GOD TO US

GOD TO US

Covenant Theology in Scripture

Stephen G. Myers

God to Us
© 2021 by Stephen G. Myers

To

Douglas F. Kelly
For giving me an opportunity

And to

Charles Stephen Myers
and
Nancy McLaurine Myers
For giving me everything else

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments

One of the great joys of coming to the completion of a writing project is the opportunity to express your gratitude to all of those who have helped you and ministered to you along the way. In that regard, I find myself indebted to many. First, I want to express the humblest gratitude to the faculty, staff, and trustees of Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary. It is the highest privilege to labor among all of you and to share with you the great vision of seeing the gospel change hearts from east to west. I can think of no better place in which to undertake the gospel work and no better group of brothers and sisters with whom to undertake it. I only hope that this book will be used by the Spirit to further the work so dear to all of us.

In addition to my colleagues at Puritan Reformed, I am most grateful for the encouragement and fellowship of both the Free Reformed Congregation of Grand Rapids and Reformation Orthodox Presbyterian Church, also in Grand Rapids. Both congregations have cared well for me and my family, demonstrating, in their love for us, their love for our Jesus (John 13:35). Both congregations also have allowed me to serve in their midst in various capacities, and it has blessed my soul to see God's Word go out among them, never returning to Him void.

While I currently find myself geographically quite distant from them, I also am indebted to two further congregations. The blessed saints of Pressly Memorial Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church in Statesville, North Carolina, allowed me the privilege of serving as their pastor for more than eight years. They loved me and my family as their own, and having spent eight of the sweetest years of our lives among them, they still are family to all of us. Much of what lies ahead in the present work was first germinated in their pulpit and in their homes. The saints of Coddle Creek Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church in Mooresville, North Carolina, are similarly central to all of my labors. In His mercy, God has been pleased to convert my family, sitting in

The most special of gratitude is owed to my wife, Lisa. She willingly tied her future to mine more than sixteen years ago, and while the intervening times have taken both of us places we never could have anticipated, she always has been constant, and she always has made wherever we are "home." No words can search out my love for her. And our children—Quinn, Cale, Mae, and Caroline Leigh—fill the deepest parts of my heart with love and with laughter. With each day that passes, they make me more profoundly grateful that "unto them that do him fear / God's mercy never ends; / And to their children's children still / His righteousness extends" (Psalm 103:17; *The Scottish Psalter*). These five souls, who fill my heart and my home, are my greatest joy this side of the Realm of Endless Day.

While there are so many to thank, this book is dedicated specifically to three people. The first of them is Dr. Douglas F. Kelly. Many years ago, Dr. Kelly took an interest in a fellow Carolina boy, and from North Carolina to Edinburgh and back again, he met with me, read Scripture with me, prayed with me, and pushed me to use the gifts that God has given me for the benefit of His people. Then, Dr. Kelly asked me to teach his covenant theology course one semester while he was on sabbatical from his position at Reformed Theological Seminary in Charlotte, North Carolina. It was that invitation that has led both to my current calling and to the book that is before you. There are few who have shaped my life more radically than Dr. Kelly. Even still today, one of my greatest comforts is knowing that there is a man in Moore County, North Carolina, who is praying for me.

Next, this book represents a faltering effort to express gratitude to my parents, Charles Stephen Myers and Nancy McLaurine Myers. How does one thank the ones who have given him everything? How does one thank those who have spoken of God's Word in their rising up and in their lying down all of their days so that now that Word is in his mouth too? How does one extend that gratitude? I have tried to write it down for others. I pray the Lord will bless it and will bless those who have entrusted it to me.

Finally, above all, my gratitude and my greatest debt is to my triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He has broken my bonds, and He has set me free. May my every word sing His praises.

—Stephen G. Myers
November 2020

Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
ANF	*The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*. Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, A. Cleveland Coxe, and Allan Menzies. 10 vols. Reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989–1990.
BBRSup	Bulletin for Biblical Research Supplement
BDAG	W. Bauer, F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
BDB	F. Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs. *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*. Reprint, Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2000.
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BFA	*By Faith Alone: Answering the Challenges to the Doctrine of Justification*. Edited by Gary L. W. Johnson and Guy P. Waters. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2006.
BTINT	*A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament: The Gospel Realized*. Edited by Michael J. Kruger. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2016.
BTIOT	*A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament: The Gospel Promised*. Edited by Miles V. Van Pelt. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2016.
CD	Karl Barth. *Church Dogmatics*. Edited by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance. Translated by G. W. Bromiley. 14 vols. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936–1977.
CNTUOT	*Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*. Edited by G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007.
CRT	Classic Reformed Theology Series

