

An Introduction to Covenant Theology

INTRODUCTION: There *IS* such a thing as being a diligent student of the Bible, and holding the Bible in very high esteem, and *YET* failing to arrive at a true and proper understanding of it.

- A. Jesus identified this error on multiple occasions: **Read Matthew 22:29 and John 5:39-40 (etc.).**
 - B. This same reality is no less true today than it was in the days of Jesus' earthly ministry. Therefore, we need to approach the study of Scripture *with great humility*, and *with dependence upon the Lord* to help us. **(Pray)**
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I. When it comes to studying the Bible, there is a fancy word that is worth learning: HERMENEUTICS.

- A. **Hermeneutics is the science of interpretation.** Specifically, hermeneutics aims to answer the question: *What are the proper ways to arrive at an accurate interpretation of a given text?—especially the Bible.*
- B. We need to ask this question because **not everyone who reads the Bible and quotes the Bible rightly understands the Bible they read and quote.** (Read I Timothy 1:5-7; see also II Pet. 3:15-16).
 - 1. **It is *NOT UNCOMMON* for people to be very confident of their assertions about the Bible, and yet hold very confused and inaccurate understandings of Scripture.**
 - 2. When that happens, it is because something has gone wrong with their hermeneutical approach (i.e. their method for interpreting the Bible).

II. Hermeneutics covers a broad spectrum of aspects of interpretation.

- A. For example, it can deal with interpretation *at the very specific level*, such as how to best understand and interpret a specific book of the Bible, or even how best to understand and interpret a single word in a single verse.
- B. **But hermeneutics also deals with interpretation at the macro level, asking questions like:**
How should we understand the structure and flow of the whole Bible? Is there a unifying center to the unfolding of redemptive history that we should recognize in order to better understand and interpret the whole?
 - 1. To be clear, these questions are different than asking: *What is the Bible about?*
 - a) That is a question which seeks to discern God's primary **theme** and **purpose** in redemptive history.
 - 2. **Our question this morning is not so much about theme, but rather about structure and form.**
 - a) *That is, when we consider Scripture, how should we understand the relationship between all the parts? Is the Bible just a bunch of random and disjointed pieces thrown into a bucket called the Bible? Do the pieces fit together into a larger framework? If so, what is that framework?*
 - b) **The answer is yes.** The Bible *DOES HAVE* an ordered framework, given by God and identified within Scripture itself, by which we are to rightly understand the relationship of all the parts of the Bible to one another, AND to understand their relationship to ourselves as New Covenant Christians.

III. That hermeneutical framework is called COVENANT THEOLOGY.

- A. Covenant theology is the long-held view of Reformed Theology, and it is the view of the Bible held by FSPC.
- B. What do we mean when we say that we hold to Covenant Theology?
 - 1. Generally speaking, this affirmation means that *it is through the framework of God's covenants* that we believe we are to endeavor to understand, interpret, and apply the whole counsel of God contained in the Scriptures.
 - a) We *DO NOT* believe that the history of redemption is disjointed, but rather part of a deeply unified whole which is all centered in Christ. (**Lk. 24:27**)
 - b) Moreover, we believe that as New Covenant Christians, we have been grafted into and become full partakers of, ALL THE COVENANT PROMISES OF GOD given to his covenant people throughout history.
 - c) We believe this for the simple reason that is is exactly what the Bible teaches us time and again:
Read Ephesians 2:11-14, II Corinthians 1:20, Galatians 3:7, I Corinthians 10:1

IV. So, if Covenant Theology is the proper framework for understanding the Bible, what does that framework look like? **Please note that we are speaking at the 30,000-foot view here and offering succinct summaries.*

- A. At the broadest level, the covenantal structure of the Bible can be broken into three parts:

