





GOD'S COVENANTS:

The Key to Understanding the Bible

The idea of *covenant* is the spine that binds the Bible together; determining how we understand any given passage or story's meaning at any given place in the story of salvation history (macro-hermeneutics/context).

C.H. Spurgeon said, "The doctrine of the divine covenant lies at the root of all true theology." Yet even Spurgeon acknowledged that he is a "master of divinity" who understands the inter-relationship of the covenants.¹ Thus, this subject is given to numerous understandings.² That which is presented here is generally known as Classic Baptist Covenantalism.³

God relates to humans through covenants. A covenant is a formal agreement between two parties, either God and man (unequals) or between men (co-equals). (Modern parallels would be a marriage covenant, last will and testament [covenant] or a business contract). Using human marriage as an example, God's

¹ Charles H. Spurgeon, "[The Wondrous Covenant](#)," in [The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons, vol. 58](#) (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1912), 58: 517.

² Dispensationalism, Two Covenant, Covenantalism, Baptist Covenantalism, Progressive Covenantalism; New Covenant.

³ Also known as 1689 Federalism.

covenants contain the following hallmarks: a) the parties, b) the condition, c) the promises (blessings and curses) and d) the sign.

Parties	Groom and Bride	Promises	Vows
Condition	Commitment	Sign	Ring

Though not all the covenants in the diagram are overtly named as covenants in the Bible (e.g. Edenic) there is no question that since the hallmarks of covenant are present they are real covenants.

ETERNAL COVENANT: This covenant, sometimes called the covenant of redemption, speaks of the covenant the Trinity made in eternity past to redeem a people for Himself. (Heb 13:20).

Parties	Trinity	Promises	Salvation
Condition	God's Will	Sign	<i>NA- in eternity</i>

COVENANT OF WORKS: Following Creation God entered into a covenant of works with Adam and Eve. It is called “works” because, being before sin, their obedience meant life. Hos 6:7 says, “But like Adam they transgressed the covenant...” We also find all the hallmarks of covenant present in Genesis. God promised to bless them as they lived out His good word (e.g. fruitful, tend and keep, Sabbath, etc) with the life of His presence. However, he promised to curse them if they ate of the fruit (Gen 2:17).

*c.f. [1689.20.1](#) (and WCF.7.2).

Parties	God and Adam (Eve)	Promises	Life and Death
Condition	Faith	Sign	Tree

Gracious Covenants: Because of Adam's, our federal head, failure to keep the covenant of works any agreement God makes with us is now by His grace. However, the actual grace is found in Christ's shed blood and so the Old Covenants do not have inherent grace but are only gracious as they look forward to the covenant of grace, or the New Covenant. These Old Covenants cumulatively revealed the glory of the New.

EDENIC COVENANT: Following the Fall how could man relate to God? Only if God took the initiative to enable a covenant relationship. In the robing of Adam and Even with garments (theme: sacrifice) we see a pre-figurement of Christ. From

this moment until Abraham humans no longer enjoyed God's presence nor His place but they could become His people through faith in the promised saviour. The Gospel acorn of Gen 3:15, which would grow into a mighty oak, became the basis on which man could now relate to God. If you hoped in the coming Saviour you were justified and walked in the fear of God and kept His commands as Job (Job 1:1) and Noah did (Gen 6:9).

Parties	God and man	Promises	Life goes generally better or worse dependent upon obedience.
Condition	Faith	Sign	Fear of the Lord

NOAHIC COVENANT:

As unrighteousness increased on the earth God sent the Flood. Only Noah and his family continued to trust God's promises. After the Flood God made a unique covenant with the whole world; never again would He flood the whole world (Gen 9). With all of humanity God re-ratified the Creation mandate and added new commands such as capital punishment and the permissiveness to eat meat.

Parties	God	Promises	Never to flood the earth
Condition	Unconditional	Sign	Rainbow

ABRAHAMIC COVENANT:

**This covenant gave added clarity and expanded the Edenic Covenant. Upon this Covenant would come the Mosaic and David Covenants.*

The Edenic Covenant was given fuller form in God's covenant with Abraham (Gen 12, 15 and 17). It answers how would the offspring of woman come. The post-flood world had again rebelled against God (e.g. Babel). From the nations God chose one man to make into a nation through which to bring salvation to the nations. God promised Abraham: land, notoriety, an offspring (Isaac/Christ), numerous descendants and that he would be a blessing to the nations. Abraham believed God's promise and so he was justified ("counted to him as righteousness,"

Gen 15:6). The covenant sign was circumcision to note the biological component, amidst the non-biological, of the promise.