CT	*Covenant Theology: Biblical, Theological, and Historical Perspectives.* Edited by Guy Prentiss Waters, J. Nicholas Reid, and John R. Muether. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2020.
CTJ	*Calvin Theological Journal*
DIC	*Drawn into Controversie: Reformed Theological Diversity and Debates within Seventeenth-Century British Puritanism.* Edited by Michael A. G. Haykin and Mark Jones. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011.
FOBC	Focus on the Bible Commentaries
GELS	Johan Lusk, Erik Eynikel, and Katrin Hauspie. *Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint.* Rev. ed. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2003.
GELSD	Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains.* 2nd ed. 2 vols. New York: United Bible Societies, 1989.
HALOT	Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament. Study Edition.* Revised by Walter Baumgartner and Johann Jakob Stamm. 2 vols. Leiden: Brill, 2001.
HC	Heidelberg Catechism. In *Reformed Confessions Harmonized: With an Annotated Bibliography of Reformed Doctrinal Works*, edited by Joel R. Beeke and Sinclair B. Ferguson. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999.
JETS	*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
JPSTC	Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
LC	The Lectio Continua Expository Commentary on the New Testament
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LONTS	Library of New Testament Studies
NAC	New American Commentary
NACSBT	New American Commentary Studies in Bible and Theology
NCBC	New Cambridge Bible Commentary
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIDNTTE	*New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis.* Edited by Moisés Silva. 2nd ed. 5 vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014.
NIDOTTE	*New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis.* Edited by Willem A. VanGemeren. 5 vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997.

NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIVAC	The NIV Application Commentary
*NPNF*1	*A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church.* Edited by Philip Schaff. 14 vols. Reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989–1994.
*NPNF*2	*A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church.* Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Second Series. 14 vols. Reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991.
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
NTL	New Testament Library
NTT	New Testament Theology
OSHT	Oxford Studies in Historical Theology
OTL	Old Testament Library
PRRD	Richard A. Muller. *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520–ca. 1725.* 2nd ed. 4 vols. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003.
RD	Herman Bavinck. *Reformed Dogmatics.* Edited by John Bolt. Translated by John Vriend. 4 vols. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–2008.
REDS	Reformed, Exegetical and Doctrinal Studies
SBJT	*The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*
SJT	*Scottish Journal of Theology*
SSBT	Short Studies in Biblical Theology
TDNT	*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament.* Edited by Gerhard Kittel. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. 10 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–1976.
TLNF	*The Law Is Not of Faith: Essays on Works and Grace in the Mosaic Covenant.* Edited by Bryan D. Estelle, J. V. Fesko, and David VanDrunen. Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2009.
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith. In *ARP Standards*. Greenville, S.C.: General Synod of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, 2015.
WLC	Westminster Larger Catechism. In *ARP Standards*. Greenville, S.C.: General Synod of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, 2015.

WSC   Westminster Shorter Catechism. In *ARP Standards*. Greenville,
           S.C.: General Synod of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian
           Church, 2015.
WTJ   *Westminster Theological Journal*
ZECNT   Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament

Introduction

When we understand covenant theology, our knowledge of God, our peace in our relationship with Him, and our grasp of what it means to live as His people grow deeper and richer. While this has been the assumption of covenant theologians for centuries, it nonetheless can seem an arrogant claim. Is one system of organizing doctrine so important that it necessarily enhances our understanding of God and our relationship with Him?

The answer to such a question is bound up with the connection between relationships and knowledge. In the Scriptures, God always reveals Himself to His people as a God in covenant; therefore the lens of covenant is necessary to understand accurately all that God has revealed about Himself. Our own human relationships show the importance of this connection between relationship and knowledge. My wife and I have four children, one of whom is a boy. If my son wants a right understanding of me and all of my interactions with him, he must begin by understanding me as his father. For example, as his father, I tell my son what time to go to bed. If my son sees me as just a friend, that action will seem a bit presumptuous, and I would be a rather overbearing friend. If my son sees me as his father, that established bedtime is simply rightful authority used to create healthy habits. As his father, I might take my son out for ice cream. If my son sees me as a personal fitness trainer, the ice cream would appear to undermine fitness, and I would seem incredibly negligent and even foolish. If my son sees me as his father, the ice cream treat is seen as a fun indulgence shared in the enjoyment of life's pleasures. Knowing my relationship to him enables my son to understand rightly all of his interactions with me, and it enables those interactions to give him an accurate impression of my intentions and character because he is viewing those actions through the same lens, the same relationship, through which I view them and intend them.

The same is true in humanity's relationship with God. If God has approached His people as the God of the covenant, then their right understanding of Him

must begin with viewing Him as the God of the covenant. The covenantal relationship is how God has approached His people, and thus that relationship is how His people must approach Him and understand Him. If we neglect to do so, our knowledge of God might be true and it might be sufficient, but it never will be as clear, as accurate, or as powerful as it could be. To attain to the greatest heights of the knowledge of God of which we are capable, we must understand Him and know Him as the God of the covenant.[1] We must study and we must learn covenant theology.[2]

What Is Covenant Theology?

All of these rather bold claims lead to a question, What is covenant theology? It hardly seems fair to suggest that something is so important without defining clearly what that thing is. Covenant theology, which sometimes is called federal theology, is the study of God's eternal, unchanging purpose to bring a people to Himself through covenantal relationship. God has approached His people through covenant and He has worked through covenant to make them His own, and thus covenant theology uses that same covenantal structure to understand both God Himself and the redemption He has accomplished.[3] This rationale of covenant theology is rooted in God's declaration in Deuteronomy 29:12–13, where He tells the assembled Israelites that He has gathered them together "that you may enter into covenant with the LORD your God, and into His oath, which the LORD your God makes with you today, that He may establish you today as a people for Himself, and that He may be God to you, just as He has spoken to you, and just as He has sworn to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." Through covenant, God makes a people His own. Covenant theology, then, is the exploration of how God makes a people His own—how He gathers them and shapes them into His people.

