a brand of theology called Dispensationalism) it was so confusing that I couldn't make heads nor tails of it.

Our goal here is to understand the idea of covenant. What does the word mean? What is the covenant of works? What is the covenant of grace? What is the difference between the old and new covenants? Of what must we beware regarding covenant morphing? What difference does this all make to me?

Define Covenant

What does the word *covenant* actually mean? There are multiple ways this word can be used. It can be used between nations as a treaty or an alliance of friendship. It can be used between individuals as a pledge or an agreement. It can be used between a monarch and his subjects regarding certain obligations, often relating to a constitution. It's a contract of sorts.

In the Bible the covenant is primarily between God and man.¹ This God-initiated, covenant is accompanied by signs, sacrifices, and a solemn oath that seals the relationship with promises of blessings for keeping the covenant and curses for breaking it.² Roughly put, mankind has a contract with God to live a certain way. If we live that way we'll be blessed, if not we'll be cursed.

Covenant of Works

We first see a covenant (commonly referred to as a covenant of works) made with Adam.

Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it. ¹⁶And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; ¹⁷but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Genesis 2:15-17).

Seems simple enough. If you eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you are demonstrating rebellion against God. You have broken the covenant and will suffer the consequences. Here we have a pretty reasonable explanation for why there is a one hundred percent casualty rate among humans. The Apostle Paul explains,

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned (Romans 5:12).

Therefore, as through one man's offense *judgment* came to all men, resulting in condemnation (Romans 5:18).

Adam's sin has affected and infected the entire race. In other words, we're all guilty because of his offense and because of our offense as well. There's simply no escaping our humanity.

When we get right down to it, this covenant of works has become pretty bad news. We are all sinful and cursed individuals in a sinful and cursed race.

Covenant of Grace

But praise God; the Scriptures almost immediately reveal the covenant of grace. Question 30 of the Larger Westminster Catechism expresses things nicely:

God doth not leave all men to perish in the estate of sin and misery, into which they fell by the breach of the first covenant, commonly called the Covenant of Works; but of his mere love and mercy delivereth his elect

¹ Though not always. Job made a covenant with his own eyes (Job 31:1).

² Harris, R. L. 1999, c1980. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Page 128). Moody Press: Chicago.

out of it, and bringeth them into an estate of salvation by the second covenant, commonly called the Covenant of Grace³

It isn't too long after the fall of man that we read of the covenant of grace. There is an immediate proclamation by God in which He promises to win back, through the seed of the woman (that would be Jesus), that which was lost through Adam's disobedience. Speaking to the serpent God says,

He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel (Genesis 3:15).

Some Common Mistakes

Let's avoid some mistakes here. We are not to think that the covenant of works is no longer in play. Nor should we think that the covenant of grace applies indiscriminately to the entire human race as did the covenant of works. In other words the covenant of works is still in effect to those who are not under the covenant of grace—that is people who reject Jesus. They prefer, if you will, to remain part of Adam's deal.

Let's also avoid another huge mistake. The covenant of grace does not supplant or nullify the covenant of works. It is not as if God no longer requires absolute, perfect obedience to His holy law as our necessary contribution—as our part of the deal. God is immutable; He changeth not (Malachi 3:6). What He once required He always will require. The covenant of grace rather fulfills the covenant of works.

The Scriptures read as if God is hunting for someone to undo what Adam has done.

Then the Lord saw *it*, and it displeased Him that *there was no justice.*

¹⁶ He saw that *there was no man*, and wondered that *there was no intercessor* (Isaiah 59:15, 16).

Then I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and to loose its seals?" ³And no one in heaven or on the earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll, or to look at it. ⁴ So I wept much, because no one was found worthy to open and read the scroll, or to look at it (Revelation 5:2-4).

But both of these passages end wonderfully. Isaiah records that God wondered that there was no intercessor (representative for men),

Therefore His own arm brought salvation for Him; and His own righteousness, it sustained Him. ¹⁷ For He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on His head; He put on the garments of vengeance for clothing, And was clad with zeal as a cloak (Isaiah 59:15-17).

The human race had no hero, no deliverer, so God would do it Himself. John wept because no one was worthy. The text continues,

³ Smith, M. H. 1990; Published in electronic form by Christian Classics Foundation, 1996. Larger catechism of the Westminster Confession Standards. Index created by Christian Classics Foundation. (electronic ed.). Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary Press: Greenville SC.

But one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep. Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has prevailed to open the scroll and to loose its seven seals” (Revelation 5:5).

Of course, this refers to Christ, the eternal Son of God made flesh.

So the covenant of grace is not God changing His mind about the covenant of works as much as it is God fulfilling the covenant of works by sending His own Son. Jesus taught,

Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill (Matthew 5:17).

Briefly, God made a covenant with mankind that He must live in perfect obedience or suffer the eternal consequences. Men rebelled. But God, because of the great love with which He loved us, chose not to leave us in a state of rebellion and death. So He, by sending His own beloved Son, kept our part of the deal. We failed in our righteousness—Jesus did not fail. We could not escape the due punishment of sin, eternal death and misery—He bore it for us on a tree (1 Peter 2:24).

