

1. Introducing Bible Covenants

The subject of Bible covenants is vast and hugely significant. The *seven* divine covenants are *stages* in God's restoration of creation; from the **old** creation badly damaged by sin, to a **new** creation wherein righteousness will *reign*, and ultimately *dwell*. The covenants therefore provide a framework to guarantee the fulfilment of divine purpose for the *glory* of God and *blessing* of man. The faithful character of God *secures* each covenant and *ensures* they will be fulfilled.

The Phraseology of Bible Covenants

- **Definition.** The Hebrew word for "covenant" is *bērît*. This word is used over x280 in OT. The etymology of the Hebrew word is not clear, but some propose two Akkadian associations. **1.** *birît*, a preposition meaning 'between' (*agreement* between two parties). **2.** *birtu*, a noun meaning 'clasp' or 'fetter' (a *bond* that binds two parties).
- A Bible covenant is "**a solemn, legally binding arrangement to regulate the relationship between two parties**". A covenant involved *promises* or *obligations* that were sealed (ratified) with an *oath* (either verbal or symbolic).
- **Diversity.** There is a variety of covenants found in the Bible. Some are *bi-lateral* or *conditional* (two sided), meaning *both* parties are obligated to fulfil the conditions. Failure to keep the conditions leads to *sanctions* or *annulment* of the covenant. Other covenants are *unilateral* (unconditional) meaning one party is obligated to fulfil the conditions.
- **Distinction.** Theologians divide covenants into *three* main types:
 - "Royal Grant Treaty" (unconditional). Arose out of a king's desire to reward a loyal servant (Davidic covenant).
 - "Suzerain-Vassal Treaty" (conditional). Bound an *inferior* vassal to a *superior* suzerain and was only binding on the one who swore (Mosaic covenant).
 - "Parity Treaty". Bound two *equal* parties by mutually agreed conditions (Jacob and Laban).
- The most important covenants of the Bible are those that *God* makes *with human beings* – divine covenants. The first was the *Noahic covenant* (Genesis 6.18; 8.20-9.17), solemnly promised with an *oath* (Isaiah 54.9).
- Other covenants are made between *human beings* for personal or socio-political reasons. Examples are Abraham and Abimelech (Genesis 21.17), Jacob and Laban (Genesis 31.44-55) or Israel and the Gibeonites (Joshua 9.3-21).
- *Marriage* is described as a covenant (Malachi 2.14) and, occasionally, there is mention of *metaphorical* covenants such as Job making a covenant with his *eyes* (Job 31.1) and Jerusalem's covenant with *death* (Isaiah 28.15, 18).

The Procedures of Bible Covenants

- When a covenant was made, God was involved as a *witness* (cf. Genesis 31.50; 1 Samuel 23.18). Covenant breakers were thus accountable to God and liable to divine sanction if they broke the covenant.
- Various *verbs* are used to describe the making of a covenant. Jeremiah speaks of 'entering' a covenant (34.10). The Antichrist will 'impose' a covenant 'by force' (Daniel 9.27). God 'establishes' (Genesis 6.18), 'gives' (Genesis 17.2) and 'commands' covenants (Psalm 111.9). But, by far the most frequent verb to describe the making of a covenant is 'to **cut**' (cf. Genesis 15.18). This phrase came from the ancient custom of *slaughtering* and *cutting* a sacrificial animal into two halves between which the parties passed, to intimate that if either of them broke the covenant they would be split in two just like the animal (cf. Genesis 15.10, 17; Jeremiah 34.18-20)!
- Covenants were generally *ratified* (formal confirmation) by means of **swearing** a solemn oath (Genesis 21.31; Exodus 24.7; Deuteronomy 29.10-15). Today, covenants are ratified by a **signature**. In Bible times, covenants were also ratified by **salt** (Numbers 18.19; 2 Chronicles 13.5), **shoes** (Ruth 4.7-8), **sheep** (or the giving of gifts, cf. Genesis 21.27) and by **sacrifice** (or *slaughter*). The parties often sealed the agreement with **supper** (Genesis 26.30).
- God often attached **signs** to His covenants as a *repeatable memorial* of the covenant that was made. God placed a *rainbow* in the sky for Noah and subsequent generations, promising that He would never again destroy the earth by flood (Genesis 9.14-17). He commanded *circumcision* as a perpetual reminder to Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 17.9-10). Later, He instituted the *Sabbath* as a sign of His covenant with Israel (Exodus 31.13).

The Programme of Divine Covenants

- In total there are *seven* divine covenants in Scripture, *two* of which are so closely linked to other covenants they are really developments of the same. There are therefore *five* major covenants each linked with *five* different men.
- The purpose of these covenants is to restore creation. The old creation, though initially 'very good', was badly damaged by sin. So awful was the wickedness of the earth, it "grieved" the LORD He had made man (Genesis 6.7).