But answering the question, What is covenant theology? only raises a further question: What is a covenant? O. Palmer Robertson, in his classic study of covenant theology, makes the very apt assessment that "asking for a definition of

---

1. "We know the LORD only in and through the Covenant of Grace that He establishes." Douglas F. Kelly, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *The God Who Is: The Holy Trinity* (Fearn, U.K.: Mentor, 2008), 387.

2. Michael Horton proposes covenant theology as the organizing principle for both biblical theology and systematic theology. Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 16–19. On Horton's overall project, see Michael Allen, "Covenant in Recent Theology," in *CT*, 437–43.

3. Allen, "Covenant in Recent Theology," 443.

'covenant' is somewhat like asking for a definition of 'mother.'"[4] Like "mother," "covenant" is such a rich expression that it is impossible to encapsulate all that it means; when one attempts to do so, elements inevitably are omitted. This is something that one must remember from the outset. When dealing with covenant and covenant theology, we are dealing with rich and textured realities that defy simplistic categorizations and demand careful understandings.

That complex understanding must begin somewhere, however, and a good place to begin is the definition of "covenant" offered by Francis Turretin, a leading Reformed theologian of the seventeenth century. Turretin argued that a covenant is "a pact and agreement entered into…consisting partly in a stipulation of duty…and partly in the promise of a reward."[5] In this definition, Turretin addresses two key elements of covenant. First, there are defined parameters to a covenant; as Turretin puts it, there are duties stipulated and rewards promised. But secondly, covenant involves relationship. The covenant is "entered into" by certain parties, and their covenantal relationship to each other knits their futures together. What one might consider the "contractual elements" of the covenant—the duties and the promises—function within a specific relationship. A covenant, in other words, is a relationship within parameters. In the past, theologians argued over whether a covenant is a contract or a relationship, but a covenant is, in fact, both. It is both a relationship and a contract, and neither aspect denigrates the importance of the other.

While Turretin is helpful in gaining an initial orientation, the most critical starting point for understanding covenant must be the Scriptures themselves. How do the Scriptures define and speak of covenant?[6]

Old Testament Terminology for Covenant

In the Hebrew of the Old Testament, the idea of covenant is expressed very consistently and uniformly using the word *berith* (בְּרִית).[7] *Berith* occurs approximately 290 times in the Old Testament, and there really is no Hebrew synonym

---

4. O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1980), 3.

5. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison Jr. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1992–1997), 2:172 (12.1.8). Subsequent references to Turretin's *Institutes* will give references using the (topic, question, paragraph) format.

6. For more on the biblical terminology for covenant, see Richard A. Muller, "The Covenant of Works and the Stability of Divine Law in Seventeenth-Century Reformed Orthodoxy: A Study in the Theology of Herman Witsius and Wilhelmus à Brakel," in *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition*, OSHT (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 175–89.

7. *Berith* is defined as "agreement, covenant." *HALOT*, 1:157.

for it. Resultingly, *berith* is used in a wide variety of contexts. It describes relationships between people (Jacob and Laban in Gen. 31:44; David and Jonathan in 1 Sam. 18:3), relationships between nations (Josh. 9:15), and relationships between God and human beings (with Noah in Gen. 6:18; with Abraham in Gen. 15:18; with David in Ps. 89:3–4; with Phinehas in Num. 25:12; with Israel in Ex. 19:5). However, within these diverse usages of *berith*, the covenants between God and human beings are distinct from all other uses of the word. On one hand, covenants involving only human beings or nations involve some degree of negotiation or compromise, and thus a *berith* of this sort is defined as a "treaty, alliance, league."[8] God's covenants with human beings, however, are all both sovereignly and graciously administered. In each instance, God unilaterally declares the parameters of the relationship and then voluntarily enters into it. Never is God presented as being under compulsion in His *berith*, but rather He is the gracious initiator and designer of His relationships with human beings, both in the relationships themselves and in the parameters that encircle them. As a result of this enhanced personal dimension to God's covenants with human beings, this sort of *berith* is defined as an "alliance of friendship."[9] The Old Testament is peppered with instances of *berith*, but God's covenants with human beings are distinct. In them, God is sovereignly fostering "friendship" with humanity and declaring the parameters within which that "friendship" can flourish. *Berith* is God making His people.

While there is this remarkable uniformity in Old Testament language, always using *berith* to speak of covenants, the variety of verbs paired with *berith* also is important. Primarily, there are three verbs that most often are used with *berith*, and each of them brings an important nuance of meaning. Most frequently, the verb used with *berith* is *karat* (כָּרַת; e.g., Jer. 34:18), which means "to cut." *Karat berith*, then, means "to cut a covenant," a phrase which speaks of the inauguration, or even the renewal, of a covenant.[10] The background to this language of "cutting" is very important in covenantal thought and will be particularly clear later in a consideration of the Abrahamic covenant.

