

Know Your Covenants

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Why You Should Know Your Covenants

It is difficult to read and understand the Bible without some knowledge of the covenants of the Bible. **A covenant is a solemn promise that establishes a relationship**, and there are several covenants found in Scripture. But these covenants are more than distinct points of God's revelation, these covenants are also the support structure on which the whole of God's revelation rests. So no matter what you read in the Bible, what you read is resting within a covenantal framework. This is why William Tyndale urged, "The right way, yea, and the only way, to understand the scripture unto salvation, is that we earnestly and above all things search for the profession of our baptism, or covenants made between God and us."¹ When you read the Bible with a view to the covenants, you engage in "a way of reading the whole Bible that is itself part of the overall interpretation of the Bible that it undergirds."²

Improving your understanding of Scripture has many benefits. The chief of them is that by better understanding God's word you will better know God himself, your relationship to him, and your relationship to others in God's church. Consider these three passages in which covenant is related to community.

1. Ephesians 2:11–22, 4:1–16

Paul talks to Gentiles, i.e. "non-Jews" who once did belong to the covenants of God but now do through their faith in Jesus. And he describes in dramatic terms what their new membership in the covenant means for the community.

2. First Corinthians 11:17–34, 12:12–13:13

The apostle is chastising the church in the city of Corinth for failing to make the connection between covenant and church, their relationship with God and their relationship with each other. We read that when they come together for worship and in particularly for partaking of

¹ Quoted in Fesko, *Westminster Standards*, 130. William Tyndale, *Doctrinal Treatises and Introductions to Different Portions fo the Holy Scriptures* The Parker Society, ed. Henry Walter (Cambridge: CUP, 1848), 470.

² J. I. Packer, "Introduction: On Covenant Theology" in Herman Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants* vol 1.

the Lord's Supper, they fail to love each other in a way that corresponds with the love with which God. This despises the church of God and brings about the heavy discipline of God.

3. Hebrews 10:24–25

God describes, yet again, what covenantal life looks like for those who trust him as the faithful keeper of his covenantal promise. If you continue reading, it describes the horrible consequences of not trusting him who is faithful, of profaning the “blood of the Covenant”.

These three passages, and thousands more, call us to think about lives as Christians in light of God's covenants. The rest of this document will help you do that by giving you a brief overview of each covenant.

Read through each definition carefully and then look up the key scriptures. If you are unfamiliar with covenant theology, you will find it helpful to also read chapter seven in the Westminster Confession of Faith and the overview of the covenants in *Sacred Bond: Covenant Theology Explored*, from which I've drawn the following sections.

Covenant of Redemption

AKA: *Pactum Salutis*

Definition: “The pre-temporal, intra-Trinitarian agreement among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to plan and execute the redemption of the elect.”³

The Father appoints the Son as covenant surety (Eph 1:4-10; John 6:57, 20:21; Luke 22:29) and promises to reward him for fulfillment (Deut 17:19-20, 29:1).

The Son is the surety of the covenant (Heb 7:22; Rom 4:25), meaning he “assumes the legal responsibilities on behalf of another.”⁴ He assumes human nature, is born under the law, etc. (Gal 4:4; Heb 2:10-15).

The Holy Spirit is the bond of love between the Father and the Son, is the one who anoints the Son to work (Isa 61:1; Luke 4:18; Acts 10:38), and applies the work of redemption by making the word a reality in the incarnation and in inscripturation (John 14:26, 15:26).

Key Passage: 2 Tim 1:9-10

Also: Psalm 2:7, Psalm 110; Ephesians 1-2

³ Fesko, *The Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption*, 131.

⁴ Fesko, *The Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption*, 134.

Covenant of Works

AKA: Covenant of Creation, Covenant of Life, Adamic Covenant

Definition: “God’s commitment to give Adam, and his posterity in him, eternal life for obedience or eternal death for disobedience.”⁵

Key Passage: Gen 2-3

Also: Isaiah 24:5; Hosea 6:7; Romans 5:12-19; 1 Corinthians 15:21-22

Covenant of Grace

AKA: Covenant of New Creation

Definition: “The covenant between God and believers with their children, in which he promises salvation through faith in Christ, who merited their salvation by his obedience [according to] the covenant of redemption.”⁶

Key Passage: Gen 3:15

Also: See other covenants below

Covenant of Common Grace

AKA: Noahic Covenant

Definition: “God’s covenant of common grace with the earth, despite mankind’s depravity, to sustain its order until the consummation.”⁷

Key Scriptures: Gen 8-9 (esp. 8:20-21 and 9:1-17)

Also: Jer 33:20-21

⁵ Michael Brown and Zach Keele, *Sacred Bond: Covenant Theology Explored*, 47.

⁶ Brown and Keele, *Sacred Bond*, 62.

⁷ Brown and Keele, *Sacred Bond*, 77.

Abrahamic Covenant

Definition: “The covenant of grace established with Abraham and his offspring, wherein God promised the entire future of his covenantal kingdom, in both its old covenant and new covenant stages.”⁸

Key Passage: Gen 17:9-14

Also: Gen 12:1-3; Gen. 16, 17:9-14. Renewed with Isaac (Gen 26:1-5) and Jacob (Gen 28:10-17); Deut 1:10; 1 Kings 4:20a; Gal 3-4

Mosaic Covenant

AKA: Old Covenant

Definition: The Mosaic covenant is, “God’s law covenant with Israel, wherein he graciously leads them to Christ by showing them the perfect righteousness that only Christ could fulfill to redeem sinners.”⁹

Key Passage: Deut 5:2-3; Gal 3:17-19. Guaranteed failure: Deut 4:26-27, 30:1

Also: Gal 3-4; 2 Cor 3:9

Davidic Covenant

Definition: “God’s promise to David that, when his righteous Son builds a house for God’s name, God will grant him an eternal kingdom.”¹⁰

Key Passage: 2 Samuel 7

Also: 1 Chron 17

⁸ Brown and Keele, *Sacred Bond*, 91.

⁹ Brown and Keele, *Sacred Bond*, 108.

¹⁰ Brown and Keele, *Sacred Bond*, 125.

New Covenant

Definition: “God bringing forth the new creation in his people through the finished work of Christ, in fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant.”¹¹

Key Passage: Jer 31:31-34

Also: 2 Cor 3:6-7; Gal 3-4; Heb 7:22

¹¹ Brown and Keele, *Sacred Bond*, 142.