

Lesson 49: Chapter 7: Paragraph 1: An Overview of the Covenants

How can people in the OT be saved, if Jesus only died in the NT? Why do we die? Why are we sinners? Why is there so much suffering in the world? Should we baptize babies like children were circumcised in the OT? Is it the task of God's people to establish Christian nationalism? Is Adam's original task of having dominion back in the hands of the church and to be married to the Great Commission? If God saves me by grace do I keep myself saved by works? The answers to these questions and so many more will be determined by your understanding of covenant theology. You will have gleaned from the questions that matters of salvation, ecclesiology, the church's relationship to culture, eschatology, hamartiology, creation and so much more are intimately connected to the biblical doctrine of the covenants. Sadly many in the church do not even think about covenant theology, do not see it as a framework that makes intelligible all the different parts of the progressive unfolding plan of God as they are revealed in the Bible.

We come now to the wonderful doctrine of the Covenant of Grace in chapter 7. The 1689 has made some changes to the WCF and Savoy's version of this chapter for important reasons. It only has three chapters to the WCF's 6. It has removed the second paragraph talking about the covenant of works. This is not because it denies the CoW but because the title is in the singular and instead develops various aspects of the CoG. The CoW was dealt with in chapter 6 and reappears in 19-20. This has led some to think that Reformed Baptists rejected the CoW, but this is not the case. Paragraph 4 was also removed as it is a technical point about CoG often being called a Testament in the NT. Paragraphs 5-6 are radically changed because the WCF stresses how the NT and the OT are essentially the same thing but with different signs and sacraments, where the 1689 sees more development than continuity between the OT and the NT. This chapter on the covenant of grace lays a foundation for the following chapters in the confession. Chapter 8 will speak about Christ the mediator of the CoG; 10-18 show the salvation that we receive in the CoG, 19 shows the relationship of law to the CoG, etc.

My purpose today is not to begin unpacking the chapter on the covenant but rather to give you a top view of the covenantal structure of God's plan of Redemption. I want to lay out the chronology of God's plan showing how the different kinds of covenants spoken of in the Bible and make intelligible all the different twists and turns, while unifying it in one plan of salvation. Here are a few key ideas that we need going into it. Firstly, what is a covenant? Chris Caughey in his book *The Tale of Two Adams* stresses the need for a definition that can encompass all the covenants in the Bible. The main covenants being the CoR; the CoW; the CoG, the CoG is made up of a number of covenants which include the Abrahamic; the Mosaic; the Davidic and comes to a climax in the New Covenant. And then there is also the Noahic Covenant which is what we call a common grace covenant. You can see that there are different types of covenants here, there are covenants between God and non-sinners, e.g. the CoR and the CoW; there are covenants between God and sinners, e.g. the Abrahamic and the Mosaic; then there is the Noahic covenant which is a covenant with creation. What is a definition of covenant that will encompass all these dynamics? Pat Abendroth in his new book *Covenant Theology* gives a definition. After looking at various covenants in the bible and examining their characteristics he writes, 'A covenant is a solemn agreement. Such an agreement is between two or more parties and may be accompanied by signs

and ceremonies. Swearing and oaths underline the solemnity of covenants. This is sometimes underscored by the use of blood. But simply put, a covenant is a solemn agreement.”¹ A broad definition is necessary to encompass the differing types.

There have been some really problematic definitions. For example John Murray who was self-consciously seeking to reform covenant theology in light of the contemporary challenges of dispensationalism drifted from the main stream definition. He says, ‘A Covenant is a sovereign administration of grace and promise.’ Is every covenant an administration of grace? If God’s grace is His kindness to the sinful in providing salvation, how does this work with Adam who was not a sinner? Or how does this work with Christ who was sinless? If we want to emphasize that God is giving an undeserved kindness to sinless creatures by entering into an agreement with them, this may sound like grace, but we must distinguish between undeserved goodness and gospel grace as some of the Puritans did. John Murray laid the foundation for what is called monocovenantalism, where every covenant becomes a mix of law and grace. Murray, with a clack of clarification muddled the waters. By allowing grace into legal covenants like the CoW; this laid the foundation for law flowing into gracious covenants. This made way for John Murray’s most infamous student, Norman Shepherd. Shepherd was a one-time professor at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia but had to be removed for his denial of sola fide. He taught that we are saved by the co-instrumentality of faith and repentance not faith alone, he spoke of an obedient faith in a way that faith is not the empty hands that we receive the gift of Christ’s righteousness, but rather a redefined faith that made obedience integral to its instrumentality. Here is his definition of covenant, ‘a divinely established relationship of union and communion between God and his people in the bonds of mutual love and faithfulness.’ All of God’s covenants with man depend on human faithfulness, that is a soft way of saying, you get in by grace and you keep yourself in by your faithfulness.