The second verb that often is used with *berith* is *heqim* (הֵקִים; e.g., Gen. 6:18), which means "to stand." *Heqim berith*, rather than referring to the initial inauguration of a covenant, refers to the perpetuation, the maintaining, or the confirming of a previously existing covenant. If an analogy is drawn with marriage, *heqim berith* envisions not a wedding, but a purposeful gaze at one's

---

8. BDB, 136.
9. BDB, 136.
10. Miles V. Van Pelt, "The Noahic Covenant of the Covenant of Grace," in *CT*, 119.

own wedding ring as confirmation of the relationship that already exists. This nuanced meaning is important to keep in mind, particularly when reading the Old Testament in English, because both *karat berith* and *heqim berith* often are translated in most English versions as "make a covenant," a translation that flattens the distinction between them. Sometimes, then, when the English Bible reads "make a covenant," what is being translated is *heqim berith*, and therefore what is in view is not the creation of a covenant that had not existed before, but rather the perpetuation of a previously existing covenant.[11]

The third verb that is paired with *berith* is, by far, the most infrequently used of the three, appearing only three times in the Old Testament.[12] *Natan* (נָתַן; e.g., Gen. 17:2) means "to give," and thus *natan berith* envisions the giving of a covenant. When the Scriptures use this specific language, the emphasis is on one party giving the blessings of that covenant to the other party. In this sense, *natan berith* is not the striking of a covenant, but rather the acting on a covenant that already has been forged. In this regard, *natan berith* is very similar to *heqim berith*.[13]

Septuagint Terminology for Covenant

Sometime around the third century BC, the Old Testament was translated into Greek, resulting in the Septuagint (commonly abbreviated LXX). In this Greek translation of the Old Testament, the uniformity of *berith* remained largely intact. Of the approximately 290 uses of *berith* in the Hebrew Old Testament, 275 were rendered in Greek by *diathēkē* (διαθήκη).[14] This uniformity of translation into Greek is striking because Greek also has the word *synthēkē* (συνθήκη). In the Greek in use at the time of the LXX, *diathēkē* and *synthēkē* were very similar, yet they had important shades of meaning. *Diathēkē* had the connotation of being a unilateral agreement. In this sense, *diathēkē* spoke of a "treaty, covenant" that was entirely one-sided and the result of only

---

11. See Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2018), 187–95; W. J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: A Theology of Old Testament Covenants* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 1984), 25–26. Not all Old Testament scholars agree on this nuanced meaning of *heqim berith*. For an alternative view, see Paul R. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God's Unfolding Purpose*, NSBT (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2007), 73.

12. Gen. 17:2; 9:12; Num. 25:12.

13. For an account of the debate on this point, see Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 2nd ed., 300–306.

14. *HALOT*, 1:157.

one party's initiative.[15] *Synthēkē*, on the other hand, envisioned a more two-sided "agreement, pact, covenant" much closer to a "contract" than to a "last will and testament."[16] Among other things, *synthēkē* therefore strongly implied the equality of both parties to the relationship. In the opinion of LXX scholars, *synthēkē* was "based on an accord between two parties, in opp[osition] to διαθήκη where one party usually imposes its will upon the other."[17] *Synthēkē* was between equals; *diathēkē* was not. As the translators of the LXX brought *berith* into Greek, they did so with striking uniformity, which is underscored by the fact that they had two options—*diathēkē* and *synthēkē*—available to them.[18] What *berith* meant in Hebrew, *diathēkē* meant in Greek, and that identification was the result not of a lack of translational options, but of the affinity between the two words. *Diathēkē* was the "stereotypical rendition of ברית."[19]

New Testament Terminology for Covenant

In the Greek New Testament, the usage of *diathēkē* to refer to covenant becomes completely uniform. *Diathēkē*, which had come to refer to a "last will and testament," occurs thirty-three times in the New Testament, and it always is used when "covenant" is in view.[20] Most critically, however, when the inspired authors of the New Testament quote Old Testament passages where *berith* is used, they invariably use *diathēkē* to translate *berith*. For example, Hebrews 8:8–12 is an extensive quotation of Jeremiah 31:31–34, and in that quotation, "new *berith*" (בְּרִית) is rendered by "new *diathēkē*" (διαθήκη).[21] As the Holy Spirit led the authors of the New Testament in their writing, He always chose *diathēkē* to speak of "covenant," and He always chose *diathēkē* to express in Greek what He previously had expressed by *berith* in Hebrew. What *berith* meant in the Old Testament, *diathēkē* means in the New Testament.

---

15. *GELS*, 137.

16. *GELS*, 592; *GELSD*, 1:452 (34.44).

17. *GELS*, 592.

18. John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. W. H. Goold (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1966–1991), 18:78–80.

19. *GELS*, 137.

20. BDAG, 228.

21. It appears that in Hebrews 8:8–12 the author is quoting from the LXX rather than from the Hebrew Old Testament. See Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 412–15. However, the point remains the same. What God the Holy Spirit had spoken of as the new *berith* through Jeremiah, He spoke of as the new *diathēkē* through the author to the Hebrews. Rather than a deferral to the LXX translation, this inspired quotation should be seen as an endorsement of it. *Berith* is *diathēkē*.

