



Foreword by Ligon Duncan

COVENANT THEOLOGY

*Biblical, Theological,
and Historical Perspectives*

EDITED BY

Guy Prentiss Waters,
J. Nicholas Reid, and John R. Muether

“It has been said that Reformed theology *is* covenant theology, for *covenant* is not merely a doctrine or theme in the Bible but is the principle that structures all its revelation. Robert Rollock said, ‘God speaks nothing to man without the covenant.’ Therefore, it is a delight to see this amazing scholarly collaboration by the faculty of Reformed Theological Seminary, which will surely prove to be a sourcebook for future studies of Reformed covenant theology. Here is a gold mine of biblical and historical studies by trusted pastor-theologians of Christ’s church.”

Joel R. Beeke, President and Professor of Systematic Theology and Homiletics, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary; author, *Reformed Preaching*; coauthor, *Reformed Systematic Theology*

“The revived interest in covenant theology has sparked rich insights and lively debate. Representing a variety of views and specialties, and united by biblical fidelity and rigorous scholarship, *Covenant Theology* is a very impressive and welcome collection.”

Michael Horton, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California

“*Covenant Theology* is a gift to the church, a grand account of covenant in Scripture and in Christian theology. This work is scholarly and readable, rigorous and complete. Every chapter is thorough, whether it gathers data on familiar themes or explores new territory. The contributors and editors have presented a resource that pastors and scholars will draw from for many years.”

Daniel Doriani, Vice President at Large and Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology, Covenant Theological Seminary

“This rich and learned compendium updates and extends our understanding of God’s initiative in, and manner of performing, his signature saving work. With thirteen chapters on covenant and covenants in the Bible, seven on covenant in Christian thought up to today, and seven on topics like covenant in contemporary New Testament scholarship, dispensationalism, and ‘new covenant theologies,’ no significant stone is left unturned. From Ligon Duncan’s foreword to Kevin DeYoung’s meaty homiletical summation at the end, this volume artfully defines a nonnegotiable Christian teaching and reaffirms its centrality. The annotated bibliography offers an invaluable listing of covenant studies in (and in some cases against) the Reformed tradition over many centuries. These important essays by a distinguished seminary faculty are a lasting gift to scholarship as well as to the church.”

Robert W. Yarbrough, Professor of New Testament, Covenant Theological Seminary

“Breathtaking! I don’t know of any work that has the diversity and scope of *Covenant Theology*. Every aspect of the covenant doctrine receives attention from the book’s contributors. Each chapter is an urgent invitation. The covenant doctrine is analyzed here with unquestionable scholarship and inalienable commitment to Scripture and Reformed theology. Starting with the exegesis of biblical material, going through the historical development of the theme in the church, contrasting and comparing it with extrabiblical material, and analyzing the concept of the covenant in modern theology, this book offers the most comprehensive exposition of the covenant doctrine available today.”

Augustus Nicodemus Lopes, Assistant Pastor, First Presbyterian Church, Recife, Brazil; Vice President, Supreme Council, Presbyterian Church of Brazil; author, *Apostles* and *The Bible and Its Interpreters*

“If *covenant* is the Bible’s word for God’s relationship with his people, what could be more important than thinking deeply and clearly about covenant theology? This volume is a sure guide to the covenantal thinking that underpins so much of pastoral ministry. Bringing rigorous exegesis into conversation with historic perspectives and modern debates, it is a remarkably comprehensive and thorough work that will help any preacher or student of Scripture.”

Jonty Rhodes, Minister, Christ Church Central Leeds, UK; author, *Covenants Made Simple* and *Man of Sorrows, King of Glory*

“In the history of Reformed theology, the biblical teaching of the triune God’s sovereign initiative to enter into covenant union and communion with his people, before and after the fall into sin, has been a central focus, and some say it even defines Reformed theology. For this reason, the contributors to this comprehensive volume, which treats the topic of the covenant or covenants in biblical, historical, and systematic perspectives, provide a wonderful overview of Reformed theology’s engagement with Scripture’s teaching. Encyclopedic in scope, balanced in tone and temper, sensitive to diversity of expression and formulation—this volume is a model of theological study and an indispensable resource for anyone who has interest in exploring the scriptural witness to God’s covenant.”

Cornelis P. Venema, President and Professor of Doctrinal Studies, Mid-America Reformed Seminary; author, *Christ and Covenant Theology* and *Chosen in Christ*

“I rarely use the term *magisterial* of any book, but this one deserves it. The faculty of Reformed Theological Seminary have produced an outstanding volume on the biblical doctrine of the covenant. The opening section is marked by superb exegetical studies that ground the whole book in Scripture. The historical section that follows presents material (such as the use of *covenant* in the early church and the medieval period) that is not otherwise easily accessible. Later sections bring the discussions right up to the present time and interact with modern exponents and critics of covenantal theology. This is the volume to which those inquiring into the biblical idea of covenant should be pointed, and its presentation will instruct and challenge, while its annotated bibliography of modern studies will lead to many other sources. Everyone seriously pursuing an interest in this central biblical theme must have this book.”

Allan Harman, Research Professor, Presbyterian Theological College, Australia; coauthor, *The Story of the Church*

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Foreword by Ligon Duncan

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In honor of
O. Palmer Robertson and Douglas F. Kelly

and in memory of
Howard Griffith

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ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library
<i>ACF</i>	<i>Annuaire du Collège de France</i>
ACW	Ancient Christian Writers
AnBib	Analecta Biblica
ANE	ancient Near East(ern)
<i>ANES</i>	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Studies</i>
ASBT	Acadia Studies in Bible and Theology
AUMSR	Andrews University Monographs, Studies in Religion
<i>AUSS</i>	<i>Andrews University Seminary Studies</i>
<i>BA</i>	<i>Biblical Archaeologist</i>
BB	Babel und Bibel
<i>BBR</i>	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
<i>BETS</i>	<i>Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
BibInt	Biblical Interpretation Series
<i>BJRL</i>	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester</i>
<i>BSac</i>	<i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i>
BSS	Barth Studies Series
BTCP	Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation
BTNT	Biblical Theology of the New Testament
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CBQMS	Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series
CCT	Contours of Christian Theology

<i>CH</i>	<i>Church History</i>
CJA	Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity
CNTC	<i>Calvin's New Testament Commentaries</i> . Edited by David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance. 12 vols. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959–1972.
<i>Comm.</i>	<i>Calvin's Commentaries</i> . Edited by John King et al. Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1844–1856.
<i>ConcJ</i>	<i>Concordia Journal</i>
<i>ConTJ</i>	<i>Conservative Theological Journal</i>
<i>CovQ</i>	<i>The Covenant Quarterly</i>
CPSHT	Changing Paradigms in Systematic and Historical Theology
CRT	Classic Reformed Theology
CSCD	Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine
CSEMBH	Cambridge Studies in Early Modern British History
CSRT	Columbia Series in Reformed Theology
CTC	Christian Theology in Context
<i>CTJ</i>	<i>Calvin Theological Journal</i>
<i>CurBR</i>	<i>Currents in Biblical Research</i>
CUSAS	Cornell University Studies in Assyriology and Sumerology
<i>Di</i>	<i>Dialog</i>
DJD	Discoveries in the Judean Desert
<i>DS</i>	<i>Diplomacy and Statecraft</i>
<i>DSD</i>	<i>Dead Sea Discoveries</i>
EBib	Etudes bibliques
EBT	Explorations in Biblical Theology
EPSC	EP Study Commentary
<i>ERT</i>	<i>Evangelical Review of Theology</i>
EUSLR	Emory University Studies in Law and Religion
<i>EvQ</i>	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
<i>EvT</i>	<i>Evangelische Theologie</i>
<i>Exp</i>	<i>Expositor</i>
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
FKD	Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte
GSC	Geneva Series of Commentaries

<i>GTJ</i>	<i>Grace Theological Journal</i>
<i>HALOT</i>	<i>Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann J. Stamm. Translated and edited under the supervision of Mervyn E. J. Richardson. 4 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1994–1999.
HBS _t	Herders Biblische Studien
<i>Hist. eccl.</i>	Eusebius, <i>Ecclesiastical History</i>
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
IBC	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<i>IJST</i>	<i>International Journal of Systematic Theology</i>
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<i>JAOS</i>	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JCS</i>	<i>Journal of Cuneiform Studies</i>
<i>JDT</i>	<i>Jahrbücher für Deutsche Theologie</i>
<i>JEH</i>	<i>Journal of Ecclesiastical History</i>
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>JSJ</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Periods</i>
JSJS _{Sup}	Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism
JSNT _{Sup}	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
JSOT _{Sup}	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
JTIS _{Sup}	Journal of Theological Interpretation, Supplements
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
<i>KTC</i>	Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum. <i>Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants</i> . 2nd ed. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018.
LCC	Library of Christian Classics
LJI	Library of Jewish Ideas
LNTS	Library of New Testament Studies
LRS	Leipziger Rechtswissenschaftliche Studien
LSTS	Library of Second Temple Studies
LTPM	Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs

<i>LW</i>	Martin Luther. <i>Luther's Works</i> . Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehman. American ed. 55 vols. Philadelphia: Fortress; Saint Louis, MO: Concordia, 1955–1986.
MC	Mentor Commentary
MEC	Mentor Expository Commentary
<i>MJT</i>	<i>Mid-America Journal of Theology</i>
MRS	Mission de Ras Shamra
<i>MSJ</i>	<i>The Master's Seminary Journal</i>
NAC	New American Commentary
NACSBT	NAC Studies in Bible and Theology
<i>NAK</i>	<i>Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis</i>
NCB	New Century Bible Commentary
NCT	new covenant theology
NHMS	Nag Hammadi and Manichean Studies
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
<i>NIDOTTE</i>	<i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i> . Edited by Willem A. VanGemeren. 5 vols. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997.
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIVAC	NIV Application Commentary
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
NSD	New Studies in Dogmatics
NTC	New Testament Commentary
NTL	New Testament Library
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
NTT	New Testament Theology
OECS	Oxford Early Christian Studies
OSHT	Oxford Studies in Historical Theology
OTL	Old Testament Library
OTRM	Oxford Theology and Religion Monographs
OTS	Old Testament Studies
par.	parallel text

PC	progressive covenantalism
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
<i>Presb</i>	<i>Presbyterion</i>
<i>PRJ</i>	<i>Puritan Reformed Journal</i>
ProEcclSer	Pro Ecclesia Series
PrTMS	Princeton Theological Monograph Series
<i>PRU</i>	Claude F.-A. Schaeffer, ed. <i>Le palais royal d'Ugarit</i> . MRS. Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1955–1970.
<i>RA</i>	<i>Revue d'assyriologie et d'archéologie orientale</i>
RBDS	Reformed Baptist Dissertation Series
REDS	Reformed, Exegetical, and Doctrinal Studies
<i>RefR</i>	<i>Reformed Review</i>
<i>RevQ</i>	<i>Revue de Qumran</i>
<i>RFP</i>	<i>Reformed Faith and Practice</i>
RHT	Reformed Historical Theology
RHTS	Reformed Historical Theological Studies
RIME	Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia, Early Periods
<i>RJ</i>	<i>Reformed Journal</i>
<i>RRR</i>	<i>Reformation and Renaissance Review</i>
<i>RTR</i>	<i>Reformed Theological Review</i>
SAA	State Archives of Assyria
<i>SAAB</i>	<i>State Archives of Assyria Bulletin</i>
<i>SBET</i>	<i>Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology</i>
<i>SBJT</i>	<i>Southern Baptist Journal of Theology</i>
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLMS	Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series
SBLSS	SBL Symposium Series
SCHT	Studies in Christian History and Thought
<i>SCJ</i>	<i>Sixteenth Century Journal</i>
SDST	Studien zur Dogmengeschichte und systematischen Theologie
SHCT	Studies in the History of Christian Thought
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
SMAL	Studies in Mediterranean Archaeology and Literature

SMRT	Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
SNTW	Studies of the New Testament and Its World
SSBT	Short Studies in Biblical Theology
StBibLit	Studies in Biblical Literature
<i>StPatr</i>	<i>Studia Patristica</i>
<i>SwJT</i>	<i>Southwestern Journal of Theology</i>
TAPS	Transactions of the American Philosophical Society
TBS	Twin Brooks Series
TCL	Theologians on the Christian Life
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . Edited by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. 10 vols. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–1976.
THR	Travaux d’humanisme et Renaissance
TiC	Theology in Community
<i>TJ</i>	<i>Trinity Journal</i>
<i>TJT</i>	<i>Toronto Journal of Theology</i>
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
TSAJ	Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum
TSRPRT	Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
VC	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
VR	<i>Vox Reformata</i>
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
WAW	Writings from the Ancient World
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith. In <i>The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms: As Adopted by the Presbyterian Church in America</i> . Lawrenceville, GA: Christian Education and Publications of the PCA, 2007.
WEC	Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary
WLC	Westminster Larger Catechism. In <i>The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms: As Adopted by the Presbyterian Church in America</i> . Lawrenceville, GA: Christian Education and Publications of the PCA, 2007.