- But God is not *reactive* – He is *proactive*. He has a preconceived plan for a **new creation**, far superior to the first. The covenants are *stages* in the plan by which the goal will be reached. Thus, after the flood, God made solemn, legally binding covenants to secure glory for Himself and blessing for mankind.
 - The covenants were given at *regular* intervals in human history and during a dark day of special crisis. They should encourage us to remember that God is in control. He is a covenant *keeping* and covenant *remembering* God!
1. **Noahic** covenant. Guarantees the *realm* (planet Earth) in which the kingdom will be established.
 2. **Abrahamic** covenant. Guarantees the *race*, both *natural* and *spiritual*, that will comprise the kingdom.
 3. **Mosaic** covenant. Declares the *righteous* standards which will be exhibited in the kingdom.
 4. **Davidic** covenant. Guarantees a *ruler* of David's seed who will sit on the throne of universal government.
 5. **New** covenant. Guarantees a close *relationship* with God. A people with hearts in harmony with Him.

Please note. Some add the so-called *Edenic Covenant* (Genesis 1.28-30; 2.15-17) and *Adamic Covenant* (Genesis 3.14-19) to this list. However, scripture does not use the word “covenant” [*bĕrît*] in these passages. The first mention of *bĕrît* is in Genesis 6.18. The only hint of a covenant made with Adam is found in Hosea 6.7. The interpretation of this verse is notoriously difficult, and likely is not referring to the historical Adam, but mankind in general. Undoubtedly Adam had a relationship with God that involved certain obligations, and God made promises to Adam – but this must be distinguished from a more formal covenant which involves a *sworn* or *enacted* oath.

The Problems of “Covenant Theology” – A Warning

- Covenant Theology is a prominent feature in *Protestant* theology, especially in *Presbyterian* and *Reformed* churches, and a similar form is found in *Methodism* and *Reformed Baptist* churches.
 - Covenant theology views Scripture through *two* (or three) *theological* covenants superimposed on the Bible. These are the “Covenant of Redemption” (in eternity past between Father, Son and Spirit), the “Covenant of Works” (made with Adam in Eden) and the “Covenant of Grace” made by God with Adam after the Fall.
 - The system propounds serious errors. **1.** It believes that God has *one* eternal purpose which is the redemption of man. **2.** It teaches that the church and Israel are not distinct. There is one people of God, and the church has now *replaced* Israel. **3.** It employs a double hermeneutic (historical-grammatical *and* allegorical). **4.** Most covenant theologians are *amillennial*. They believe the millennium is *spiritual* and *symbolic* and commenced at the beginning of the Christian era – as did a general period of tribulation.
- It is far better to approach the Bible from a **dispensational** perspective. Covenant theology was invented by men in the Reformed Churches of Switzerland and Germany in the *sixteenth* century. By contrast, dispensationalism is rooted in the NT, and was recognised by early church fathers such as *Clement of Alexandria* (150-220AD).
 - The word ‘dispensation’ (cf. Ephesians 1.10; 3.2) simply means the *management* or *administration* of household affairs. Dispensationalists see the world as a household ordered by God. He has *dispensed* His rule at different times in different ways, but on each occasion revealing more of Himself and His purpose.
 - Dispensationalism avoids the serious errors of covenant theology (above). **1.** It believes God has designed the ages to maximise His own glory. Covenant theology is *anthropocentric*, but God's glory in Christ is paramount in dispensationalism. Man is blessed, but never central. **2.** It maintains the distinction between Israel and the church. God is faithful to His unconditional promises, and though Israel has been set aside, she will soon be restored (cf. Romans 11.1). **3.** Recognising that the Bible uses symbolic and metaphorical language at times (which is always clearly explained or evident), dispensationalism interprets the Bible as plain language. “*If the plain sense makes good sense seek no other sense, or you end up with nonsense.*” **4.** The Bible is not amillennial. God has promised a kingdom to His people of old and His promises can never fail (cf. Acts 1.6).
 - The importance of dispensationalism cannot be overestimated. Oliver Cromwell marched into battle singing the Psalms and claiming holy war on the Irish. Why? He was not a dispensationalist! There are no holy wars today.
 - Martin Luther was antisemitic. Why? He was not a dispensationalist! He didn't recognise the place God has for His people. He loves them with an everlasting love. Antisemitism is satanic.

“Numerous things in the Bible indicate that God has employed different dispensations or ways of administering His rule throughout history. For example, before the Noahic Flood God did not institute capital punishment for murderers (Gen. 4.9-15), but He did institute it after the flood (Gen. 9.5-6). Between the giving of the Mosaic Law and the death of Christ, God commanded adulterers in Israel to be put to death (Lev. 20.10), but since the death of Christ God does not so command (1 Cor. 6.9-11). While the Mosaic Law was in effect, God required Jews to worship on Saturday (Ex. 20.8-11), but since the death of Christ God does not so require (Col. 2.13-17). God's people today do not offer animals as sacrifices for sins, but people before Christ's death were required to do so.” **Renald Showers**