But what exactly does it mean? For centuries, covenant theologians have disagreed about whether *diathēkē* in the New Testament should be understood as, and thus translated as, either "covenant" or "testament." Largely, these disagreements grow out of the presence of *synthēkē* in the Greek of the New Testament era. Given the clearly bilateral meaning of *synthēkē*, is *diathēkē* to be understood almost exclusively as a "last will and testament," ceding all "covenantal" nuances to *synthēkē*? Or, was the meaning of *diathēkē* broad enough that it included, for the New Testament authors, the full range of what is meant by "covenant"? The answer to these questions would seem to lie in something previously addressed: the uniform identification of *berith* with *diathēkē*, both in the uninspired translation of the LXX and in the inspired New Testament. The translators of the LXX, with a command of both the Hebrew and Greek languages of the day, uniformly rendered *berith* with *diathēkē*. The New Testament authors, writing as God the Holy Spirit led them along, uniformly rendered Old Testament usages of *berith* with *diathēkē*. It would appear, then, that whatever *berith* meant, *diathēkē* meant; to say in Greek what one would say in Hebrew with *berith*, one would use *diathēkē*. Since *berith* unquestionably means "covenant," then, it would seem that *diathēkē* means the same. While there undoubtedly is richness of meaning as God's revelation gains clarity in the New Testament, *diathēkē* still means "covenant."[22]

Francis Turretin, in his detailed attention to the meaning of *diathēkē*, very helpfully highlights the richness of that word. Turretin argues that *diathēkē* can refer to any covenant or agreement, "but it peculiarly denotes a testamentary disposition with a federal agreement."[23] In Turretin's explanation, the word *diathēkē* has particular reference to an agreement marked by two characteristics. First, a *diathēkē* has a "testamentary disposition." Turretin here has in mind a "disposition," or, a "giving," that is done unilaterally, much like a last will and testament. A *diathēkē*, therefore, is a unilateral giving. And that unilateral giving is joined to a "federal agreement," or a covenantal agreement. In full, Turretin understands *diathēkē* as a unilateral giving based on an underlying covenantal arrangement; *diathēkē* is a "contract" or a "pact" that gives rise to a free giving. In a sense, then, *diathēkē* envisions a specific kind of *berith*, namely, one in which a "covenant" has produced a "testament."

---

22. For more on this point, see Geerhardus Vos, "'Covenant' or 'Testament'?," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1980), 400–411.

23. Turretin, *Institutes*, 12.1.3.

What the Biblical Terminology Teaches

Running throughout the biblical terminology for covenant are two critical concepts. First, the biblical language always points to the terms of a contract. If a covenant is to be understood as a relationship within parameters, those parameters are critical to the entire notion of covenant, because covenants come with terms attached. But secondly, the biblical terminology of covenant always carries the idea of relationship. While the parameters around that relationship are essential, they are not present in a cold or mechanical sort of way. Much to the contrary, the parameters are enclosing a relationship; they demand a personal dimension.[24] "Covenant" in the Scriptures "may, in fact, be the most important and lasting interpersonal relationship."[25]

Given these commonalities of the biblical terminology for covenant, it is possible to offer a definition of "covenant." A "covenant" is a binding relationship between parties that involves both blessings and obligations. While such an analogy easily can be overdone, a fitting illustration of this understanding of "covenant" is the institution of marriage. Marriage involves a contract; there are terms placed upon and accepted by each party to the marriage. Within a marriage, there are things that must be done, things that may be done, and things that must not be done. There are "terms" in marriage. In many ways, the presence of those terms is identical with marriage itself.[26] Certainly, the violation of those terms constitutes an assault on marriage.[27] But within marriage, alongside these terms, there is undeniably a relationship. Two people are brought together. Indeed, if one had to make a distinction, one would have to say that the terms are present for the purpose of the relationship and not *vice versa*. The relationship is the point of the entire enterprise; the terms, while critically important, are there simply to enclose and to define the relationship. Both contract and relationship are present in marriage and so, too, are they

---

24. "The covenant is personal-relational before it is legal-political. One's responsibilities to others (love thy neighbor) and to the wholly other (love God with all your heart, mind, and strength) arise out of one's prior participation in a network of relationality that is itself created by the divine promise." Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 137.

25. *GELSD*, 1:452 (34.44).

26. On the importance of these terms, see J. Ligon Duncan, "Recent Objections to Covenant Theology: A Description, Evaluation and Response," in *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century*, ed. J. Ligon Duncan, vol. 3 (Fearn, U.K.: Mentor, 2009), 494–97.

27. These "contractual" terms, far from being cold, actually bring assurance to the believer. See Donald Macleod, *A Faith to Live By: Understanding Christian Doctrine* (Fearn, U.K.: Mentor, 2002), 129.

both present in a covenant. A covenant is a binding relationship between parties that involves both blessings and obligations.