WSC	Westminster Shorter Catechism. In <i>The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms: As Adopted by the Presbyterian Church in America</i> . Lawrenceville, GA: Christian Education and Publications of the PCA, 2007.
WSJ	<i>Westminster Society Journal</i>
WTJ	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZECNT	Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
ZKG	<i>Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte</i>
ZNW	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche</i>

FOREWORD

Ligon Duncan

Reformed theology is covenant theology. Allow me to explain.

Reformed theology, representing the public, ecclesial, doctrinal convictions of a major branch of Protestantism, is a school of historic, orthodox, confessional Christianity that maintains and emphasizes the sovereignty of the triune God, the authority of Scripture, God's grace in salvation, the necessity and significance of the church, and covenant theology. Reformed theology believes that the Bible needs to be studied and understood by employing both biblical theology and systematic theology.

Biblical theology approaches the Bible from a redemptive-historical perspective. That is, biblical theology studies the Bible chronologically, historically, or diachronically. It is the study of special revelation from the standpoint of the history of redemption.¹ As Michael Lawrence puts it, "Biblical theology is the attempt to tell the whole story of the whole Bible as Christian Scripture."² Biblical theology is concerned to show that the Bible has one story and to relate all its parts to that one story.

Systematic theology, in comparison, is concerned to show that the Bible has one theology and to relate all its doctrines to one another as part of that one coherent theology. Hence, systematic theology studies the Bible topically, synchronically, and interrelatedly. It works on the collection, summary, interrelation, articulation, and application of what the whole Bible teaches on the major topics that it addresses. Systematic theology is not an enemy of, competitor with, or alternative to biblical theology but is its partner, benefactor, and beneficiary. Biblical theology cannot provide the final assessment offered by systematic theology, but it helps systematic theology make that assessment. Biblical theology and systematic theology, done rightly, are friends. They need each other. They complement one another.

1. See Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1948).

2. Michael Lawrence, *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church: A Guide for Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 89.

Covenant theology is a blending of both biblical and systematic theology. If biblical theology is the thematic survey of redemptive history, with an emphasis on the theological development—era to era—of whatever loci is being studied, then covenant theology could rightly be called “biblical biblical theology.” That is, covenant theology recognizes that the Bible itself structures the progress of redemptive history through the succession of covenants.

Covenant theology is systematic theology in that it identifies the covenants as a fundamental organizing principle for the Bible’s theology. Thus it proceeds to integrate the biblical teaching about the federal headships of Adam and Christ, the covenantal nature of the incarnation and atonement, the continuities and discontinuities in the progress of redemptive history, the relation of the Old and New Testament Scriptures, and law and gospel into a coherent theological system.

So covenant theology is Reformed theology’s way of gleaning from and putting together both systematic and biblical theology. Hence, Reformed theology is covenant theology.

No wonder B. B. Warfield called covenant theology the “architectonic principle” of the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647),³ or James Walker asserted that covenant theology was “the old theology of Scotland.”⁴ J. I. Packer claims that we cannot understand the gospel, the Bible, or the reality of God without a covenantal framework and that the Bible “forces” covenant theology on us by the covenant story it tells, the place it gives to Jesus Christ in that covenant story, the Adam-Christ parallel in Paul, and the testimony of Jesus to the covenant of redemption in the Gospel of John.⁵

Covenant theology sets the gospel in the context of God’s eternal plan of communion with his people and its historical outworking in the covenants of works and grace (as well as in the various progressive stages of the covenant of grace). Covenant theology explains the meaning of Christ’s death in light of the biblical teaching on the divine covenants, undergirds our understanding of the nature and use of the sacraments, and provides the fullest possible account of the grounds of our assurance.

To put it another way, covenant theology is the Bible’s way of explaining and deepening our understanding of at least four things:

1. The atonement (the meaning and significance of the death of Christ)
2. Assurance (the basis for our confidence of communion with God and our enjoyment of his promises)
3. The sacraments (signs and seals of God’s covenant promises—what they are and how they work)
4. The continuity of redemptive history (the unified plan of God’s salvation)

3. B. B. Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), 56.

4. James Walker, *The Theology and the Theologians of Scotland* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1872), 40.

5. J. I. Packer, “Introduction on Covenant Theology,” in Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man: Comprehending a Complete Body of Divinity*, trans. William Crookshank, 2 vols. (1677; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 1:20.

Covenant theology is also a hermeneutic, or an approach to understanding the Scripture, that attempts to biblically explain the unity of biblical revelation.

The Bible's teaching on the covenants is central, not peripheral, to the biblical story. When Jesus wanted to explain the significance of his death to his disciples, he went to the doctrine of the covenants (see Matt. 26; Mark 14; Luke 22; 1 Cor. 11). When God wanted to assure Abraham of the certainty of his word of promise, he went to the covenant (Gen. 12; 15; 17). When God wanted to set apart his people, ingrain his work in their minds, tangibly reveal himself in love and mercy, and confirm their future inheritance, he gave the covenant signs (Gen. 17; Ex. 12; 17; 31; Matt. 28; Luke 22; Acts 2). When Luke wanted to show early Christians that Jesus's life and ministry were the fulfillment of God's ancient purposes for his chosen people, he went to the covenant of grace and quoted Zechariah's prophecy, which shows that believers in the very earliest days of the fledgling Christian church understood Jesus and his messianic work as a fulfillment (not a "plan B") of God's covenant with Abraham (Luke 1:72–73). When the psalmist and the author of Hebrews wanted to show how God's redemptive plan is ordered and on what basis it unfolds in history, they went to the covenants (see Pss. 78; 89; Heb. 6–10).

Covenant theology is not a response to dispensationalism. It existed long before the rudiments of classic dispensationalism were brought together in the nineteenth century. Covenant theology is not sectarian but is an ecumenical Reformed approach to understanding the Bible, developed in the wake of the magisterial Reformation but with roots stretching back to the earliest days of catholic Christianity and historically appreciated in all the various branches of Protestantism under the influence of Reformed theology (Anglican, Baptist, Congregationalist, Independent, Presbyterian, Reformed). As one theologian stated,

The doctrine of the divine covenant lies at the root of all true theology. It has been said that he who well understands the distinction between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace is a master of divinity. I am persuaded that most of the mistakes which men make concerning the doctrines of Scripture are based upon fundamental errors with regard to the covenant of law and of grace. May God grant us now the power to instruct, and you the grace to receive instruction on this vital subject.⁶

Who said this? C. H. Spurgeon, the great English Baptist preacher! Certainly a man beyond suspicion of secretly purveying a Presbyterian view of the sacraments to the unsuspecting evangelical masses.

What Spurgeon's quote evidences is the influence of covenant theology in the Baptist tradition, and indeed, in our own day there is a revival of what is termed

6. C. H. Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 58, *Sermons Preached by C. H. Spurgeon during the Year 1912* (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1978), 517.

“1689 Federalism”—that is, a distinctly Baptist approach to covenant theology derived from the Second London Baptist Confession (1689). Covenant theology, not dispensationalism, is the native soil of not only the Presbyterian, Congregational, and evangelical Anglican traditions but also of historic Baptist biblical theology.

Covenant Theology in the Westminster Confession

Because Reformed Theological Seminary is committed to the inerrancy and authority of Scripture and to confessional Reformed theology, we are committed to covenant theology. The Reformed theology of the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms (WLC and WSC, respectively) beautifully summarizes and expresses the main points of covenant theology in chapter 7 of the confession, titled “Of God’s Covenant with Man”:

1. The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God’s part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant.

2. The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.

3. Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace; wherein he freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ; requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life his Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe.

4. This covenant of grace is frequently set forth in Scripture by the name of a testament, in reference to the death of Jesus Christ the Testator, and to the everlasting inheritance, with all things belonging to it, therein bequeathed.

5. This covenant was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel: under the law, it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all foreshadowing Christ to come; which were, for that time, sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation; and is called the Old Testament.

6. Under the gospel, when Christ, the substance, was exhibited, the ordinances in which this covenant is dispensed are the preaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper: which, though fewer in number, and administered with more simplicity, and less outward glory, yet, in them, it is held forth in more fullness, evidence and spiritual efficacy, to all nations, both Jews and Gentiles; and is called the New Testament. There are not

therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations.

Several things are to be observed here. First, the Westminster Standards set forth a bicovenantal structure of covenant, or federal, theology,⁷ with a covenant of works and a covenant of grace providing the theological outline of the biblical story of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation (WCF 7.2–3). That is, even though the chapter heading speaks of God’s covenant (singular) with man, the chapter itself makes it clear that there is a fundamental division and distinction between God’s covenant relations pre- and postfall. Both covenants, as an expression of his one eternal decree, have in view God’s glory and our good, our imaging him and communing with him, to the praise of his glory. But the means by which the covenants of works and grace are secured are distinct, with the covenant of grace dependent on the mediator in the fulfillment of its conditions. To say this yet another way, the Westminster Confession’s presentation of covenant theology is not monocovenantal. It explicitly speaks of first and second covenants that are distinct: a covenant of works and a covenant of grace. Indeed, rightly understood, the covenant of works protects the grace of the covenant of grace.

Second, the Westminster Confession explains that God himself is the blessedness and reward of his people but that we could not have enjoyed him as such apart from his “voluntary condescension” (WCF 7.1). This is necessary because of the distance between God and humanity, which is not because of some inherent defect or lack in man but is inherent in the Creator-creature distinction and is because of the greatness of God and the finitude of man (WCF 7.1). The confession identifies God’s “voluntary condescension” with covenant in general and with the covenant of works in particular (WCF 7.1–2). For God to covenant is for God to lovingly and generously stoop down, to willingly associate himself with his inferior—that is, with humanity. It should be noted that the confession does not identify this “voluntary condescension” of God as “grace,” nor does it speak of “grace” in the context of its presentation of the prefall covenant. While some orthodox covenant theologians have spoken of God’s grace or graciousness in the covenant of works, the foregoing point should be borne in mind—it protects against a misuse and misunderstanding of “grace” in relation to the first covenant.

Third, the Westminster Confession identifies and summarizes the covenantal structure of Scripture using the “first” and “second” covenants (or the covenants of works and grace), rather than listing explicitly denominated biblical covenants (e.g., God’s covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses/Israel, David) as ways in which God secures his people’s enjoyment of union and communion with him. In doing so, the confession is using the categories of systematic theology. It uses these theological covenants to teach

7. In this book, the term *federal theology* is used interchangeably with *covenant theology*, particularly stressing the representative aspect of two great “federal heads,” Adam and Jesus. *Federal* derives from the Latin *foedus*, which means “covenant.”

that the God of the Bible relates to his creatures covenantally, first in a covenant of works and then through the various administrations of the covenant of grace (WCF 7.5), and it sees all the explicitly designated postfall covenants of Scripture as a part of the one covenant of grace (“the second covenant,” WCF 7.3, 5–6). It is right, then, to see the covenant concept as an important architectonic principle of the theology of the confession.

Fourth, the covenant made with humanity before the fall is identified by the Westminster Standards as a covenant of *works* (respecting its terms or conditions; WCF 7.2), a covenant of *life* (respecting its goal or end; WLC 20), a covenant with *Adam* (respecting its party or representative; WLC 22), and the *first* covenant (respecting its chronological priority and indicating that there is a successor; WCF 7.2). All four names are apt descriptors of the same prefall covenant and are aspects essential to it.

Fifth, this first covenant, or the covenant of works, entailed both promises and conditions (WCF 7.2). Furthermore, it comprehended Adam as federal head, or representative, and required of him perfect and personal obedience to the moral law (WCF 19.1–3; WLC 22). When Adam fell, however, he made himself and all his posterity by ordinary generation incapable of life by the covenant of works and plunged all mankind into a condition of sin and misery (WCF 7.3; WLC 22, 23–25). This lays the groundwork for understanding the work of Jesus Christ, the second Adam (WLC 31), the only mediator of the covenant of grace (WLC 36), who satisfied God’s justice (WLC 38) and performed obedience unto the law (WLC 39).