1. The Covenant of Redemption (Made in eternity among the Trinity)

- a) *"Before the ages began,"* the Triune God planned to reveal his own glory to a specific and chosen people, the Elect, through the works of Creation, Providence, and Redemption (Rom. 9:18-24). In fulfillment of this eternal purpose, the Father agreed to send the Son. The Son agreed to be sent. The Spirit agreed to glorify the Father and the Son by applying the work of the Son to the hearts of the elect from all nations.
 - (1) This is the whole reason why God ever created anything, and why the words, *"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth..."* were ever written (Gen. 1:1).
 - (2) **Read Eph. 1:4-5; 3:8-11; II Tim. 1:9.** (See also WCF 3)

2. The Covenant of Works (Made with Adam and all who are born of him by natural generation)

- a) In the Garden of Eden, God promised life and blessing to Adam and all his posterity if he walked in perfect and personal obedience to God's holy will. God threatened judgment and death to Adam and all his posterity if he turned from the holy and good will of God unto sin, (Gen. 2:15-17; WCF 7.2).

Q: We all know what happened. So why doesn't the Bible end at Genesis 3:6?

3. The Covenant of Grace (Made with Christ and all the elect who are united to him by faith)

- a) God promised life and blessing to Christ, and through him, to all who are in Christ (the Elect), based on his perfect obedience and sacrificial death in our place as our saving substitute (Gen. 3:15; WCF 7.3).
 - (1) Everything that happens in the rest of the Bible is rightly understood as the unfolding and fulfillment of the Covenant of Grace which God planned in eternity for his Church.

B. Now, I have simply stated this broad structure. But we must ask: Is this how the Bible itself teaches us to read and understand it? Is this how the inspired Apostles read, understood, and applied the Bible to the New covenant Church? The answer is an unequivocal YES.

1. The Bible consistently teaches us to understand the structure of redemptive history according to this covenantal structure (*i.e. as being either “in Adam” (i.e. Covenant of Works) or “in Christ” (i.e. Covenant of Grace)*).

a) Here are three important examples of where this takes place explicitly:

(1) Read Romans 5:17-19

(2) Read I Corinthians 15:22

(3) Read Revelation 2:7, 22:1-5 (Why are we hearing about the Tree of Life?)

V. REVIEW: So, what should we understand so far? We should understand this:

A. The best and proper way to understand the overarching framework of the Bible is by Covenant.

B. The best way to understand the covenants of the Bible is according to the three-fold designation:

1. The Covenant of Redemption (Made in eternity among the Trinity)

2. The Covenant of Works (Made with Adam and all mankind born of him)

3. The Covenant of Grace (Made with Christ and all the elect in him)

C. Finally, we have seen that the Bible itself talks about redemptive history in these broad categories, ultimately placing all humanity either in the Covenant of Works under Adam (*i.e. dead in sin*), or in the Covenant of Grace under Christ (*i.e. made alive by the Spirit*).

VI. But this leaves an important and obvious question: What about all the other biblical covenants?

How are we supposed to understand those? Didn't God make a covenant with Noah, and with Abraham, and with Israel through Moses, and with David? And didn't he speak of a New Covenant through his prophets? How are we to properly understand the purpose, function, and place of those covenants? To whom do they apply? How did they work? Do they have anything to do with us? If so, what? Etc.

A. We are going to spend the remainder of our time trying to answer some of those important questions.

B. The simplest and most important answer is that we are to understand the various covenants in Scripture (*i.e. Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and New*) as PARTS or SUB-COVENANTS of the one Covenant of Grace in Christ.

1. Not every aspect of these covenants applies to the Church today in the same way it applied to God's covenant people in times past (*i.e. food laws, ceremonial laws have fulfilled their temporary purpose; Matt. 9:14-17; II Cor. 3:11*).

2. But ALL divine covenants in Scripture are to be understood as having a singular unity in Christ that:

a) Even as Gentiles converts, is now part of our own heritage (I Cor. 10:1, 6), and

b) Which were always intended by God to point us, as New Covenant Christians, to the full array of blessings and privileges which now fully belong to us in Jesus (Eph. 1:3, 2:12-22).

(1) **Objection:** Some people accuse those who hold to Covenant Theology of “*spiritualizing*” the literal and physical promises of God, and therefore, failing to interpret/teach the Bible rightly.