Back to Covenant Theology…

If covenant theology is the study of God's eternal, unchanging purpose to bring a people to Himself through covenantal relationship, and a covenant is a binding relationship between parties that involves both blessings and obligations, there remains an issue to be resolved. How has God been working eternally and unchangeably through covenant to bring a people to Himself? The answer to this question constitutes the body of covenant theology. While the whole of that doctrinal system will be detailed in what follows, it is helpful to begin with an overview of the entire sweep of covenant theology. With a sense of the entire field in mind, it then is possible carefully to consider each individual aspect of covenant theology in more detail in following chapters.[28]

The Westminster Confession of Faith ably provides a good starting point for this overview of covenant theology. The confession begins its treatment of covenant theology—chapter 7, "Of God's Covenant with Man"—with these words: "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."[29] The difference between God as creator and humanity as creature is so radical that in order for human beings to be in meaningful and blessed relationship with God, God had to "stoop down" to them by means of covenant. This starting point for covenant theology is critically important. While God's covenant certainly is required by the moral distinction between a holy God and a sinful people, even behind that moral necessity God's covenant is required simply by the fact that He is creator and human beings are creatures. Because of this ontological disparity (a disparity of being), God condescended to enter into a covenant in order that He might draw a people to Himself. Even before there was sin to be remedied, God was condescending *via* covenant in order that He might be the "blessedness and reward" of His covenant people.

In considering how God undertook this covenantal work, one confronts three different covenantal entities. If these covenantal entities are arranged in the

---

28. What follows in this chapter is a brief sketch of covenant theology. The biblical bases for these assertions will be detailed in subsequent chapters.

29. WCF 7.1.

order in which they appear as one moves along a "timeline" from "pre-creation" eternity all the way to the end of the age, they are the *pactum salutis* (literally, covenant of salvation), the covenant of works, and the covenant of grace.

First, one encounters the *pactum salutis*, which sometimes is called either the covenant of redemption or the counsel of peace. This *pactum salutis* (or, *pactum*, for short) is an eternal, intra-Trinitarian covenant wherein God the Father covenanted to give the elect to the Son, the Son covenanted to purchase the elect's redemption, and the Spirit covenanted to seal the redemption that the Son had purchased to the elect whom the Father had given. This covenant, clearly, is an intra-Trinitarian covenant—it is a covenant among the three persons of the Trinity. And it also is eternal. It occurred before the commencement of time, before the foundation of the earth. The *pactum* is an eternal, intra-Trinitarian covenant in which the elect are chosen and their redemption is guaranteed by the Son.

The next divine covenant to occur as one moves from pre-creation eternity to the end of the age is the covenant of works. This covenant sometimes is called the covenant of life, or the covenant of creation, but the common name of the covenant of works is preferable for reasons that will be detailed later. The covenant of works is described very succinctly in section 2 of chapter 7 of the Westminster Confession, which states, "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."[30] The covenant of works is the relationship between God and humanity that existed during humanity's innocence in the garden of Eden. Among other things, this covenant of works stipulated that Adam, Eve, and all of their posterity were not to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. As God told Adam, in the day that he ate of that tree, he would surely die. This was one obligation for humankind in the covenant of works; this was a parameter around humanity's relationship with God—that they were not to eat of the fruit of the specified tree. If Adam violated the covenant by eating of that tree, he would die. This clear prohibition also has a very evident implication. If Adam did not eat of the tree, he would live. Forever. In this covenant of works, then, God was bridging the ontological gap between creator and creature. God is infinite and humanity is finite, but by covenant, God entered into a relationship with His creature to provide a way whereby finite humanity could obtain eternal life. That way by which eternal life could be had was by "perfect and personal obedience," as

---

30. WCF 7.2.

the confession says. The covenant of works, then, is the covenant wherein God condescends to provide a way whereby man's perfect obedience will bring eternal life to finite creatures.

Adam, of course, did not fare so well in this covenant of works. Adam sinned and fell and thus, moving from pre-creation eternity to the end of the age, one next encounters the covenant of grace. In the covenant of works, God bridged the ontological divide between creator and creature; in the covenant of grace, God overcomes the infinitely greater moral chasm between the Holy God and sinful human beings. In this covenant of grace, Jesus Christ plays a critical role. Viewed in different aspects of His work, Jesus is the mediator, the representative, and the covenant head for the elect in the covenant of grace. Because Adam broke the covenant of works, all of his posterity stands under two separate burdens. First, since Adam brought sin on all humankind, all people are due the wages of sin. They deserve death. And Christ, in the covenant of grace, suffers that death in the place of the elect. He suffers the penalty of the covenant of works for those who had been given to Him. This sometimes is called the passive obedience of Christ. He passively submits Himself to the curse of the covenant of works for His people.

Christ removing the burden of the curse of the covenant of works from His people is wondrous, but it still leaves one burden resting on His people. Even had the elect not sinned, both in Adam and in their own actions, they still would have had to render "perfect and personal obedience" in order to keep the covenant of works and, through God's condescending covenant, to obtain eternal life as finite creatures. In the covenant of grace, Christ also renders this perfect and personal obedience in the elect's place. He keeps the law for them. This often is called the active obedience of Christ, as He actively keeps the law and renders obedience for His people. In the covenant of grace, the Son renders His passive obedience to absorb the curse of the covenant of works for His elect, and He also renders His active obedience to obtain the blessings of the covenant of works for those same elect. In this, Christ fully justifies His people, both winning the pardon of their sin and obtaining the righteousness that is given to them.[31]

Those who criticize covenant theology sometimes will say that the covenant of grace is little more than Jesus keeping the covenant of works for His people. If one sheds all of the negative caricatures that often are packed into that