Sixth, the Westminster Confession does not equate the instrumentality of faith as it relates to justification in the covenant of grace with the obediential fulfillment of the conditions of the covenant of works (cf. WCF 7.2, “upon condition of perfect and personal obedience,” with WCF 7.3, “requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved”). It carefully distinguishes conditions from requirements, reminds us that even the faith of the elect is the gift of God, and draws a line from the conditions of the covenant of works to the work of Christ, not to the believer’s faithfulness or obedience (WLC 32). That is, the conditions that Adam failed to keep under the covenant of works, the second Adam, Jesus, kept on our behalf under the covenant of grace. Our obedience, thus, under the new covenant administration of the covenant of grace is as tied up with and dependent on Christ’s fulfillment of the conditions of the covenant, as was Israel’s with the sacrificial system under the old covenant (which was necessitated by and remedial of imperfect obedience). To put it yet another way, just as the Mosaic covenant isn’t “get in by grace, stay in by works” (“covenantal nomism”) but rather “get in by grace, stay in by mediator” (see, e.g., Ex. 19:3–6; 32), so also the new covenant isn’t “get in by grace, stay in by works.” Our obedience under the new covenant is evangelical obedience (WCF 11.1), obedience that is impossible apart from Christ’s active and passive obedience on our behalf, and the Spirit’s grace-work in us, and thus it is neither a substitute for nor a supplement to the work of Christ but rather its product in us, the evidence of

his grace, and the firstfruits of the whole goal of our creation and redemption, which is that we would be to the praise of God's glory.

Seventh, the terminological distinction between the covenants of works and grace highlights the fullness of the Westminster Confession's usage of the word "grace," which means not simply or merely God's undeserved favor but God's favor to those who deserve disfavor. Grace in its fullness is God's saving blessing to us despite our demerit. Thus there can be no grace (in the fullest sense of the word) without sin, since grace is the love and goodness of God to his people in spite of their sin and their deserving of curse, judgment, and disfavor. Hence, the Standards say, God in his love and mercy (WLC 30) made a second covenant, called the covenant of grace (WCF 7.3), in which he offers salvation to sinners by faith in Jesus Christ and promises to the elect the Holy Spirit (WCF 7.3).

Eighth, the confession indicates that any testamentary themes and terms in Scripture are to be subsumed under the overarching rubric of the covenant of grace (WCF 7.4). This is a unique statement in that it is an observation about the English translation of *διαθήκη* in certain places in the New Testament ("The covenant of grace is frequently set forth in Scripture by the name of a testament"; cf. the accompanying proof texts, Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25; Heb. 7:22; 9:15–17). Many modern subscribers to the Westminster Confession take exception to this assertion that "testament" occurs frequently (most scholars today agree that in only two possible places can *διαθήκη* be translated "testament," Gal. 3:15 and Heb. 9:15–17, though even in these passages there are good reasons to render *διαθήκη* "covenant").

Ninth, the Westminster Confession affirms that there is one covenant of grace in the Old Testament era ("the time of the law") and the New Testament era ("the time of the gospel") (WCF 7.5). Hence, the confession asserts the unity of the covenant of grace in its various administrations (WCF 7.6), while also affirming its diversity or progress. The confession is clear in its insistence that salvation is by faith in the Messiah, in the Old Testament as in the New (WCF 7.5).

Tenth, the Westminster Larger Catechism goes out of its way to indicate that the covenant of grace is made with the elect, or even more precisely, "with Christ as the second Adam, and in him with all the elect as his seed" (WLC 31). Thus, any attempt to make the covenant of grace apply equally to the elect and reprobate is contraconfessional. Furthermore, it is common in Reformed theology to use the term *covenant of grace* both broadly and narrowly, or externally and internally—that is, to speak of it entailing both everyone who is baptized into the Christ-professing covenant community (broad or external) and those who are elect, members of the invisible church, united to Christ by the Spirit through faith (narrow or internal). Nevertheless, the confession never speaks as if all those who are in the covenant of grace broadly or externally considered (the visible church) are recipients of the substance or saving benefits of the covenant of grace narrowly or internally considered (the invisible church). This is a vital

distinction, and so those who deny or confuse it, or who assert that all the benefits of the covenant of grace accrue to all who are baptized, do err and are out of accord with the confession.

Eleventh, though the Westminster Confession does not deploy the term *covenant of redemption*, its teaching comports with such. WLC 31 in its description of the parties of the covenant of grace indicates a belief that is consistent with the idea of a pretemporal *pactum salutis* (“The covenant of grace was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in him with all the elect as his seed”), as does WSC 20 (“God having, out of his mere good pleasure, from all eternity, elected some to everlasting life, did enter into a covenant of grace, to deliver them out of the estate of sin and misery, and to bring them into an estate of salvation by a Redeemer”). As the confession suggests, the doctrine of the covenant of redemption serves to clarify who is included in the parties of the covenant of grace.

Zealous for the Covenant

Sometime in the late second century, Eusebius of Caesarea tells us, Irenaeus (ca. AD 120–202/3) carried a letter to Rome from his fellow Christians in Lugdunum (Lyons), in which they commend him with these words: “We pray, father Eleutherus, that you may rejoice in God in all things and always. We have requested our brother and companion Irenaeus to carry this letter to you, and we ask you to hold him in esteem, *as zealous for the covenant of Christ*.”⁸ The expression “zealous for the covenant of Christ” is unique in patristic literature. It is certainly appropriate for Irenaeus, whose *Demonstration of the Apostolic Teaching* reads like a second-century version of O. Palmer Robertson’s *Christ of the Covenants*.

As you search the Scriptures, and as you study the contents of this book, may you be so captivated by the truths of God’s word about his covenants that you, too, become “zealous for the covenant of Christ.”

8. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.4.2.

INTRODUCTION

Guy Prentiss Waters, J. Nicholas Reid,
and John R. Muether

Humanity, as the bearer of the divine image, was created for fellowship with God. But how is a relationship possible between an infinite and all-powerful God and a mere creature? Most religions, Herman Bavinck contends, cannot solve this dilemma. They “either pantheistically pull God down into what is creaturely, or deistically lift him endlessly above it.” Fellowship can take place only when religion takes the shape of a covenant, according to Bavinck: “Covenant is the essence of true religion.”¹

Most evangelical Protestants agree that God’s way with humanity is covenantal. The Bible often describes our relationship with God, both his promises to us and our duties toward him, in the language of covenant. And so, in this broad sense, they are covenant theologians.

But do we fully understand that term? Is it merely a helpful metaphor to describe the condescension of God in his goodness and faithfulness? Reformed theology believes that Scripture constrains us to go deeper. As we come to see the centrality of covenant to the Christian faith, it provides the foundation for a host of theological doctrines. The covenant of grace drives Christ to the cross in his atoning work, it secures our justification before God, it prompts the ministry of the Spirit in our growth in grace, and it forms our hope of heaven.²

This is not all. Sustained study on the covenant theme in Scripture has prompted Reformed theologians to expand beyond a single covenant of grace to a two-covenant scheme (including the covenant of works with Adam in Eden) and even to a three-covenant scheme (including the covenant of redemption, an intra-Trinitarian pact, made before

1. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 569–70.

2. This is not to suggest that covenant theology is required to believe in Christ and the benefits he has secured for us, but it is to claim that covenant theology presents those precious truths in the most compelling and coherent way.

time, to establish the salvation of God's people). Together, these covenants help us interpret God's word more clearly and understand his redemption more fully. J. I. Packer goes so far as to assert that the Bible's covenant architecture is "pervasive, arresting, and inescapable."³

But many other Protestants have resisted the vocabulary and the categories that are employed in covenant theology. Elaborate covenant schemes appear too detailed and abstract for them. John MacArthur speaks for many when he claims that "theologically derived covenants . . . can alter God's intended revelation."⁴ Covenant theology, then, is something unique to the Reformed tradition, and even in Reformed circles some question its value. Norman Harper, one of the early professors at Reformed Theological Seminary, lamented four decades ago that "the doctrine of the covenant of grace has received little emphasis in recent times even from those confessionally committed to covenant theology."⁵

The contributors to this volume, members of the faculty at Reformed Theological Seminary, gladly take on the defense of covenant theology, convinced that it is not a theological abstraction foisted on Scripture but rather the clear teaching of Scripture itself. We present covenant theology through explorations in biblical, systematic, and historical theology, all from a confessional Reformed perspective. In the style of previous Reformed Theological Seminary faculty collaborations,⁶ our goal is to address ourselves primarily to the church. This book is a resource for the student in the seminary class, the pastor seeking continuing education, and educated laypeople looking for enrichment in their knowledge of this vital area of biblical doctrine.

What should readers expect to find in the pages of this book? In this introduction, we want to draw attention to several features of our approach to covenant theology.

Covenant Theology Is Exegetical

As a faculty, we submit unwaveringly to the inspiration and authority of the Bible, the infallible rule of faith and practice for the church. We are constrained, then, first and foremost to make a biblical case for covenant theology. Covenant theology mines the Scriptures to find a concrete basis for our relationship with God. Through the "architecture" of the covenant, the purposes and promises of God become increasingly legible on the pages of the Bible.

This book begins, in part 1, "Biblical Covenants," with the biblical revelation of the covenants of redemption and works, which, as we will see, establish the foundation for

3. J. I. Packer, "Introduction on Covenant Theology," in Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man: Comprehending a Complete Body of Divinity*, trans. William Crookshank, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 1:42.

4. John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, gen. eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 871.

5. Norman E. Harper, *Making Disciples: The Challenge of Christian Education at the End of the 20th Century* (Memphis, TN: Christian Studies Center, 1981), 34.

6. See Miles V. Van Pelt, ed., *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament: The Gospel Promised* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016); Michael J. Kruger, ed., *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament: The Gospel Realized* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).

properly understanding the covenant of grace. This may appear as an inauspicious start, because skeptics of covenant theology are generally most doubtful about these covenants. They are right, of course, when they note that neither the covenant of redemption nor the covenant of works is identified in Scripture by these terms. But covenant theology does not emerge from the slim evidence of a proof text or two. Rather, as Guy Richard writes, early covenant theologians derived these covenants from “complex and thoroughgoing examination” of Scripture.⁷ Careful exegesis of a variety of texts reveals their covenant features, often by “good and necessary consequences” (WCF 1.6), even when the word itself does not occur.⁸

Covenants are the Bible’s way of displaying the grand sweep of redemptive history. Because the covenant of grace—which is “one and the same, under various dispensations” (WCF 7.6)—progresses in its development in the pages of Scripture, it is fitting that this book devote ten chapters to its organic development from promise to fulfillment. In each stage of Old Testament covenantal administration, the picture of the Redeemer to come grows deeper and richer. After the fall of our first parents, God promises that the seed of the woman will destroy the seed of the serpent. That promise is reinforced with the pledge to Noah that common grace will extend throughout redemptive history, guaranteeing the success of the seed. God promises that Abraham will be the father of a great family that will spread God’s blessings to the nations. The family is constituted a nation at Sinai, pointing to a new Moses who will lead a new exodus and a true Israel who will obey the Father. When the nation formally comes under the rule of David and his descendants, the promise takes the form of a triumphant Son and an anointed King. Each covenant builds on the previous, all foreshadowing the new covenant that becomes the focus of the message of the prophets. As Michael McKelvey notes, yet another dimension emerges in the prophetic forecast of the new covenant: it will come in the form of a servant, who will fulfill the promises in his suffering.

When the New Testament reveals the Redeemer of God’s elect in the person and work of Christ, the language of covenant actually recedes significantly (except in the book of Hebrews). For some interpreters, this is reason enough to dismiss the covenant as a redemptive-historical theme. Two things must be observed in response. First, as Christ is the “substance” of the covenant of grace (WCF 7.6), to exhibit Christ is to reveal the covenant, and to be united to Christ is to be in covenant with him. Thus, covenant theology, far from distracting us from Christ, emphatically drives us to Christ.⁹

7. See p. 50 below.

8. John Bolt rightly describes resistance to the biblical covenants as “methodological Biblicism”—that is, a wooden insistence that any implicit or indirect teaching in the Bible is a “theological imposition” on the text. John Bolt, “Why the Covenant of Works Is a Necessary Doctrine: Revisiting the Objections to a Venerable Reformed Doctrine,” in *By Faith Alone: Answering the Challenges to the Doctrine of Justification*, ed. Gary L. W. Johnson and Guy P. Waters (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 186.