When it comes to covenant theology, as it pertains to salvation there are only two types of covenants, works or law based covenants, and grace based covenants. Outside of the realm of salvation there are all sorts of political covenants as well as the Noahic Covenant. As we go through the various covenants you need to be asking, is this a works covenant or is this a gracious covenant? Is this a covenant where requires man to work to win a reward and who will be judged if he fails; or is this a covenant where God fulfills the requirements on our behalf and the benefits of the covenant are a gift and not an earned wage? Another way of asking the same question is to ask is the covenant unilateral or bilateral?

Let me give a brief sketch then of redemptive history dividing it up between the three major covenants, of Redemption, works and grace.

CoR: Before Creation God planned our salvation. The Bible reveals that in eternity God has predetermined to save a people in Christ, Eph. 1:4, ‘even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will.’ We do not have any

¹ — Covenant Theology by Patrick Abendroth
<https://a.co/7LaecWL>

eye witnesses to this event, but there are verses where various aspects of this act of God is revealed to us. In Jesus High Priestly prayer in John 17:4 Jesus reveals that He as the Son was given a work to do, we know this to be the work of saving God's people, the elect, 'I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do.' Jesus incarnation, being born under the law, being baptized to fulfil all righteousness, His life and death on our behalf was a work given by the Father to the Son to do as our representative. The whole of human history is the unfolding of God's plan from eternity, His agreement for the Son who would come and by His work save His elect. John 6:37-40; Luke 22:29-30; The Bible notes the outworking of this plan in the progress of God's saving acts and covenants, paragraph 3 spells this out, note especially the reference to the 'eternal counsel.' Speaking about the Covenant of Grace it says: 'This covenant is revealed in the gospel; first of all to Adam in the promise of salvation by the seed of the woman, and afterwards by farther steps, until the full discovery thereof was completed in the New Testament; and it is founded in that eternal covenant transaction that was between the Father and the Son about the redemption of the elect; and it is alone by the grace of this covenant that all the posterity of fallen Adam that ever were saved did obtain life and blessed immortality, man being now utterly incapable of acceptance with God upon those terms on which Adam stood in his state of innocency.' I have included in my diagram the CoR that is in eternity; and I have put the CoG over the whole of human history showing how any who are saved are saved by this CoG. This is not the place for us to dig deeply into a full presentation of the CoR but let it be stated that it is a legally oriented covenant, in other words, though God condescends to have dealings with His creatures, the Son agrees to do a 'work' that the Father has given Him. The Eternal Son is not a sinner who needs gospel grace extended to Him.

Secondly, we have on our diagram the CoW. We have spoken before about some have have called this bilateral arrangement between Adam and God the Edenic Administration; the Covenant of Nature or the Covenant of Creation. We have stated that we think 'works' best describes the central principle. Adam is sinless and has not been brought into this covenant by gospel grace. The confession states that it is a condescension on God's part because creatures are so much lower than God, but it is not technically by grace. Adam is put under a law where if he disobeys he dies; if he obeys he will be rewarded. We have explored at length the idea of Adam as a federal head, a legal head, a representative whose actions were done as a public person on behalf of others. And we have emphasized that Paul sees Adam's disobedience as the root of both original imputed guilt and our inherent corruption. If Adam had obeyed he would have passed the probation which consisted in overcoming the serpent just as Jesus did in the wilderness. This would have been followed by a time of subduing the earth, which would end in all of Creation entering into God's Sabbath Rest and a New Creation. Adam failed leaving the promise of entering into God's rest unattained. He plunged us into sin. At this point God could have acted justly and wiped out the human race but instead He instituted the CoG.