---

31. Hugh Martin, *The Atonement: In Its Relations to the Covenant, the Priesthood, the Intercession of Our Lord* (Edinburgh: James Gemmell, 1882), 46–47.

comment, it actually is pretty true.[32] In the covenant of grace, God the Son pursues the eternal, unchanging purpose of God to bring His people to Himself. And He does it by destroying both the moral chasm between the Holy God and wicked sinners through His atoning death, and the ontological chasm between the infinite God and finite creatures through a righteousness that provides the perfect and personal obedience that God had required in the covenant of works. The Son purchases these things through His active and passive obedience and the Spirit applies them to the hearts of the elect. That is the covenant of grace. At its consummation, the eternal, unchanging purpose of God has been met. He has a people not only forgiven, but also made righteous and fit to be in His presence. Working through covenant, God has achieved His eternal purpose.

Within this broader covenant of grace, there are several distinct covenantal administrations. These covenantal administrations are, essentially, individual, distinct, yet interrelated covenants that God made, in history, with different individuals or groups. These different covenantal administrations of the covenant of grace include the protoevangelium, the promise God made to Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:15; the covenant with Noah; the covenant with Abraham and his seed after him; the covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai or the Mosaic covenant, as it often is called; the covenant with David; and the new covenant that is foretold by the prophets and then inaugurated in Jesus Christ. Each of these different covenantal administrations is part of the larger, overarching covenant of grace. God is bringing His ultimate purpose to pass through these individual covenants and through the movement from one to the next.

Of course, there are differences between the various covenantal administrations. Some place more emphasis on promise and faith; some place more emphasis on obedience and sin. No two covenantal administrations are identical—it would be pointless to have different administrations if they all were the same—but all of them, and each of them together, work as one to achieve God's eternal purpose.

The different covenantal administrations are all unique, all distinct, all necessary, yet they all form an organic whole. They all find their purpose in the larger, overarching covenant of grace. It can be helpful, on this point, to view the covenant of grace as a big jigsaw puzzle and each of the covenantal

---

32. G. K. Beale even speaks of the new covenant as the "republication" of God's covenant with Adam, only with Christ. G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 918 and n39; Brandon D. Crowe, *The Last Adam: A Theology of the Obedient Life of Jesus in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 67–81; Macleod, *A Faith to Live By*, 122.

administrations as one of the puzzle pieces. Each of the puzzle pieces is its own piece. You can hold it in your hand. It has its own little notches and pegs. It is distinct from all of the other puzzle pieces. But it finds its purpose by doing what it was designed to do—not magnifying its distinctiveness, but rather fitting into the piece next to it, and having the next piece fit into it, as all of the pieces together reveal the picture of the puzzle. All of the covenantal administrations together reveal the overall picture of the covenant of grace. As God moves from one covenantal administration to the next, it is as if He is showing His people the next piece of the puzzle, fitting that piece into the previously placed piece, and thereby disclosing a little bit more of the splendorous picture of His covenant of grace. Each piece is important, but it is important, most fundamentally, for its fitting into, and its filling out of, the whole. There is diversity, but it always is within, and for the purpose of, a larger unity. That is the covenant of grace—a diversity of covenantal administrations divinely ordered to bring the people of God to God.

Both historically and in the present day, there are some who would differ from this broad sketch of covenant theology at certain points. In considering the various covenants in more detail, these diverse opinions will be evaluated. For the present, however, this represents a general map that can be followed in seeking to understand both the broad sweep and the focused detail of covenant theology.

Summary

Covenant theology is a vast topic enclosing all of God's revelation and all of His redeeming work, but its basic contours are easily grasped. A covenant is a binding relationship between parties that involves both blessings and obligations. And covenant theology is the study of God's eternal, unchanging purpose to bring a people to Himself through precisely such a covenantal relationship. That redeeming purpose unfolds throughout divine revelation and redemptive history, all the way from the eternal, intra-Trinitarian counsels to the consummation of history in the new heavens and the new earth. By studying that covenantal purpose and work in more detail, God's people are able to understand better both who their God is and what He is doing through the ages.[33] It is little wonder, then, that covenant theology has been a source of Christian reflection and thought throughout the generations, and this history of doctrinal development will be explored in the next chapter.

---

33. Beale, *New Testament Biblical Theology*, 918.

A History of Covenant Theology

The introduction concluded with a statement that would raise eyebrows in certain settings. In the opinion of some scholars, covenant theology did not originate until the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century.[1] To claim, then, that covenant theology has been a source of Christian thought since the earliest days of the New Testament church would be preposterous. However, assigning such a late date to the advent of covenant theology simply is inaccurate. Even from the time of Jesus's own earthly ministry, the Christian church has been doing covenant theology.

Covenant Theology in the New Testament Scriptures

Here, one has to consider a very specific question: Do Jesus and the apostles after Him use covenant theology? This is different from the matter of using covenant theology to understand Jesus, His work, and the writings of the apostles. This is the matter of whether Jesus and the apostles used covenant theology themselves to understand and explain what God had been doing previously and what He was doing in their own day. When this very specific question is placed before the New Testament, the answer is a resounding "yes." Jesus and the apostles repeatedly used covenant theology to understand and explain what God had done and what He was doing.