9. Sinclair Ferguson is particularly compelling in arguing this point: “Christ *is* the covenant.” Foreword to Cornelis Venema, *Christ and Covenant Theology: Essays on Election, Republication, and the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2017), xi.

Second, as several contributors observe, the New Testament writers were themselves covenant theologians. Michael Kruger notes that the Gospel writers describe the movement from promise to fulfillment in covenant logic: Christ as the second Adam, the seed of the woman, the new Moses, the true Israel, the greater Son of David, and the suffering servant—all this is covenant-enriched language. As Christ brings the organic development of the old covenant to its intended fulfillment, none of the redemptive plans of God are altered, replaced, or terminated.

Covenant Theology Is Trinitarian

Covenant Theology offers a Trinitarian approach to the covenants. For example, Guy Richard takes note that the mission of God to save his people is based on the uniqueness of the persons of the Trinity, appropriate to the personal properties of each member of the Trinity: “Each person of the Godhead acts in a way that is suited to his own person and mission.”¹⁰ In underscoring the finished work of the Son in his death and resurrection and the ongoing work of the Spirit in applying that work to God’s elect, we maintain important Trinitarian distinctions.

Similarly, Greg Lanier observes that in the Johannine corpus, “covenantal thinking permeates [John’s] description of each divine person.”¹¹ This yields, he goes on to explain, a particularly expansive view of the person and work of the Spirit, who serves as the covenant witness in Revelation. Indeed, the new covenant is particularly the ministry of the Spirit, as Guy Waters explains in his chapter on Paul: all that the second Adam accomplished is for the Spirit to apply.

Covenant Theology Is Eschatological

Yet another feature of this book is the eschatological direction of covenant theology. Robert Cara’s study of covenant in Hebrews helpfully highlights that redemptive history is not only horizontal progress (in the movement from the first Adam to the second Adam) but is also a vertical movement from earthly types to heavenly realities. Adam’s prefallen communion with God in the garden of Eden was only a provisional arrangement. From the beginning of biblical revelation, the goal of the covenant of works was to bring the people of God into the glorified state of confirmed righteousness in a consummated order of eternal Sabbath rest.

What is the destiny of those united to Christ in his obedience to the covenant of works? We experience not the earthly joy of returning to Eden but the realization of an eternal and heavenly joy. Rather than receiving a recovered innocence, we follow Christ in his consummated glory, the reward that Adam forfeited having been obtained for us by the second Adam. Guy Waters writes, “Christ has not only undone what Adam

10. See p. 60 below.

11. See p. 269 below.

did; he has done what Adam failed to do.”¹² Indeed, the Scriptures close with a vision of that consummated glory of the new Jerusalem expressed in the very promise of the covenant: “The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son” (Rev. 21:7).

Eschatological life is a higher life; it is resurrection life of a different order. Moreover, this abundant life does not merely await the believer’s entrance into glory. Even now, in the certainty of our entitlement to heaven, we have confidence to serve God in the power of the resurrection.

Covenant Theology Is Historical

To repeat, our case for covenant theology emerges from Scripture, not from Christian antiquity or from church tradition. We trust that readers will find that this book has met that burden. Still, it is incumbent for advocates of covenant theology to demonstrate some continuity of the covenant theme through church history and the benefits of the church’s exegesis and theological reflection on the subject. *Covenant Theology* is sensitive to the historical development of covenant theology as it turns, in part 2, to historical studies.

Diverse streams of influence have given shape to covenant theology. The seeds of covenant theology are broad and varied in the early church, as Ligon Duncan demonstrates. While it is not a major feature in medieval theology, Douglas Kelly reveals that covenant theology is still present and assumed.

The first generation of sixteenth-century Reformers began thinking covenantally to reinforce their gospel claims. Howard Griffith demonstrates that the covenant served Huldrych Zwingli and Heinrich Bullinger’s desire to stress the unity of God’s saving purposes against Anabaptist dismissals of the Old Testament. John Calvin’s theology of the covenant emerged as the foundation of both the *historia salutis* (the execution of God’s sovereign election in the saving work of Christ) and the *ordo salutis* (the sealing of Christ’s benefits by the Spirit). After Calvin, theological reflection on the covenant became increasingly explicit to the point where, by the turn of the seventeenth century, the covenant became an organizing principle in Reformed theological systems.

In complementary studies of the post-Reformation era, Blair Smith (focusing on Puritanism) and Bruce Baugus (focusing on the Dutch Reformed tradition) survey this era of covenant refinement. Far from a departure from the theology of the Reformers, Protestant scholastics established the wider covenantal framework in which to explain Reformation truths such as the imputation of the righteousness of Christ. There is continuity, but there is also expansion and nuance in covenant thinking, especially as new challenges threatened Reformed orthodoxy. These historical pieces, we believe, should put to rest the claim that covenant theology is a Reformed invention. If the

12. See p. 88 below.

Reformation was an exercise in retrieval and development, that included the doctrine of the covenants.

Covenant Theology Is Confessional

These historical chapters stress that proponents of covenant theology, as part of an international confessional movement, were churchmen. Diverse formulations of the covenants largely stayed within the confessional standards of Reformed churches. This confessional consensus guarded the development of covenant theology from idiosyncrasy and provincialism.

Like the voices from our Reformed past, the authors of this book are also united in our cordial agreement with historic covenant theology, especially as it finds expression in the Westminster Confession of Faith. As the doctrinal standard for the seminary and the churches we serve, we are duty bound to teach it. Where many theologians in our anticonfessional age might fear doctrinal standards as curtailing freedom in theological reflection, we believe that Scripture and confession promote exegetical reflection and theological creativity, and it is in this context that we approach the subject of covenant theology.

Covenant Theology Is Technical

While it is the desire of this book to communicate accessibly to the church, covenant theology can be a complex subject. Debates in covenant theology wade into deep waters of highly technical matters of difference with competing interpretive theories. Here the readers are also exposed to the rise and fall of particular schools of thought that have held sway in the past: the two traditions of covenant theology (which claimed to identify a divergence between the bilateral covenantal approach of Bullinger and the unilateralism of Calvin), Calvin versus the Calvinists (which drove a wedge between the spirit of the sixteenth-century Reformation and the post-Reformation era on several related topics, including the covenant), and Perry Miller's recasting of Puritanism (where covenant became the means to escape the iron cage of Calvinistic predestinarianism).

Other technical issues are addressed in part 3, "Collateral and Theological Studies." Nicholas Reid, in one of the more challenging essays in the book, takes on ancient Near Eastern parallels to the biblical covenants. This has been a growing field of investigation with recent archaeological discoveries that have raised questions concerning whether similarities between Deuteronomy and ancient Hittite treaties support an early date (and Mosaic authorship) of the book. Reid points to new evidence and constantly changing theories that question earlier assumptions. This reality places limits on the conclusions that comparative studies can draw, and Reid urges caution against relying on extrabiblical evidence at the expense of exegesis. Peter Lee pronounces a similar caution in his look at Second Temple Judaism, another area of contemporary interest. Surveying a wide

range of intertestamental literature, he identifies several competing covenantal systems and concludes that popular proposals (such as the “covenantal nomism” of E. P. Sanders) struggle to account for all the traditions of this period.

Covenant Theology Is Charitable

To be sure, covenant theology developed in a polemical age, in the context of intense debates between Reformed theologians and Socinians, Arminians, antinomians, and others. Later, the church faced different challenges. Mark McDowell surveys the particular criticism from Karl Barth and his theological descendants T. F. Torrance and J. B. Torrance. Michael Allen demonstrates why covenant theology has fallen into neglect among modern theologians, though he does highlight the promising work of two notable exceptions. There are competing hermeneutical frameworks today—including dispensationalism, the New Perspective on Paul, and progressive covenantalism. These challenges oblige the contributors to this book to engage their opponents polemically.

Still, it is the desire of the authors to present the case for covenant theology with charity. As Scott Swain reminds us, disagreements can have a sanctifying effect on our theology. If opposition served to sharpen the focus of covenant theology in the past, we hope and expect that new challenges will do the same today. Readers can detect in all the contributors a desire to engage respectfully those with whom they disagree.

Covenant Theology is indebted to a rich tradition of reflection on the covenant. This book does not claim to be the only word—nor to be the last word—on the subject of covenant theology. We lean on the work of others, and names like Calvin, Bavinck, and Geerhardus Vos are frequently invoked. Readers can also find some of the diversity in the Reformed tradition on the covenants in these pages. The faculty of Reformed Theological Seminary are not in complete agreement on all the details of the doctrine of the covenant. The nature of the Noahic covenant, the differences between John Murray and Meredith Kline, and the question of republication in the Mosaic covenant—on these and other areas there are differences among us, all within common confessional commitments. In this way, the book is a window into the faculty of Reformed Theological Seminary, and as editors we have been pleased at the spirit of unity that has characterized work in the project.

Covenant Theology Is Practical

Finally, *Covenant Theology* seeks to be practical. As noted above, the very real purpose of this volume is to help Bible study leaders, pastors, and Christian leaders teach and apply the word of God, with an eye toward edifying God’s people as they grow in grace. Kevin DeYoung’s afterword, for example, demonstrates how covenant theology and its implications for Christian living can be communicated in simple terms from the pulpit of the church.

Assurance of salvation appears as a recurring theme throughout this book. The eternal covenant of redemption and its historical outworking in the covenant of grace serve to guarantee the salvation of the elect, because what stands behind them is the unchangeable oath of God. We join with Calvin in believing that “we have no reason to be afraid that God will deceive us if we persevere in his covenant.”¹³ Derek Thomas invites us to grow in the assurance of faith, especially through the God-appointed means of covenant signs and seals. Covenant theology directs us to “improve” (make proper use of) our baptism, especially in times of temptation, and we come to the end of all doubt when we commune with Christ and all his benefits in the Lord’s Supper.

All of us at Reformed Theological Seminary want you to be knowledgeable of and passionate about the Bible’s teaching on the covenants. This book is designed to give you, our readers, a clearer understanding of the exegetical foundations and theological implications of covenant theology, in the hope that as students of Reformed theology, you will be better equipped to defend and propagate the Reformed faith. More than that, the editors are bold enough to hope that you will emerge encouraged in your understanding of the joy of covenant life.

May this book leave you, the reader, with the great hope and consolation of the gospel: our covenant-making God is a covenant-keeping God. He is “the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments,” whose ear remains attentive and his eyes open to the prayers of his servants (Neh. 1:5).

Three of the contributors to this volume are former faculty members at Reformed Theological Seminary. O. Palmer Robertson, Douglas Kelly, and Howard Griffith were influential and beloved figures in the life of the seminary.

One of the early members of the faculty, Dr. Robertson taught in Jackson from 1967 to 1972 and subsequently at Westminster (Philadelphia), Covenant, and Knox Seminaries, as well as African Bible Colleges in Malawi and Uganda. He has devoted a lifetime to the study of the covenants, especially in his influential *Christ of the Covenants*. His essay “Israel and the Nations in God’s Covenants,” in this volume, is a fitting convergence of his love for covenant theology and his passion for the worldwide witness of the church.

Dr. Kelly began his career at the Jackson campus (1984–1994) and then taught at the Charlotte campus for over two decades, until his retirement in 2016. He mentored many of the contributors of this book as a professor and as a senior colleague on the faculty, impressing on us all the value of the whole history of Christ’s church.

13. John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries*, 22 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979), 4:424 (comm. on Ps. 25:10).

Dr. Griffith's devotion to covenant theology grew in his seminary studies under Meredith G. Kline and Richard B. Gaffin Jr. After pastoring in Richmond, Virginia, for twenty-five years, he joined the faculty at Reformed Theological Seminary, Washington, DC, in 2007, teaching systematic theology and guiding the faculty as academic dean. He finished his contribution to this book only a month before his sudden passing. His mining of Calvin's covenant theology, especially through the Reformer's sermons, testifies to Howard's passion for the preached word in his years of pastoral ministry.

We honor these three faithful instructors, devoted preachers, meticulous scholars, colleagues, and fathers in the faith by dedicating this book to them.