Parties	God and Abraham	Promises	Land, notoriety, offspring, blessing
Condition	Faith	Sign	Circumcision

MOSAIC COVENANT:

While “Old Covenant” can refer to all covenants in the Old Testament it usually means the Mosaic or Sinaitic Covenant, the covenant God made with Israel at Mt. Sinai. This was renewed or re-ratified numerous times throughout the OT (e.g. Joshua, Asa, Jehoida, Hezekiah, Ezra-Nehemiah). Having rescued Israel from Egypt and made them a people, God covenanted to be Israel’s God and they His people. God would bless them as they faithfully obeyed and curse them if they distrusted and disobeyed. Key to this was the elaborate 613 laws: ceremonial, civil and moral that constituted worshipping and walking before the LORD in holiness.

Contrary to some popular thinking the covenant was not based upon works but faith (Ro 9:32, certainly a works righteous-legalism developed but it was based upon faith). However, to enjoy its blessings obedience was required. Thus, it was a difficult covenant that revealed Israel’s sin and need for the promise (Gal 3). Likewise, it wasn’t an exclusively ethnic covenant community either, for many non-Jews joined the OC community (e.g. Ruth and many other proselytes).

Parties	God and Israel	Promises	Blessings and Curses of the Law
Condition	Faith	Sign	Circumcision (Ex 12:48) Sabbath (Ex 31:13) ⁴

DAVIDIC COVENANT:

When David desired to make a house for the LORD the Lord in turn promised to turn David into a great dynasty (2 Sam 7 and 22). God would ensure an unbroken

⁴ Like reinvesting the existing practice of circumcision with new meaning, the LORD reinvested the Creation Ordinance of the Sabbath into the Mosaic Covenant, with additional stipulations.

linage of kings. Specifically, this was a clarification of earlier Messianic prophecies and how Abraham's offspring would be a blessing to the nations and that king's would descend from him. God's rule and reign would be through the line of David.

Parties	God and David	Promises	A descendant to reign
Condition	Faith	Sign	Throne

The Old Covenants, while gracious, were intended to drive the Israelites to the Promise. Israel needed a new covenant and this is exactly what God promised through the prophets (e.g. Jer 31:31–34; c.f. Ezk 11, 18, 36). And just as old covenants could be re-ratified (e.g. the new tablets in Ex 34) or even cancelled because of a failure in terms, God would ratify a new covenant through His Son's blood. This New Covenant fulfilled the Old Covenants; indeed, it would be the very covenant of grace that had given these forward looking covenants value. Man would now relate to God, not through the Old Covenants, but through the NC.

NEW COVENANT:

Jesus fulfilled all of the Old Covenants. This is clearly the point of Mt 1:1. Here the mercy of the Noahic covenant is clearly displayed in the Christ. He is the Second Adam, offspring of woman and Abraham, the one greater than Moses, the faithful Israelite and the descendant of David.

- ✓ Jesus, as the second Adam, fulfilled the Covenant of Works through His perfect life (active obedience), thus enabling His righteousness to be imputed to us (1 Cor 15:22, 45) (c.f. [1689.7.3](#)).
- ✓ Jesus is the offspring of woman to crush the serpent (Gen 3:15).
- ✓ Jesus is the offspring of Abraham who would bless the nations.
- ✓ Jesus is the prophet greater than Moses and faithful Israelite who kept the whole Law.
- ✓ Jesus is the offspring of David who would reign over God's people forever.

Jesus is the covenant partner these figures, in their imperfection, could never be.

Through His life, death and resurrection/ascension Jesus fulfilled the OC and inaugurated the promised and far better (Heb 8:6) New Covenant.

Here the *newness* of the NC must be noted. It was not simply a renewal of the OC. It was new in substance not just new in kind. It was new (*kainos*) like a new invention—a rocket, a mode of transport; and not simply a new type of car (*neos*).

This covenant is made between God and believers. All that is required of man is to repent and believe. By our union with the faithful covenant partner, Christ, we receive all of His benefits: imputed righteousness (Christ's active obedience) and imparted righteousness (the gift of the Spirit who leads us, promising to attain righteousness as we yield to Him). Everything we could not do Jesus promises to do for us! The outward sign is baptism, the first step of obedience, marking visible entrance into the New Covenant community. Ascended, Jesus reign's over the Church (the New Covenant Community) by His Spirit, spreading His Kingdom on earth.

Parties	God and believers	Promises	-in Christ -Spirit led sanctification -Law of Christ (moral law + NC specifications like baptism) -Return
Condition	Faith	[Inward Sign] Outward Sign	-Holy Spirit -Baptism

ETERNITY

When Christ comes again He will reign over His redeemed people in the New Heavens and New Earth. He will be present with His people, in His place in accordance with His covenant promises.