- (a) They say: *Israel is an ethnic people, the promised land is physical land in a specific geographical place, the new temple, priesthood, and sacrifices must look like they looked in the Old Covenant, etc.*
- (2) **Response:** As those who hold to Covenant Theology, we are not “*spiritualizing*” the Bible’s promises when we teach that all the promises and privileges given to God’s people (Israel) by covenant throughout history now belong to us as New Covenant Christians. Now are we spiritualizing the literal fulfillment of those promises and prophecies. We are simply:
 - (a) Reading what the Bible plainly teaches us to believe (**Read: Eph. 1:3, 2:12-13; II Cor. 1:20**)
 - (b) Affirming what the Apostles themselves understood and proclaimed (**Read: I Peter 2:4-5, 9-10**)

C. Here are a few central affirmations of Covenant Theology which are VERY IMPORTANT, and which we hold at FSPC:

1. There were NEVER different ways to be saved.

- a) Salvation has only and always been through faith in Christ.
 - (1) Abel is commended as having faith in Christ (Heb. 11), Noah ministered by the Spirit of Christ (I Peter 3), God preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham (Gal. 3), David called Jesus his Lord (Matt. 22), etc.
 - (2) People were NEVER saved in different ways during different “*dispensations*”. That is NOT biblical teaching.

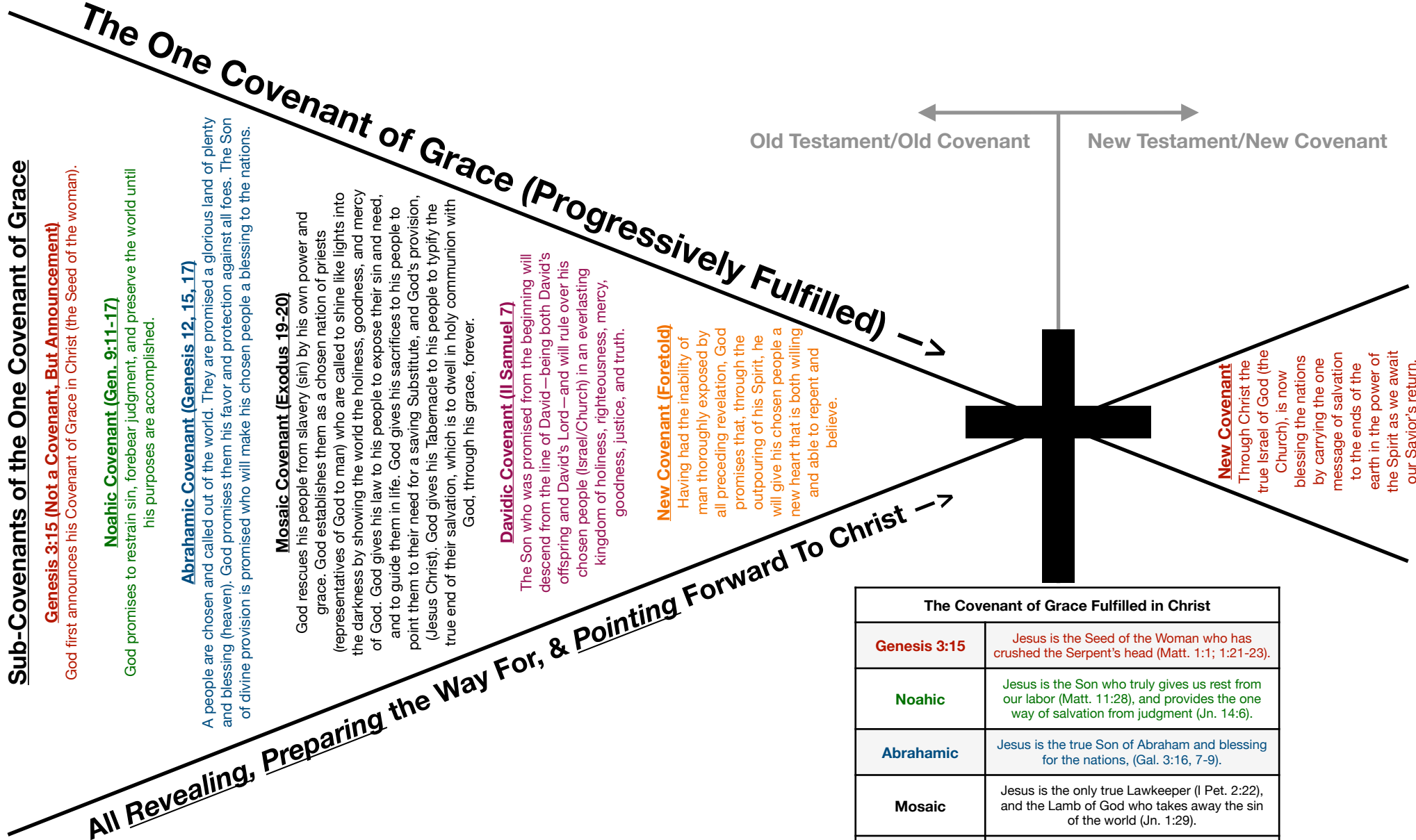
2. There were NEVER different peoples of God.