PART 1



BIBLICAL COVENANTS

THE COVENANT OF REDEMPTION

Guy M. Richard

Perhaps the most questionable element of historical federal theology is the covenant of redemption—the idea that there is a pretemporal agreement between the persons of the Trinity to plan and carry out the redemption of the elect. Many people today have reservations about the biblical warrant for such an idea.¹ The biblical proof texts employed to support it have come under a fair amount of criticism in recent years. Moreover, there is a sense in which the covenant of redemption feels speculative and unnecessary, because it deals with things happening within the mind of God before the creation of time and because it seems to run counter to the unity of God. If God really is one God with one mind and will, then why would the persons of the Trinity need a covenant to establish agreement between them? Would there not already be agreement by virtue of the fact that all three persons share one and the same mind and will?² The covenant of redemption has, for all these reasons, fallen on hard times within the Reformed community at large.

But as we shall see, the covenant of redemption was not always so suspect. It was, in fact, a commonly accepted idea from at least the middle part of the seventeenth century until the early twentieth century. From the moment it was formally expressed in writing, the covenant of redemption was embraced almost universally within the Reformed

1. The influence of Karl Barth and, to a lesser degree, John Murray, Herman Hoeksema, O. Palmer Robertson, and Robert Letham helped cultivate many of these reservations regarding the covenant of redemption within the broader Reformed world. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 4.1:64–66; John Murray, “The Plan of Salvation,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 2, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977), 130; Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Free Publishing, 1966), 285–336; O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 53–54; Robert Letham, “John Owen’s Doctrine of the Trinity in Its Catholic Context,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen’s Theology*, ed. Kelly M. Kapic and Mark Jones (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2012), 196.

2. Barth offers a similar criticism as this one in *Church Dogmatics*, 4.1:65, as does Letham in “John Owen’s Doctrine of the Trinity,” 196.

world with a speed that was quite astonishing. What led our forefathers in the post-Reformation period to embrace this doctrine so universally and so quickly? We seek to answer this question by exploring the biblical and theological rationale that made the covenant of redemption a staple within Reformed orthodoxy so quickly and for so long.³ My hope is that, in doing this, we will all be able to see the beauty that our forefathers saw in this doctrine. In the course of fulfilling my intended goal, this chapter surveys the origins and development of the covenant of redemption, and then it explores the biblical and theological rationale that have been used to support it.

Origins and Development

The precise origin of the covenant of redemption is difficult to pinpoint. David Dickson was apparently the first to speak of it by name in a speech he gave to the General Assembly of the Scottish church in 1638.⁴ After that, we see it appear in a good many treatises published in the 1640s.⁵ But there are hints that the covenant of redemption may have predated all these occurrences. Johannes Oecolampadius, for instance, specifically referred to a covenant between the Father and the Son in 1525. And it is quite possible that Martin Luther had this same idea in mind as early as 1519.⁶ Theodore Beza, too, may well have been speaking of a pretemporal covenant when in 1567 he said, in his translation of Luke 22:29, that the Father had “made a covenant with” the Son, which he linked to the eternal testament of Hebrews 9.⁷

These hints at the existence of a pretemporal intra-Trinitarian covenant continued to be visible to a greater or lesser degree throughout the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in the writings of men like Guillaume Budé, John Calvin, Caspar Olevianus, Paul Bayne, William Ames, and Edward Reynolds. Even men from the opposite side of the theological spectrum were willing to speak of a covenant between the Father and the Son. James Arminius did so as early as 1603, and he defined this covenant as a voluntary arrangement to accomplish the salvation of humankind.⁸

It was not until later in the seventeenth century, however, that these hints became expressed much more concretely and the phrase *covenant of redemption* began regularly

3. For more on the federal theology of the post-Reformation period, see D. Blair Smith, “Post-Reformation Developments,” chap. 17 in this volume.

4. Alexander Peterkin, ed., *Records of the Kirk of Scotland, Containing the Acts and Proceedings of the General Assemblies, from the Year 1638 Downwards* (Edinburgh: John Sutherland, 1838), 158.

5. David Dickson, *Expositio analytica omnium apostolicarum epistolarum* (Glasgow, 1645); Thomas Goodwin, *Encouragements to Faith drawn from several Engagements both of Gods [and] Christs heart* (London, 1645); Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* (London, 1645); Peter Bulkeley, *The Gospel-Covenant* (London, 1646); John Owen, *Salus electorum, sanguis Jesu* (London, 1647); Johannes Cocceius, *Summa doctrinae de foedere et testamento Dei* (Leiden, 1648); David Dickson and James Durham, *The Summe of Saving Knowledge* (1648; repr., Edinburgh, 1671).

6. See, e.g., Johannes Oecolampadius, *In Iesaiam prophetam hypomnematon, hoc est, commentariorum, Ioannis Oecolampadii libri vi* (Basel, 1525), 268r (Isa. 55:3); Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* (1519), in *D. Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1967), 2:521.

7. Richard A. Muller, “Toward the *Pactum Salutis*: Locating the Origins of a Concept,” *MJT* 18 (2007): 40.

8. James Arminius, “Oration 1: The Object of Theology,” in *The Works of James Arminius*, ed. James Nichols and William Nichols, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991), 1:415–17.

to appear. And within a very short period of time, this covenant secured a standard place in contemporary expressions of federal theology. A survey of the writings of men such as Thomas Blake, Anthony Burgess, Samuel Rutherford, John Bunyan, Patrick Gillespie, Herman Witsius, and James Durham and of confessional documents such as the Savoy Declaration, the Helvetic Consensus (1675), and the Second London Baptist Confession (1689) shows just how widespread the doctrine of the covenant of redemption became in the latter half of the seventeenth century.⁹

The surprising thing is how rapidly this happened and how little opposition there was to this covenant. Richard Muller has argued that “the seemingly sudden appearance of the doctrine as a virtual truism” within a relatively few years in the 1630s and 1640s suggests that the sixteenth-century references were in fact more than merely hints and that the covenant of redemption developed gradually over time from the very beginning of the Reformation. Although the terminology “covenant of redemption” was not used until Dickson’s speech in 1638, the groundwork that would later produce the doctrine was in place long before that.¹⁰

This evidence further suggests that this doctrine was perceived as being overwhelmingly evident to the ministers and theologians of the latter half of the seventeenth century. Rather than seeing the covenant of redemption as unbiblical, speculative, and unnecessary, these men saw it both as biblically and theologically essential and as exceedingly practical. The question is why. What biblical and theological rationale led these men to embrace this doctrine so overwhelmingly?

Biblical Rationale

The people of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries wholeheartedly embraced the covenant of redemption for one overarching reason: they believed that the Bible taught it. And they believed it did so in three main ways. They argued, first, that the language of Scripture pointed to the covenant of redemption; second, that the recorded dialogues between the Father and the Son also pointed to it; and third, that the teaching of several individual passages proved that it was true.

Language of Scripture

The Bible frequently uses language that is highly suggestive of a pretemporal agreement existing between the Father and the Son. According to Dickson, the Bible does

9. Thomas Blake, *Vindiciae foederis* (1653; London, 1658), 14–15; Anthony Burgess, *The True Doctrine of Justification Asserted and Vindicated* (London, 1654), 375–77; Samuel Rutherford, *The Covenant of Life Opened* (Edinburgh, 1655), 282–315; John Bunyan, *The Doctrine of the Law and Grace Unfolded* (1660), in *The Works of John Bunyan*, ed. George Offor, 3 vols. (1854; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991), 1:522–23, 525–26; Patrick Gillespie, *The Ark of the Covenant Opened, or A Treatise of the Covenant of Redemption between God and Christ, as the Foundation of the Covenant of Grace* (London, 1677); Herman Witsius, *De oeconomia foederum Dei cum hominibus* (Leeuwarden, 1677), trans. as *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, trans. William Crookshank, 2 vols. (London, 1822), 2.2–3; James Durham, *Christ Crucified, or The Marrow of the Gospel* (Edinburgh, 1683), 154–64; Savoy Declaration (1658), 8.1; Helvetic Consensus (1675), 13; Second London Baptist Confession (1689), 8.1.

10. Muller, “Toward the *Pactum Salutis*,” 14.

this in three fundamental ways. First, it regularly speaks of the salvation of the elect in terms of buying and selling (e.g., Acts 20:28; 1 Cor. 6:20; Eph. 1:7; 1 Pet. 1:18). But as Dickson pointed out, buying and selling presume that the parties have reached prior agreement regarding the terms of the deal. Second, the titles given to Jesus in the Bible indicate that the Father and the Son must have made some kind of prior agreement. Thus, the fact that Jesus is called our “propitiation” in Romans 3:25 and 1 John 2:2 is evidence that an agreement must have been reached beforehand in which the Son consented to give his life as a propitiatory sacrifice and the Father consented to accept it. Third, Jesus regularly speaks about his mission on earth in terms implying that he and the Father had made an agreement prior to his coming. So we see Jesus talk about the Father “sending” him into the world, “giving” him a specific “work” to do, and investing him with authority to do it, and we also see Jesus “receiving” his Father’s “charge,” devoting himself to his Father’s “business,” and accomplishing the specific work he has been given to do (e.g., Luke 2:49 ESV mg.; John 5:36–37; 6:38; 10:18; 17:4).¹¹ All these things suggest that an agreement was made within the Trinity regarding the salvation of the elect, and this agreement is precisely what the covenant of redemption is meant to embody.

Patrick Gillespie argued that *agreement* is the essential ingredient of all covenants: “The agreement or consent of two or more Parties upon the same thing, maketh a Paction [i.e., a covenant].”¹² In demonstrating this, he turned to Isaiah 28:15—which says,

We have made a covenant with death,
and with Sheol we have an agreement.

He concluded from this that because the two words occur in parallel, they must be synonymous. This meant that all that was required to prove the existence of a covenant between the Father and the Son was to show that there was an agreement between them. And as Dickson’s example demonstrates, the Bible shows this in a great variety of ways.

But Scripture also uses language that describes the salvation of the elect as a transaction between the persons of the Trinity. Thus, in the Gospel of John, we see Jesus talk about the elect as those whom the Father “gives” to him (6:37, 39; 17:6–9, 24–25), with the expectation that he will do certain things on their behalf—that is, he will lose none of them (6:37, 39); he will raise them up at the last day (6:39–40); and he will be “lifted up” after the pattern of John 3:14, so that the elect will believe in him and receive eternal life (6:40). We also see Jesus acknowledge that he has come into the world to fulfill his Father’s expectations on behalf of the elect (6:38), which again shows the prior agreement of the persons of the Trinity to the conditions and promises of the transaction

11. David Dickson, *Therapeutica sacra* (Edinburgh, 1664), 23–34. See also Durham, *Christ Crucified*, 121–22.

12. Gillespie, *Ark of the Covenant Opened*, 6. Indeed, *agreement* has been the basic definition of covenant from at least Martin Luther in the sixteenth century to Charles Hodge in the nineteenth. See J. V. Fesko, *The Covenant of Redemption: Origins, Development, and Reception*, RHT 35 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016), 172.

of our salvation. For men like Samuel Rutherford, this manner of speaking pointed conclusively to the existence of an intra-Trinitarian covenant in which the Father, Son, and Spirit agreed on the terms of our redemption.¹³

Interestingly enough, this kind of transactional language is reflected in the definition of the covenant of redemption provided by David Dickson and James Durham in their 1648 *Summe of Saving Knowledge*:

The sum of the Covenant of Redemption is this, God having freely chosen unto life, a certain number of lost mankind, for the glory of his rich Grace did give them before the world began, unto God the Son appointed Redeemer, that upon condition he would humble himself so far as to assume the human nature of a soul and a body, unto personal union with his Divine Nature, and submit himself to the Law as surety for them, and satisfie Justice for them, by giving obedience in their name, even unto the suffering of the cursed death of the Cross, he should ransom and redeem them all from sin and death, and purchase unto them righteousness and eternal life, with all saving graces leading thereunto, to be effectually, by means of his own appointment, applied in due time to every one of them.¹⁴

Dickson and Durham even cited John 6:37 on the title page of their treatise as the main text on which their subject matter would be grounded, thereby indicating that this pretemporal arrangement between the persons of the Trinity is the very foundation on which all salvation depends and the source from which it flows.