Let us say a word about merit, for there are many who look at this situation where Adam has to work for reward and they grow concerned because it sounds like the Roman Catholic doctrine of Condign merit, where we put God in our debt by our good deeds. There was a special distinction made where the Puritans would talk about pactum merit, or merit that agrees with the demands of the covenant. The obedience of Adam in defeating the serpent truly is not equal to God giving access to Himself and His treasures for all eternity, but according to

the terms of the covenant, Adam would receive the stated terms by fulfilling the stated requirements. Paragraph 1 is concerned to spell this out, 'The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience to him as their creator, yet they could never have attained the reward of life but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant.' Adam even though sinless did not oblige God to enter into a covenant of works with him; nor would any acts that he, even as a sinless man, be enough to merit what God offers in the CoW, it is only because God is so good and generous and condescended to make it so, that the CoW is possible.

Thirdly we come to the Covenant of Grace. Please note that all the covenants of the Bible either happen in the context of the CoG, the Noahic; or are developments of the CoG. Look at the first part of paragraph 3, 'This covenant is revealed in the gospel; first of all to Adam in the promise of salvation by the seed of the woman, and afterwards by farther steps, until the full discovery thereof was completed in the New Testament.' You will notice that the CoG begins with the promise to Adam and Eve, Gen. 3:15, 'I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.' God is preaching the gospel to the devil, revealing that He has a plan to defeat satan where Adam did not. He will do this through a human child born to Adam's fallen race who will overcome satan, while being mortally wounded by him. This promise is then developed by further steps and all the other covenants on this time line develop it in specific ways. It has been pointed out that there is an organic unity to the covenants, that these plural covenants develop this singular promise. Paul says as much in Eph. 2:12, 'remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.'

From Gen. 3:15 until the second coming, any person who ever gets saved is not saved by works like Adam in Eden, we cannot save ourselves by our works, we need to be saved by God's grace. The ordinary way of God working salvation in the NT is present in the OT. Sinners cannot be saved apart from the Holy Spirit, apart from regeneration, they were saved by the Spirit working through the word to produce faith in the provision of God's mercy. Christ was the object of their faith though He was presented in types, shadows, prophecies and promises. It says as much in the last part of paragraph 3, 'and it is alone by the grace of this covenant that all the posterity of fallen Adam that ever were saved did obtain life and blessed immortality, man being now utterly incapable of acceptance with God upon those terms on which Adam stood in his state of innocency.' The example of Abraham being saved by faith is a proof-text, Rom. 4:1-2, 'What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? ² For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.' Jesus says that Abraham was saved, John 8:56, 'Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.' David spoke about and was saved by grace through faith, Rom. 4:6-8, 'just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin." They could not have pleased God apart from faith, Heb. 11:6, 'And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.' They died in faith, v13, 'These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but

having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.’ By the Spirit the OT saints did not have all the truth that we have in the NT but they had a lot, listen to Job’s faith, 19:25-26, ‘For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God.’ He is confessing a living Savior, he describes as a Redeemer; that He will conquer at the end of history standing on the earth; that though he die and his body be destroyed, death will not have the last word he will be resurrected bodily and be in the presence of God.

Part Two

This brings us next to the Noahic Covenant: Unlike the other Covenants that make up the CoG, the Noahic Covenant is made with creation not God’s people. We have to remember that after Adam and Eve fell God did not wipe the slate clean and start again, God related to human beings and the world in a way different in the garden. In the Garden, the will of the Lord was the law of the land, and the sinner must die. Sin cannot be tolerated in the presence of God. The sinners received the penalty and were driven out lest they be extinguished. Instead of God judging the world in a judgment day there was a stay of execution. This stay of execution was for the whole of the creation to not be destroyed but to enjoy a level of stability and blessing, this we call common grace. God tolerated Cain and his ungodly offspring to live on the earth, just as God tolerates sinners in His creation today. This is by grace. Our ability to marry, raise families, work, enjoy the seasons, experience the blessings of our natural abilities in music, science, art, etc. are all undeserved gifts and blessings. God has made a promise to give a Savior in the future, in order for that Savior to arrive, in order for God to fulfil the various parts of His plan that will result in that Savior arriving God suspends the justice He would have applied in Eden. He allows sinners and the godly to live side by side, He maintains the order of His creation though it is impacted by the fall.