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A Nobody Trying to Tell Everybody About Somebody,

Pastor Mark Driscoll

Understanding God's Covenants Research Brief

From Pastor Mark Driscoll

Prepared by a research team

Introduction to Covenants

Being God's people is a repeated theme throughout both testaments: "I will live among them and walk among them, and I will be their God and they will be my people" (Lev. 26:12; Jer. 32:38; Eze. 37:27). The Christian story begins with creation in harmony, unity, and peace; and it ends with a restored creation. In between these two "book-ends" is the drama of redemption. And the covenants are major dimensions (or acts) of this drama. The goal is to see the work and person of Christ in light of the Old Testament and to highlight aspects that we have possibly overlooked. Christ's work is intimately related to and fulfills each of the 5 covenants (with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David) that God initiated in the Old Testament. New dimensions are brought to light when the Christ's covenant is understood in the context of the previous covenants. Covenants are about God's activity and intention to redeem us, and the covenants tell us about ourselves—our condition, our brokenness, our dignity, our role as images of God, our suffering, and our calling.

God entered into covenantal relationships with his people. Explicit references may be found of a divine covenant established with Noah (Gen 6:18), Abraham (Gen 15:18), Israel (Exod 24:8), and David (Ps 89:3). Israel's prophets anticipated the coming of a "new covenant" (Jer 31:31), and Christ himself spoke of the last supper in covenantal language (Luke 22:20).

The word for covenant is *berith* in Hebrew and *dialtheke* in Greek. A covenant is *a bond in blood that is sovereignly administered* (O. Palmer Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*). When God enters into a covenantal relationship with humanity, God sovereignly institutes a life-and-death bond.

1. A bond—This implies relationship. It commits people to one another, God to God's people, and people to God. Oaths, promises, and signs accompany the bond or commitment.
2. A bond in blood—There is an ultimacy or intensity in the covenant. By initiating covenants, God never enters into the relationship casually or informally. Covenant relationship signifies the life-and-death intensity of the bond. This intensity is seen in all three types of covenants—human to human (Gen 21:27 and 32, 2 Sam 3:12,13), God to human (Abraham- Gen 15:18, Moses- Exod 24:8, Deut 5:2, David- 2 Chron 21:7, Ps 89:3, the New Covenant- Jer 31:31, Ezek 37:26), human to God (2 Kings 11:17, 2 Kings 23:3, 2 Chron 29:10). The establishment of a covenant is called "cutting a covenant." It usually entails the slaughter of an animal. This symbolizes or represents the curse that the covenant maker calls down upon himself or herself if they should violate the commitment that was made.
3. A bond in blood sovereignly administered—There is a unilateral form of covenantal establishment. There is no bargaining, bartering, or contract negotiations. The sovereign lord of heaven and earth dictates the terms of God's covenants. It is God's covenant in that it is conceived, devised, determined, established, confirmed, and dispensed by God Himself, "Behold, I am establishing my covenant with you."

Other things about covenants (from John Murray essay, which accompanies this brief):

1. Unity of covenant structure—Each covenant builds on the previous covenant. God made a covenant with God's people and their "seed." The promise was genealogical.