What is more, several passages of the Bible also use language that describes Christ as being “chosen,” “ordained,” or “appointed” as mediator for his people (see, in this regard, Ps. 2:7; Isa. 42:1–3 with Matt. 12:15–21; Luke 22:29; Acts 2:23, 36; Eph. 1:4; Heb. 7:22, 28; 1 Pet. 1:19–20). Two of these passages bear further study. The first is Luke 22:29, which has historically been understood as teaching that Christ was “covenantally” appointed by God as King over his mediatorial kingdom.¹⁵ Even as far back as Theodore Beza in the middle of the sixteenth century, scholars within the Reformed tradition recognized that the original Greek word used in this verse (διατίθημι) means “to covenant.” They therefore concluded that it was not just true that Christ was “appointed” King, as the Vulgate had previously specified (using the Latin word *dispono*), but that God had actually “made a covenant” with Christ to appoint him King.¹⁶

The second passage is Psalm 2:7. Here, too, we see reference to a covenantal arrangement existing between the Father and the Son. Patrick Gillespie, for one, argued that

13. Rutherford, *Covenant of Life Opened*, 293.

14. Dickson and Durham, *Summe of Saving Knowledge*, 2.2.

15. See Cocceius, *Summa doctrinae*, 14.34.2; Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants*, 2.2.3; Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, trans. Bartel Elshout, ed. Joel R. Beeke, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 1993), 1:255; Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992–1997), 12.2.14.

16. Theodore Beza, *Testamentum Novum, sive Nouum foedus Iesu Christi, D.N.* (1567; n.p., 1588), 318 (comm. on Luke 22:29).

the Hebrew word typically translated as “decree” in Psalm 2:7 (קִּיָּן) comes from a root that originally meant, among other things, “to ordain, appoint, or covenant.” Citing several exegetical traditions, including the Targums, he pointed out that “most ancient Interpreters” chose the word “covenant” in their translations of this verse. But what was more important for Gillespie was the fact that the same Hebrew word was elsewhere used interchangeably with the word for “covenant” (cf. Jer. 31:35–36 with 33:20; see also Ps. 105:10). That is why Gillespie believed that it was entirely appropriate to take Psalm 2:7 as referring to the same basic thing that Luke 22:29 did, namely, to Christ being appointed “covenantally” as mediator.¹⁷

The fact that Christ was “appointed” to his role as mediator certainly implies that the persons of the Trinity had made some kind of previous arrangement wherein they agreed on what this role would look like and what conditions and blessings would be attached to it. But the fact that both Luke 22:29 and Psalm 2:7 speak of this appointment in covenantal terms certainly seems to make this arrangement more overt and formal. Christ was not only appointed to be mediator, but this appointment apparently took place within the context of a covenant between the Father and the Son.

Even though the Westminster Confession of Faith does not explicitly mention the covenant of redemption by name, this covenant would appear, nonetheless, to be implicitly reflected in the confession’s use of the language of “appointment.” Thus, when the confession says that “it pleased God, in his eternal purpose, to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus, his only begotten Son, to be the Mediator between God and man,” it is obviously referring to the covenant of redemption, albeit implicitly, by adopting the biblical language of the covenantal appointment of Christ.¹⁸ The Savoy Declaration (1658) and Second London Baptist Confession (1689) both amended the Westminster Confession by adding the phrase “according to a covenant made between them both” to the abovementioned excerpt to make obvious and explicit what was previously obvious but implicit in the Westminster Confession.¹⁹

Dialogues between Father and Son

The recorded dialogues between the Father and the Son in the Bible also point toward a pretemporal, intra-Trinitarian covenant. One of the clearest examples of this can be seen in Hebrews 10:5–10, which records the words of Psalm 40 and places them on the lips of Christ (Heb. 10:5). The words Christ speaks are directed to God (10:7), and they allude to an agreement between the Father and the Son in the accomplishing of our salvation. Thus, Christ speaks of God’s “desires” (10:5), of what gives God “pleasure” (10:6), and of coming into the world to do God’s “will” (10:7)—all of which indicate that the Son not only knew about these things before he came into the world (10:5)

17. Gillespie, *Ark of the Covenant Opened*, 11–12. More attention is given to Ps. 2:7 below.

18. WCF 8.1.

19. Savoy Declaration 8.1; Second London Baptist Confession 8.1.

but, more importantly, that he also willingly consented to take on the body that God prepared for him, to live according to God's desires, and to do God's will long before he actually did any of these things. These works had already been written down in Scripture (10:7) long before the Son ever took on flesh and dwelt among us, which means that they must have been determined in the counsels of God even before that.

For Patrick Gillespie, the fact that Christ consented to God's proposals was proof positive that there was a covenant of redemption between the Father and the Son.²⁰ He reasoned that consent showed not only an awareness of the relevant issues involved but also agreement to the conditions and promises of the arrangement. Thus when the Son consented to God's "will," and did so long before the incarnation ever took place, he was demonstrating that something like the covenant of redemption had to have taken place between himself and the Father.

Gillespie then went on to highlight six characteristics of this agreement to which the Son was consenting, all of which further substantiated a covenant of redemption. First, he said, we see the Father asking the Son to do certain things in order to accomplish our salvation and promising that certain blessings and privileges will follow if and when the Son fulfills those commands (Isa. 42:1–4; Mic. 5:4–5; Zech. 6:12–13; John 6:39–40). If commands with promises attached to them amounted to a covenant in the garden of Eden (Gen. 2:17), then commands with promises also constitute a covenant between the Father and the Son.²¹ His point is that if we are willing to acknowledge a covenant of works between God and Adam in the Bible (even if we call it by a different name), then we ought to be ready to acknowledge a covenant of redemption between the Father and the Son, because there is just as much evidence for the one as there is for the other.

Second, Gillespie pointed to the presence of promises with conditions attached. Here he cited Isaiah 53:10–12, which presents the unified "will" of the Lord (Yahweh) to "crush" the incarnate Son and put him to "grief" and, in so doing, to account many people righteous, *provided that* the Son "makes [himself] an offering for guilt," pours "out his soul to death," is "numbered with the transgressors," and bears "the sin of many." This, as Gillespie said, is nothing less than a formal covenant with conditions and promises on both sides.²²

The third and fourth characteristics that Gillespie mentioned in this regard focus on the consent that the Son gives to the Father. As John 10:18 indicates, Jesus not only is "charged" or "commanded" by his Father to lay down his life on behalf of God's people, but he has "received" this charge freely "of [his] own accord." In addition, in John 17:4 Jesus declares that he has "accomplished the work" that the Father gave him to do. And as a result, the Father "highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above

20. Gillespie gives five ways that Christ consented to the Father's proposals in Ps. 40. See his *Ark of the Covenant Opened*, 14–16.

21. Gillespie, *Ark of the Covenant Opened*, 17.

22. Gillespie, *Ark of the Covenant Opened*, 17–18.

every name” (Phil. 2:9).²³ This kind of “reciprocation” in the actions of the Father and the Son indicates that something like the covenant of redemption had been established and is now being executed in space and time.

Fifth, there is an “asking and giving” in the dialogues between the Father and the Son in Scripture that reflects the covenant of redemption. So in Psalm 2:8 the Lord invites Christ (his “Anointed,” Ps. 2:2),

Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and the ends of the earth your possession.

And in John 17:5 Jesus asks the Father, “Glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.” In both cases, the requests were answered affirmatively. The Father gave the nations to the Son as his inheritance, and he exalted him to the place that he had prior to his self-emptying (Phil. 2:5–9). This, according to Gillespie, is the language of transaction or of business contracts (*editio* and *venditio*), either of which would signal some kind of a covenant or agreement.²⁴

Finally, Gillespie directed his reader’s attention to the language of work and wages in the Bible. This language, Gillespie said, is very similar to the language that is used in covenants that are enacted between the “work-man” and the “work-master” or between the “servant” and “his Lord” in everyday life. It is the kind of language in which one party says, “I give this upon condition you do that,” and the other party responds, “I do this upon condition you do that.” Gillespie saw this reflected in passages like Isaiah 49:3, 6; 53:11–12; John 10:17; 17:4; Philippians 2:8–9; Hebrews 10:7; and 12:2.²⁵

Individual Passages

Thus far we have established that the covenant of redemption was not developed from one or two isolated texts in Scripture but from a complex and thoroughgoing examination of the language that the Bible uses to speak about the relationship between the Father and the Son and the planning and accomplishing of the salvation of God’s people. Sadly, much modern discussion of this doctrine has ignored this evidence and focused on isolated proof texts such as Psalm 2:7 and Zechariah 6:13, which are less persuasive when taken by themselves. If we start by looking for the covenant of redemption in these kinds of isolated texts, we will have a good deal more trouble finding it. But if we start by looking at the language of Scripture—which we have done here—and then come to these isolated texts afterward, we will be in a better position to see the covenant of redemption for ourselves.

We can confidently turn our focus to examining a few of these isolated texts and to seeing what they have to say about the covenant of redemption. We will look at three

23. Gillespie, *Ark of the Covenant Opened*, 18–19.

24. Gillespie, *Ark of the Covenant Opened*, 19.

25. Gillespie, *Ark of the Covenant Opened*, 19–20.

main texts: Zechariah 6:13; Psalm 110; and Psalm 2. Because of the limits of this chapter, we will be able to give only a cursory examination of each.

Zechariah 6:13

In Zechariah 6:13, we are told about a so-called “counsel of peace” that will be established between two particular people (“them both”). Beginning with Johannes Cocceius and Herman Witsius in the seventeenth century, this verse has often been cited as a proof text for the covenant of redemption. Before we evaluate this assertion, however, it bears mentioning that many earlier treatments of this doctrine did not make any reference to Zechariah 6:13. Men like David Dickson and Peter Bulkeley, for instance, relied exclusively on arguments like those mentioned in the prior two sections of this chapter without ever mentioning the Zechariah passage.²⁶ This means that regardless of what one makes of the “counsel of peace,” the validity of the covenant of redemption is not hanging in the balance. Zechariah 6:13 is not a necessary proof text for this doctrine. But it does add extra weight in support of it, especially when it is placed alongside the abovementioned arguments.

In the context of this passage, Joshua the high priest is a type of Christ. Like Melchizedek before him—and Christ after him—Joshua is going to be both king and priest. John Calvin pointed out that the word “crown” in Zechariah 6:11 is actually plural in the original Hebrew, and he argued that what is going on here is that two crowns are being placed on the one man Joshua. Since both priests and kings wore crowns, Calvin said, this event clearly symbolizes the union of the priestly and kingly offices in one man, which is obviously designed to point ahead to Christ.²⁷

Zechariah 6:12 further supports this conclusion. Using an idea common in the Old Testament, Zechariah speaks of the one of whom Joshua is a type by calling him the “Branch.” Several key passages describe this Branch: he will be a descendant of David (Isa. 11:1; Jer. 23:5–6; 33:14–18) but will also come from the Lord (Isa. 4:2); he will be an heir to the Davidic throne (Jer. 23:5–6; 33:14–18); he will be full of the Holy Spirit and of wisdom, understanding, and knowledge (Isa. 11:2); he will be called “The LORD is our righteousness” (Jer. 23:5–6; 33:14–18; cf. Isa. 11:4–5); he will be the instrument through which salvation will come to Israel (Jer. 23:5–6; 33:14–18); and he will be a priest who will offer an eternal sacrifice (Jer. 33:14–18). Thus, Zechariah 6:13 is ultimately and most fully about Christ. He is the Branch; he is the one who, according to Wilhelmus à Brakel, will “build the temple of the LORD” and “bear royal honor” and “sit and rule” on the Lord’s throne. And therefore, he is also the one who will enter into a “counsel of peace” with the Lord.²⁸

26. Muller, “Toward the *Pactum Salutis*,” 24.

27. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, vol. 5, *Zechariah and Malachi*, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993), 152–56.

28. Brakel, *Christian’s Reasonable Service*, 1:254.

What exactly is this “counsel of peace”? For a couple of reasons, it seems best to conclude that this counsel is an agreement—or, we might even say, a covenant—between the Branch and the Lord (Yahweh) in and by which the peace of God’s people will be secured and maintained. In the first place, the prophet Zechariah later states that the Messiah will enter Jerusalem as a king “mounted on . . . the foal of a donkey” and that his kingdom will bring peace for all “the nations.” That peace, according to Zechariah, will be secured by “the blood of my covenant with you” (Zech. 9:9–11). In other words, the prophet himself tells us that the chief business of the Branch is to bring peace to the world and redemption “from the waterless pit” (9:11) in and through the offering of a blood sacrifice, and perhaps most significantly, he tells us that this is what the covenant is all about. The fact that Zechariah himself says this indicates that we should understand “counsel of peace” in 6:13 in a complementary way to what Zechariah says about the Messiah in 9:9–11.