In the gospel narratives, Jesus's use of covenant theology is seen most poignantly in the solemnity of the Last Supper. At that sacred meal, as Jesus offered the cup to His disciples, what did He say to them? "This is My blood of the new covenant (*diathēkē*), which is shed for many" (Mark 14:24). On the cusp of His betrayal and crucifixion, when the disciples needed, more than anything else, to be strengthened in their faith, Jesus used the language of the

---

1. E.g., D. A. Weir, *The Origins of the Federal Theology in Sixteenth-Century Reformation Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990).

new covenant to help them begin to understand what was about to unfold. In His own explanation of the redeeming work that He was about to complete, Jesus used covenant theology as His paradigm.

After His resurrection, Jesus continued to teach His disciples that His redeeming work was the culmination of God's ongoing purpose. As Jesus taught, all of God's previous revelation and work in the Old Testament had been revealing Jesus and preparing God's people for Him (Luke 24:13–27). This emphasis on covenant theology and its categories evidently made an impression on the men learning from Jesus, because in the early days of the apostolic church, they used precisely the same categories to spread the gospel to others. In Acts 1, after Christ's ascension, the apostles leaned on the Old Testament both to understand what was occurring and to lead them forward in uncertain days. In Acts 1, Peter quotes from Psalms 69 and 109 both to explain Judas's treachery and to provide counsel on how to proceed in the traitor's absence. The course suggested by Psalm 109 is then followed, as the disciples cast lots to determine the new twelfth apostle, who would represent the new twelfth "tribe" of New Testament Israel. Both in their words and in their actions, the apostles manifested a self-conscious sense that they stood in unbroken continuity with the Old Testament. What God had been doing in Old Testament Israel, He now was doing in the Christian church. The necessary presupposition for any of these actions was the belief that God had one, eternal purpose of redemption and the New Testament church was firmly in the stream of that purpose.

This same sense of covenantal continuity is very striking in Peter's Pentecost sermon in Acts 2. In Acts 2:30–31, Peter declares that the covenantal promises made to David spoke of Jesus. Peter even goes so far as to say that in those promises given to David, David saw the resurrected Christ! From the very earliest of days, the apostles saw an unwavering continuity to God's work and they saw that continuity through God's covenant with His people. Certainly, the apostles were not using the same terminology that theologians of the Reformation era would use, but they were doing covenant theology nonetheless.

In the New Testament epistles, the prominence of covenant (*diathēkē*) only increases. The apostle Paul is perhaps foremost in this use of covenant concepts. In his epistles, Paul explains redemption based on the comparative covenantal headships of Adam and Christ (Romans 5); he treats Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church as one continuous entity (1 Corinthians 10); he compares the relative glory of the old covenant and the new covenant (2 Corinthians 3); he addresses the rich relationship of Abraham, Moses, and Christ

(Galatians 3–4); he testifies that Jesus is the fulfillment of every promise God has made to His people (2 Cor. 1:20); and he explains how baptism relates to circumcision (Colossians 2). Most often, these texts are considered as theologians seek to understand and formulate covenant theology. However, their centrality to present-day theology easily obscures a very basic observation. In each of these instances, Paul himself, writing under inspiration, is using covenant theology and its categories to explain the redeeming work of God. People might disagree over exactly what Paul is saying in Galatians 3–4, but what is indisputably obvious is that, whatever he is saying, Paul is saying it through the paradigm of covenant theology. Certainly, there is much work to be done to determine the content and contours of Paul's inspired covenant theology so that we can conform our own covenantal theology to that true standard, but the elemental fact remains that Paul was doing covenant theology. Paul was a covenant theologian.

The same could be said about many of the New Testament authors, perhaps most especially the author of the epistle to the Hebrews, who gives very detailed argumentation about the covenant and the movement from the old covenant to the new covenant in Hebrews 8–10, but the point need not be belabored. Even prior to the detailed consideration of these passages in the following chapters, it is evident that covenant theology begins in the Scriptures. The Reformers were not the first men to do covenant theology. Paul was doing covenant theology. Jesus was doing covenant theology.

Covenant Theology in the Postapostolic Church

In the postapostolic church (the church in the generations following the death of the apostles), covenant theology continued to play a crucial role in the church's understanding of its message and even in its evangelism.[2] The church in this era faced two primary doctrinal challenges. First, the Christian church had to articulate clearly its relationship to the Judaism of the Old Testament. Christians claimed to be worshiping the God of Abraham, yet Jewish religious

---

2. For more on covenant theology in this era, see J. Ligon Duncan, "The Covenant Idea in Ante-Nicene Theology" (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 1995); J. Ligon Duncan, "Covenant in the Early Church," in *CT*, 291–310; Peter Golding, *Covenant Theology: The Key of Theology in Reformed Thought and Tradition* (Fearn, U.K.: Christian Focus, 2004), 13–14; Everett Ferguson, "The Covenant Idea in the Second Century," in *Texts and Testaments: Critical Essays on the Bible and Early Church Fathers*, ed. W. Eugene March (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1980), 135–62; and Andrew A. Woolsey, *Unity and Continuity in Covenantal Thought: A Study in the Reformed Tradition to the Westminster Assembly* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 161–83.