- a) There is now and only ever has been **ONE PEOPLE OF GOD** (Eph. 2:14), which is rightly called:
 - (1) the true Israel of God (Gal. 6:18),
 - (2) the Sons of Abraham (Gal 3:7),
 - (3) the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 16:18),
 - (4) the Elect from all ages (II Tim. 2:19), the Bride of Christ (Eph. 5:22-22),
 - (5) the Household of God (I Tim. 3:14), etc.,
 - (a) which people is comprised of all those who share the faith of Abraham, not necessarily the bloodline of Abraham (**Read Rom. 9:6-8**).
- b) As New Covenant Christians, we have been “grafted into” the one continuing spiritual body of God’s covenant people, commonly called **Israel in the Old Covenant** and **the Church in the New Covenant**, yet these are one and the same covenant people (Romans 11:17).

3. There has NEVER been a different plan of God.

- a) There is now and only ever has been one eternal purpose (*the Covenant of Redemption planned in eternity*) which God has been perfectly fulfilling in time for the glory of his name and the everlasting blessing of his Church (Isaiah 46:8-10; Daniel 4:34-35; Eph. 3:8-11).

D. Let’s turn now to the diagram on the following page in order to help us visually wrap our minds around **the Christ-centered UNITY and PURPOSE of the covenants set forth throughout holy Scripture.**



The Covenant of Grace Fulfilled in Christ	
Genesis 3:15	Jesus is the Seed of the Woman who has crushed the Serpent's head (Matt. 1:1; 1:21-23).
Noahic	Jesus is the Son who truly gives us rest from our labor (Matt. 11:28), and provides the one way of salvation from judgment (Jn. 14:6).
Abrahamic	Jesus is the true Son of Abraham and blessing for the nations, (Gal. 3:16, 7-9).
Mosaic	Jesus is the only true Lawkeeper (I Pet. 2:22), and the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (Jn. 1:29).
Davidic	Jesus is the true Son of David (Matt. 21:9) whose kingdom shall never end (II Pet. 1:11).
New	By his victory over the grave, Jesus pours out his Spirit upon his people, turning their hearts from sin and saving them by his work in their place (Jn. 3:5, Acts 2:33).

IS THIS REALLY THE RIGHT WAY TO UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE? YES!
Look at how Scripture itself speaks of our unity with Abraham (Rom. 4), of our being grafted into Israel (Rom. 11:17; Eph. 2:12-19), of our being a holy and chosen nation of priests (I Peter. 2:9-10), of our being the true circumcision (Phil. 3:3), of our own receiving the true (heavenly) fulfillment of all the promises of God (II Cor. 1:20; Eph. 1:3), and of the one unchanging gospel of all time.

"Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed.' So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham," (Galatians 3:7-9).