In the second place, there are several passages of Scripture that link the ideas of covenant and peace together. The covenant is regularly spoken of as the vehicle that establishes peace, and at the same time, peace is spoken of as the chief consequence of the covenant relationship. So in Joshua 9:15 we read that the Gibeonites deceived Israel into entering into a covenant relationship with them, and despite the premise on which it was established, that covenant secured peace between the two nations. The Gibeonites were after peace, and they knew that the way to achieve it was by entering into a covenant relationship with Israel. They knew that covenant and peace went hand in hand.²⁹

Several passages in the Old Testament speak of a “covenant of peace” and describe it as being the vehicle through which God establishes peace for his people. Isaiah 54:10 and Ezekiel 37:26–27 are the most explicit of these. Both passages depict the covenant of peace as an “everlasting” covenant that establishes permanent peace with God (see also Ezek. 34:25). And although these passages do not use the phrase “counsel of peace,” it should be obvious that the two phrases are quite similar in their construction and their intention.

The counsel of peace would, therefore, appear to be something that occurs between the Branch (Christ) and the Lord (Yahweh). And it would seem to be an agreement between them to secure an eternal peace for God’s people. Herman Witsius helpfully summarized the teaching of Zechariah 6:13:

The counsel of peace, which is between the man whose name is the Branch, and between Jehovah, whose temple he shall build, and on whose throne he shall sit, Rev. iii.21. And what else can this counsel be, but the mutual will of the Father and the Son, which we said is the nature of the covenant? It is called a counsel, both on ac-

29. The idea that covenants establish peace is a well-attested Old Testament principle (see, e.g., Deut. 2:26–34; 20:10–18; Josh. 10:1–4; 2 Sam. 10:19). Peace is also integral to the Messiah’s work in the New Testament (see, e.g., Luke 2:14; John 14:27; 16:33; Acts 10:36; Rom. 5:1; Eph. 2:13–18; 6:15; Col. 1:20).

count of the free and liberal good pleasure of both, and of the display of the greatest wisdom manifested therein. And a counsel of peace, not between God and Christ, between whom there never was any enmity; but of peace to be procured to sinful man with God, and to sinners with themselves.³⁰

Psalm 110

The second passage that we will consider here is Psalm 110. This psalm, which was written by David, is explicitly messianic. The opening verse tells us quite plainly that David is writing about someone greater than himself, someone he calls “my Lord” (יְיָ אֱלֹהֵי יְדָדָי). This someone will sit at the right hand of God (110:1) and will be both king (110:2–3) and priest (110:4). He will not only be greater than David, but he will also be greater than the angels and the Levitical priesthood, as Hebrews 1:13; 5:5–6; and 7:17–22 make clear. But what is far more significant for us is that, as Calvin said, we have “the testimony of Christ that this psalm was penned in reference to himself,” which ought to remove any lingering doubts we might have about it (Matt. 22:41–45).³¹

In this psalm at least two interesting indicators point in the direction of the covenant of redemption. The first is the direct address that Yahweh makes to David’s “Lord” in Psalm 110:1, and the second is the oath that Yahweh takes in reference to the same figure in 110:4. In regard to the first, we can say that the address looks ahead to Christ’s incarnation and earthly ministry when, in the words of Calvin, he will be “invested with supreme dominion.”³² We know that the Son, as God, already possesses supreme dominion in and of himself; he does not need to be invested with it. But when he humbles himself, takes on human flesh, and places himself in submission to earthly authorities and principalities and to all his Father’s will, he does need to be invested with dominion, so that all may know that he really is the Son. These comments in 110:1, therefore, seem to reflect an agreement or arrangement within the Trinity whereby the Son agreed to humble himself and place himself in submission, and the Father agreed to crown the incarnate Son king and to invest him with supreme dominion.³³

Second, we can say that the language of covenant is reflected in the way that Christ is described as being appointed priest after the order of Melchizedek. The fact that Yahweh swears an oath to do this points clearly to the existence of a covenant relationship. Meredith Kline has argued that in the Bible, “the covenantal commitment is characteristically expressed by an oath sworn in the solemnities of covenant ratification.” He has pointed to Genesis 15 and Hebrews 6:17–18 and 7:20–22, in particular, to support his

30. Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants*, 2.2.7.

31. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Psalms*, trans. James Anderson, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 4:295.

32. Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 4:299.

33. Psalm 110 is a royal psalm and would most likely have been used at the inauguration of Israel’s king. It presents the king as being invested with power and dominion. See Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, WBC 21 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 83.

claim.³⁴ O. Palmer Robertson has further argued that this oath does not necessarily have to be part of a “formal oath-taking process.” Citing Psalms 89:3, 34–35; 105:8–10; and a whole host of other Scripture passages, Robertson declares that “‘oath’ so adequately captures the relationship achieved by ‘covenant’ that the terms may be interchanged.”³⁵ His conclusion is that the Bible teaches not merely that a covenant *contains* an oath but that it actually *is* an oath. If Kline and Robertson are right, Psalm 110:4 is plainly teaching that there is a covenant existing between Yahweh and Christ, one in which the latter is appointed as a priest who will intercede on behalf of God’s people forevermore.

Hebrews 7:20–22, moreover, helps us see that the intra-Trinitarian covenant of Psalm 110:4 is a pretemporal covenant. After telling us that Jesus is unique, insofar as he is made priest with an oath, the author of Hebrews cites Psalm 110:4 and concludes by saying, “*This* makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant” (Heb. 7:22). In other words, the point is that the oath (of Ps. 110:4) is what has made Jesus the guarantor of the covenant of grace. Now, a guarantor is one that *guarantees* that the promises of the covenant will in fact be carried out.³⁶ If Jesus is such a guarantor, then this means that the certainty of the covenant of grace is based on him and his role as guarantor. But this role is a result of the oath of Psalm 110:4, which means that there is an oath undergirding or guaranteeing the covenant of grace—an oath between Yahweh and Adonai, or between Father and Son. If Robertson is right that covenant and oath are used interchangeably in Scripture, then Psalm 110 and Hebrews 7 are teaching that a covenant relationship between Father and Son is undergirding or guaranteeing the covenant of grace, which is precisely what Samuel Rutherford said in the mid-seventeenth century: “The Covenant of Suretyship [i.e., redemption] is the cause of the stability and firmness of the Covenant of Grace.”³⁷ This covenant relationship must be prior to the covenant of grace not only chronologically in execution but even logically in the stage of conception within the mind of God; otherwise, it could not function as the basis for it. Thus, the intra-Trinitarian covenant of Psalm 110:4 and Hebrews 7 must be pretemporal.

Psalm 2

The third passage that we will examine in this chapter is Psalm 2. This psalm is also obviously messianic, as we know from the New Testament’s repeated application of it to

34. Meredith G. Kline, *By Oath Consigned: A Reinterpretation of the Covenant Signs of Circumcision and Baptism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), 16.

35. Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*, 6n7. Robertson points his readers to G. M. Tucker, “Covenant Forms and Contract Forms,” *VT* 15, no. 4 (1965): 487–503, for “a full statement of the evidence that an oath belonged to the essence of covenant” and to Bible passages like Gen. 21:23–31; 31:53; Ex. 6:8; 19:8; 24:3, 7; Deut. 7:8, 12; 29:12–13; 2 Kings 11:4; 1 Chron. 16:16; Pss. 89:3, 34–35; 105:8–10; Ezek. 16:8 for further support of his claims. Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*, 6–7.

36. The word “guarantor” (ἐγγυος) occurs only here in the New Testament but was commonly used outside the Bible to speak of a “surety or guarantor”—that is, one who “is answerable for the fulfilment of the obligation which he guarantees.” F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 151n70. Thus, the role of the “guarantor” is to *guarantee*.

37. Rutherford, *Covenant of Life Opened*, 309.

Jesus (see, e.g., Acts 4:25–27; 13:33; Heb. 1:5; 5:5). In examining this psalm, we look chiefly at three sentences that all strongly suggest the covenant of redemption.

The first sentence is found at the beginning of Psalm 2:7, “I will tell of the decree.” The significant word in this phrase is “decree,” which is also frequently translated “statute” in the Old Testament (קִּיּוּן). This word is regularly identified with the idea of covenant, and, as we saw earlier, it is often translated as “covenant.” Psalm 50:16 places “statute” (קִּיּוּן) and “covenant” in parallel, which indicates that there is at least a great deal of overlap between these two terms, if not outright synonymy. Joshua 24:25 and 2 Kings 17:15 teach us that God’s statutes and covenant are so closely identified that keeping his statutes is tantamount to keeping his covenant, and despising his statutes is tantamount to despising his covenant (see also 1 Kings 9:4–5; 2 Chron. 34:31; Neh. 10:29). But perhaps the clearest passage of all in this regard is Psalm 105:8–10 (which is mirrored in 1 Chron. 16:15–17). Here, “covenant,” “sworn promise,” and “statute” (or “decree”) are all used in parallel. The “covenant that [God] made with Abraham” is the same thing as “his sworn promise to Isaac,” which “he confirmed to Jacob as a statute, to Israel as an everlasting covenant.”

The word “today,” which appears at the end of Psalm 2:7, would seem to confirm the idea that the verse’s comments should be understood in a covenantal context. Over and over again in Scripture, the word “today” is used to highlight declarations of covenant renewal. One thinks immediately of Deuteronomy 30:15–19 or Joshua 24:15, where the people of Israel are called to renew their covenant with the Lord without delay. They are challenged to choose “this day” whom they will serve and to begin doing so immediately (see also Gen. 15:18; 31:48; 47:23; Deut. 11:2, 8, 13, 26, 28; 19:9; 26:17; Josh. 14:9–12; 22:16, 18, 22, 29; Ps. 95:7–8). For all these reasons, Peter Craigie concludes that “the ‘decree’ is a document, given to the king during the coronation ceremony (cf. 2 Kings 11:12); it is his personal covenant document, renewing God’s covenant commitment to the dynasty of David.”³⁸

This close identification between “decree” and “covenant” and the use of the word “today” both suggest that the words of Psalm 2:7 should be understood within the context of a covenant relationship between the “LORD” and “me.” And since we know that this psalm is ultimately about Christ, the “me” here is ultimately and most fully realized in Christ. That means that Psalm 2:7 is talking about a covenant relationship between Yahweh and Christ, one that is enacted before the foundation of the world and then *renewed* in “the fullness of time” (Gal. 4:4) when the Son becomes incarnate by adding to himself our human nature. This is the covenant of redemption. It is renewed at the incarnation, and that is when Christ is given his “personal covenant document,” so to speak. He is invested with power and authority and declared to be Son, as we will see in the very next sentence.

38. Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, WBC 19 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 67.

The second sentence that points to the covenant of redemption is also in Psalm 2:7: “You are my Son; today I have begotten you.” This phrase is also part of the coronation ceremony that would apply ultimately and most fully to Christ. It can legitimately be said of David—as can the previous part of the verse—but only insofar as he was a type of Christ. In his capacity as type, David can rightly be said to have been “begotten” when God’s choosing him became clearly manifested to the people of Israel. John Calvin put it this way:

When God says, I have begotten thee, it ought to be understood as referring to men’s understanding or knowledge of it; for David was begotten by God when the choice of him to be king was clearly manifested. The words this day, therefore, denote the time of this manifestation; for as soon as it became known that he was made king by divine appointment, he came forth as one who had been lately begotten of God, since so great an honour could not belong to a private person.³⁹

And the same explanation would also apply to Christ. As Calvin said, “He is not said to be begotten in any other sense than as the Father bore testimony to him as being his own Son.” The verse has nothing to do with the Son’s ontological origin. It does not define the nature or timing of his eternal generation. Rather, it refers to “men’s understanding or knowledge of it.” In other words, it refers to the point in time when the Son’s begottenness would be made manifest to the world, or to what the early church understood as Christ’s coronation or induction as King of the universe. According to Calvin, this coronation finds its initial fulfillment in the incarnation, when the Son “became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14), but its “principal” fulfillment is found in the “today” of Christ’s resurrection (see Acts 13:33; Rom. 1:4). In these two things, Christ is presented to the world as the Son of God in power.⁴⁰

The fact that the Son’s coronation occurs within a context of covenant renewal is suggestive of the covenant of redemption. It indicates that a covenant would have been enacted beforehand between the Father and the Son, which would then have been “renewed” at Christ’s incarnation and resurrection, because, in order for a covenant to be renewed, it must first be enacted. Moreover, when we view this earlier covenant in light of New Testament passages such as Ephesians 1:11 and 2 Timothy 1:9, we see good evidence for concluding that it must have been enacted “before the ages began” in the “counsel of [God’s] will.”

The third and final sentence is found in Psalm 2:8:

Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and the ends of the earth your possession.