It is not as if God reposed in heaven barking out impossible orders to miserable sinners (something, by the way, He would have been perfectly just to do). No, He became an active participant in producing and procuring that which we had abandoned and disdained. He is not merely a covenant-making God—He is a covenant-keeping God. He kept both sides of the covenant.

As a righteous, holy, and just God He promised to punish sin. That He did. As a gracious, merciful Savior, God the Son (Immanuel—God with us), He chose to bear the punishment and freely grant His covenant-keeping righteousness to sinners. This is known as grace.

How much more glorious is it to God when we realize that the covenant of works was not dismissed but was fulfilled by Christ!

Distinctions Between Covenants

What then are the distinctions between the covenants we see in the Bible?

A brief explanation:

If you are under the covenant of works, you are trusting in your own efforts to stand justified before a Holy God. This is just about the most foolish thing a person can do. They either have an over-inflated view of their own righteousness or an under-inflated view of the righteous judgments of God.

If you are under a covenant of grace you are trusting, not in your own works, but in Christ’s righteousness. He is the law-keeper. He is the intercessor (the mediator between God and man). He is the giver of life. He is our deliverer—the covenant keeper.

Two Covenants of Grace

Here is something that most Christians don’t realize. Both the old covenant (seen in the sacrifices and ceremonies of the Old Testament) and the new covenant (seen in the works of Christ in the New Testament) are covenants of grace! The covenant of

works was given to Adam. What we see given to Abraham, Moses, David, etc., in the Old Testament is all grace.

The old covenant is often referred to as the law. But that doesn't mean those under the old covenant were saved by keeping the law. It only means that it was during this period that the full expression of the law was given. Similarly the new covenant is referred to as a covenant of grace. Even though there is much instruction on righteous living in the new covenant, the full of expression of grace is seen in Christ.

So what's the difference? Essentially the difference between the old covenant and the new covenant is a matter of foreshadow versus fulfillment. The old covenant had priests which foreshadowed our High Priest who is Christ (Hebrews 7:24). The old covenant had sacrifices which foreshadowed the sacrifice of Christ (John 1:29). In the old covenant God preserved the nation of Israel because it was through that nation that Christ would be born (Genesis 18:22).

But the heart of the old and new covenants is the same – that God would send His Son to redeem His people to His own glory. The new covenant is represented among the people of God in a much simpler way. There is the preaching of God's word, the administration (not of blood sacrifices – Jesus already bled) of the sacraments (baptism and Lord's Supper) and the pursuit of the overall purity of Christ's church through necessary discipline.

Beware of Covenant Morphing

Finally we must beware of the covenant morphers (people who seek to change a covenant of grace into a covenant of works). The Apostle Paul dealt with these people quite often. They told church members they had to be circumcised in order to actually obtain salvation, thus turning a covenant of grace into a covenant of works (saved by human effort).

This is seen in its most blatant forms today in cults and Roman Catholics that teach salvation by water baptism or some other meritorious function performed by the person or a priest.

In its most insidious form this is seen in most of evangelicalism today where men are taught that they aid in their own salvation through autonomous volition – more commonly known as free will decisions for Christ. But this leads us back to the covenant of works. Hear A.A. Hodge,

The Arminian (salvation by human choice) view is, that Adam having lost the promise and incurred the penalty of the covenant which demanded perfect obedience, Christ's death having made it consistent with the claims of absolute justice, God for Christ's sake introduces a new covenant, styled the covenant of grace, offering to all men individually the eternal life forfeited by Adam on the lowered and graciously possible condition of faith and evangelical obedience. According to this view, the new covenant is just as much a covenant of works as the old one was; the only difference is that the works demanded are far less difficult, and we are graciously aided in our endeavors to

accomplish them. According to this view, also, faith and evangelical obedience secure eternal life in the new covenant in the same way that perfect obedience did in the old covenant (parenthesis mine).⁴

It is not too hard to see how this robs glory from God and grants room for boasting among men. It also will eventually lead men to have confidence in their own ability to make righteous choices rather than throwing themselves upon the mercy of a gracious God.

Beware of the covenant morphers. Creation is governed by a covenant God. This is a glorious and inescapable fact. You will either seek to keep the covenant yourself (an endeavor you've already failed at a millions times a million) or you will trust in God's own arm of salvation—the Son of God, the Son of man—Jesus the Christ.

The Deliverer will come out of Zion, and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob; ²⁷ for this is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins (Romans 11:26, 27).

⁴ Hodge, A. 1996. *The confession of faith : With questions for theological students and Bible classes*. With an appendix on Presbyterianism by Charles Hodge. Index created by Christian Classics Foundation. (electronic ed. based on the 1992 Banner of Truth reprint). Christian Classics Foundation: Simpsonville SC.

Questions for Study

1. What are some different examples of covenants in the Bible (page 1)?
2. Define covenant (page 1).
3. What is the covenant of works (page 2)?
4. What is the covenant of grace (pages 2, 3)?
5. What are some common mistakes regarding the relationship between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace (page 3)?
6. Who kept the covenant of works (pages 3, 4)?
7. Give some brief descriptions of the different covenants?
8. Is the old covenant a covenant of works or of grace? Explain (page 5).
9. What kind of covenant morphing do we see in churches today (page 5)?
10. Why is it important to have a proper understanding of the covenant (page 6)?