³⁹. Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 1:17–18.

⁴⁰. Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 1:18. See also G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 927–28.

As we mentioned earlier, this verse implies that an agreement had previously been reached between the Father and the Son, which was then carried out in time and space. Conditions are given, and specific promises are attached: if the Son will ask, the Father is promising to give the nations to him as his inheritance and the ends of the earth as his possession. But conditions that have specific promises attached to them indicate that an agreement has been reached beforehand. The Father is not just saying, “If you ask me, I will help you.” That is open ended and general and would not necessarily entail prior agreement. The Father is instead saying something more like this: “If you ask me, I will help you in this specific way.” That kind of specificity implies that there was agreement between the Father and the Son on the precise terms of the help that would be asked for and then provided. And that kind of agreement is exactly what the covenant of redemption embodies.

Theological Rationale

Thus far we have laid out the biblical rationale in support of the covenant of redemption. We have explored the language of the Bible and looked at the covenantal implications of several individual passages. After reading through this presentation, it should be clear that a strong biblical argument can be made for the existence of the covenant of redemption. We can understand how our post-Reformation forefathers embraced this doctrine so universally and so quickly. The biblical arguments for it are impressive and widespread.

Historically, this argument has not depended wholly on the language of the Bible and the implications of select individual passages. It has also involved certain theological positions that complemented the biblical arguments and even strengthened them. While there is not enough space to explore all these positions fully, we will look more closely at two of them: (1) the covenant of works and covenant of grace and (2) the Trinity.

Covenant of Works and Covenant of Grace

The existence of a covenant of works in the Bible points to the existence of the covenant of redemption. We see this in a number of ways. In the first place, as already mentioned, the same exegetical process that leads someone to embrace the covenant of works will also lead that one to embrace the covenant of redemption. This means that the individual who recognizes the exegetical evidence in support of the one should have little difficulty in also recognizing the exegetical evidence in support of the other.

In the second place, the covenant of works is the theological “mirror image” of the covenant of redemption.⁴¹ This means that the existence of the former covenant—even when it is referred to by a different name—necessarily implies the existence of the latter. There is no mediator in either covenant. Whereas the covenant of redemption is enacted

41. J. V. Fesko, *The Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2016), 138.

between God (the Father) and the “Son of God,” the covenant of works is enacted between God and Adam, who is called “the son of God” in Luke 3:38. What is more, the whole arrangement of Luke 3–4 would seem to be designed to point to Adam and Christ as mirror images. Whereas Matthew’s genealogy starts with Abraham and finishes with Jesus, Luke’s begins with Jesus and ends with Adam, the son of God. Why would Luke trace his genealogy all the way back to Adam? Why would he not stop with Abraham as Matthew did? Why would he list the names in the reverse order of Matthew’s genealogy? And why would he refer to Adam as God’s son?

The issue is further complicated when we look at chapter 4 and see that Luke records the three temptations of Christ in a different order than Matthew does. To be precise, the last two temptations are reversed in Luke when compared with Matthew. What could possibly account for this difference?

It would appear that Luke, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is attempting to paint out Adam and Christ as mirror images. The order he gives of the temptations just happens to be the exact same order that we find with Adam in the garden of Eden in Genesis 3: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and pride. What we see in Luke 3–4, then, is a genealogy in which Luke goes all the way back to Adam; he does it in such a way that he ends with Adam, whom he calls the “son of God,” and then he immediately transitions to the account of the temptations of Christ, in which he records everything in the exact order given in Genesis 3. The point would seem to be that Jesus is the second (and final) Adam, the ultimate Son of God. He came to do exactly what the first Adam failed to do. He came as the “mirror image” of the first Adam to undo the first Adam’s failure in the covenant of works.

Because we know that God does everything “according to the counsel of his will” (Eph. 1:11), we know that the failure of Adam did not catch God by surprise but was part of his plan from before the foundation of the world. And this means that God planned to send his Son into the world as the “mirror image” of Adam to succeed where Adam failed and to undo the consequences of his failure as well. If the Bible teaches that the relationship between God and Adam is contained within a covenant, then this implies that there must also be a covenant between God and Christ that establishes Christ as the “mirror image” of Adam, involves agreement between the persons of the Trinity to the particular conditions and promises of the arrangement, and is enacted according to the counsel of God’s will before the foundation of the world.

What is more, the existence of the covenant of grace also points to the existence of the covenant of redemption. Because the covenant of grace is enacted in time and because Christ functions as a mediator in this covenant, there must be another covenant that undergirds, establishes, and guarantees the covenant of grace. We will look at these points one at a time. First, that the covenant of grace is enacted in time implies that there must be another covenant enacted before the beginning of time in which the conditions and promises of the covenant of grace are established and agreed to. To

be sure, this might not *require* a covenant to do this. It is possible that the agreement between the persons of the Trinity could be represented in another way and that that agreement would then undergird and guarantee the covenant of grace. But as we have already indicated, the Bible speaks of this agreement in terms of an “oath” between the Father and the Son (Heb. 7:20–22), which is widely regarded as being the constitutive ingredient of the covenant relationship.

Second, the fact that Christ functions as a mediator in the covenant of grace suggests that this covenant is not enacted with him personally and that there must be another covenant that is enacted with him personally. We know from Psalm 2; Luke 22:29; and Hebrews 7, along with many other passages, that there is in fact a covenant enacted with Christ personally. If the covenant of grace cannot encompass this, then there must be another covenant that does. This covenant would then undergird, establish, and guarantee the covenant of grace by establishing and guaranteeing Christ’s role as mediator in it.

The Trinity

When we admit that there must be some kind of pretemporal intra-Trinitarian covenant that functions as the mirror image of the covenant of works and lays the foundation for the covenant of grace, we immediately raise questions about the implications of such a covenant for our understanding of the Trinity. In particular, how do we avoid the charge that we are separating the three persons of the Trinity by positing three separate wills that must all agree by way of covenant and, thus, that we are guilty of tritheism?

In responding to this objection, the first thing that needs to be said is that the dialogues recorded in Scripture between the Father and the Son suggest that it is quite possible to hold to the covenant of redemption and not be guilty of tritheism. The fact that the triune God has chosen to reveal himself in and through these dialogues indicates that there must be genuine communication between the three persons of the Trinity within the inner life of God. Listen to what Kevin Vanhoozer says on this point:

Because the way God is in the economy [i.e., in the dialogues that take place between the Father and the Son in time and space] corresponds to the way God is in himself, we may conclude that the Father, Son, and Spirit are merely continuing in history a communicative activity that characterizes their perfect life together.⁴²

If we can say that there is genuine communication between the persons of the Trinity within the inner life of God without lapsing into tritheism, then it certainly seems reasonable to say that we can hold to the covenant of redemption—which in one sense is simply a genuine dialogue between the persons of the Trinity regarding the redemption of the elect—without lapsing into it either. The dialogues between the Father and

42. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship*, CSCD 18 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 251. See also the helpful discussion in Fred Sanders, *The Triune God*, NSD (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 69–75.

the Son in Scripture allow us to say that the covenant of redemption is completely in keeping with the way God has revealed himself in the Bible.

The formula used by the Council of Florence in 1439 to differentiate the oneness of God from his threeness is helpful in understanding this idea further: “[In God] everything is one, where a relation of opposition does not prevent it.”⁴³ This simply means that God is to be considered one everywhere except where a “relation of opposition” obtains—as it does, for instance, in the internal actions of generation and spiration. But relations of opposition must also obtain in regard to the communicative activity of God, if there is to be genuine dialogue between the persons of the Trinity. The Father must stand “over against” the Son, and the Son must stand “over against” the Spirit for there to be genuine dialogue between them.⁴⁴ This means that the covenant of redemption in no way requires undoing the unity of God. It simply requires acknowledging that relations of opposition can and do exist. Thus, we cannot say that the covenant of redemption is unnecessary on account of the unity of the divine mind and will. To say this is to overlook the relations of opposition within the Trinity and to lose the threeness of God in his oneness.

The second response to this objection is that because the covenant of redemption deals with the planning and executing of our salvation, we would expect it to be enacted according to the unique mission of each person of the Trinity. The theological maxim *opera ad extra trinitatis indivisa sunt*—which is translated, “the external works of the Trinity are indivisible”—should never be taken to mean that all three persons of the Trinity always do exactly the same tasks. Rather, each person of the Godhead acts in a way that is suited to his own person and mission. The Father does not become incarnate and die on the cross. The Son does those things. The Son does not come at Pentecost and does not apply the finished work of salvation to the elect. The Spirit does those things. Each one acts according to his own person and mission, but all are involved in every external work of the Godhead.⁴⁵ Because the mission of each person is unique within God’s indivisible work of accomplishing our salvation, we would expect the covenant that plans and executes that salvation to be enacted along the lines of each person’s mission.

Geerhardus Vos helpfully differentiates between predestination and the covenant of redemption by pointing out, “In predestination there is one undivided will; [and] in the counsel of peace this will appears as having its own manner of existence in the Persons.”⁴⁶ Vos is highlighting the fact that predestination simply involves God choosing who will be saved, whereas the covenant of redemption involves planning and executing the details of how that salvation will actually be accomplished. Predestina-

43. The Latin reads, *Omniaque sunt unum, ubi non obviat relationis oppositio*. See Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 1:571.

44. Sanders, *Triune God*, 131.

45. Scott Swain and Michael Allen, “The Obedience of the Eternal Son,” *IJST* 15, no. 2 (2013): 117, 127.

46. Geerhardus Vos, *De Verbondsleer in de Gereformeerde Theologie*, quoted in G. C. Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960), 164.

tion, therefore, does not involve the unique missions of the persons of the Trinity, but the covenant of redemption does. Therefore, we should expect that, in the covenant of redemption, the will of God “appears as having its own manner of existence in the Persons.”

The covenant of redemption, moreover, has historically been understood as an action of the Trinity as a whole. Some have believed that the Father, representing all three persons of the Trinity, entered into this covenant with the Son, while others have believed that all three persons decided the terms of salvation and then commissioned the Father to enter into covenant with the Son on those terms. Both positions are trying to be faithful to the language of Scripture, which consistently portrays the Father as the one who enters into agreement with the Son, but at the same time trying to protect the Trinitarian nature of the covenant of redemption. Both positions see the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as concurring in the enacting of this covenant agreement.

Why Does This Matter?

Thus far, we have explored the biblical and theological rationale in support of the covenant of redemption. In doing so, we have surveyed the language of Scripture, the dialogues between the Father and the Son, and several key Bible passages. We have also looked at the covenant of works, the covenant of grace, and the doctrine of the Trinity to see how they support the existence of a pretemporal intra-Trinitarian covenant. The only thing that remains is for us to consider how the covenant of redemption is to be used practically in our lives and why it matters that there is such a thing as the covenant of redemption. In his treatment of this covenant, Wilhelmus à Brakel listed five practical uses of this doctrine.⁴⁷ We will highlight three.

First, the covenant of redemption guarantees the salvation of the elect and makes it absolutely certain. The “unchangeable” oath of God is standing behind this covenant (or is part and parcel of it), and thus, our salvation is sure (Heb. 6:17–18). Just as it is impossible for God to lie, so it is also impossible for our salvation to be undone. The elect are completely safe and secure because they have all been given by the Father to the Son in the covenant of redemption and because the Son has done everything that he said he would do in this covenant on their behalf.

Second, the covenant of redemption guarantees that all the conditions of our salvation have already been met in full, which is why this doctrine was historically used to fight against Arminianism. The terms of our salvation, which were agreed on before the foundation of the world within the Godhead, have all been accomplished in time and space and will be applied to the elect in the fullness of time. The only thing that remains for us to do is to acknowledge this with our gratitude and to give all praise and glory to God.

47. Brakel, *Christian's Reasonable Service*, 1:261–63.

Third, the covenant of redemption reveals the incredible love that God has shown to the elect. We have been chosen as an expression of the love that God has for himself, the mutual delight of the Father in the Son and the Son in the Father forevermore. The covenant of redemption tells us that we are in effect a love gift from the Father to the Son and from the Son back to the Father. As Brakel said,

Love moved the Father and love moved the Lord Jesus. [The covenant of redemption] is a covenant of love between those whose love proceeds from within themselves, without there being any loveableness in the object of this love. Oh, how blessed is he who is incorporated in this covenant and, being enveloped and irradiated by this eternal love, is stirred up to love in return, exclaiming, “We love Him, because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19).⁴⁸

48. Brakel, *Christian's Reasonable Service*, 1:263.

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