2. Unity of covenant theme—"I shall be your God and you shall be my people." It is interesting that Jesus is called Immanuel, which means "God with us." (Gen 17:7, Exod 6:6-7, Exod 19:4-5, Lev 11:45, Deut 4:20, Deut 29:13, 2 Chron 23:16, Zech 2:11, Zech 8:8, Ezek 34:24, 2 Cor 6:16). God does this by actually dwelling with God's people in tabernacle, temple, Christ, the church, and eventually heaven. Christ is the embodiment of God's desire to dwell among God's people. (Exod 25:8, Exod 29:42-45, Lev 26:9-13, Ezek 37:26-28, John 1:14, Eph 2:21, Rev 7:15, Rev 21:3)
3. Diversity of covenants is important. There is a difference between the OT covenants and Christ's covenant. The difference is that Christ takes what is in the OT covenants to another level. He intensifies it! Christ's covenant is the finally stage in the process from seed to full grown tree. The roots, the trunk, the branches, and the leaves are all different, but they are all an aspect of the tree.
4. Covenants are universal in scope. A covenant is not only with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, but with their seed after him and with every living creature. This places in obvious relief the fact that it affects for good even those who do not have any intelligent understanding of its meaning. The covenant operates for good to such an extent that its benefits are not contingent upon intelligent appreciation of the covenant or of the benefits which are dispensed in terms of it.
5. It is an unconditional covenant. This feature is, of course, co-ordinate with the fact that intelligent understanding is not indispensable to the reception of its benefits. But the particular consideration now in view is that no commandment is appended which could be construed as the condition upon which the promise is to be fulfilled. And there is not the slightest suggestion to the effect that the covenant could be annulled by human unfaithfulness or its blessing forfeited by unbelief; the thought of breaking the covenant is inconceivable. The confirmation given is to the opposite effect. In a word, the promise is unconditional.
6. The covenant is intensely and pervasively monergistic. Nothing exhibits this more clearly than the fact that the sign attached to attest and seal the divine faithfulness and the irrevocability of God's promise is one produced by conditions over which God alone has control and in connection with which there is rigid exclusion of human co-operation. The sign is not an action instituted by God and performed by man at the divine behest. It is one in which there is no human agency whatsoever.
7. Covenants are everlasting. The perpetuity is bound up with its divinely unilateral and monergistic character. It is because it is divine in its origin, administration, establishment, and confirmation that it can be perpetual.

God makes six major covenants in the Bible

1. Adam and Eve (Genesis 1:26-2:3)
2. Noah and his family (Genesis 9:8-17)
3. Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 12:1-3; 17:1-14; 22:16-18)
4. Moses and the Israelites (Exodus 19:5-6; 3:4-10; 6:7)
5. David and the Kingdom of Israel (2 Samuel 7:8-19)
6. Jesus and the Church (Matthew 26:28; 16:17-19)

For each of these covenants, it is helpful to highlight five special features (see Scott Hahn, *A Father Who Keeps His Promises: God's Covenant Love in Scripture*):

- i. the covenant mediator (the person God makes the covenant with) and his covenant role (whom the mediator represents);
- ii. the blessings promised in the covenant;
- iii. the conditions (or curses) of the covenant;
- iv. the "sign" by which the covenant will be celebrated and remembered.
- v. the "form" that God's family takes as a result of the covenant.

The Covenant with Adam (Genesis 1:26-2:3)

The word "covenant" isn't used, but the story of Adam and Eve is told in "covenantal" language. Adam is the *covenant mediator* in his *role* as husband. God promises *blessings*—that their union will be fruitful and their offspring will fill the earth and rule over it. God establishes a *sign* by which the covenant will be remembered and celebrated—the Sabbath, the seventh day of rest. And God imposes one *condition* that they must keep to fulfill their obligation under the covenant—that they not eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. And God attaches a curse for disobedience—that they will surely die. By this covenant, God's family assumes the *form* of the marriage bond between husband and wife.

The Covenant with Noah (Genesis 9:8-17)

The word "covenant" is used in the case of Noah, as God promises never again to destroy the world by flood. The covenant is made with all humanity, through the *mediator*, Noah, in his *role* as the father of his family. The covenant includes *blessings* to Noah and his family (that they will be fruitful and fill the earth) and *conditions* that must be obeyed (not to drink the blood of any animals, not to shed human blood). The *sign* of the covenant is the rainbow in the sky. By this covenant, God's people assume the *form* of a domestic household, an extended family.

The Covenant with Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3; 17:1-14; 22:16-18)

God makes God swears to give Abraham a great land and to bless his descendants, who will become a great nation. God makes the covenant with the *mediator* Abraham in his representative *role* as chieftain. God promises the *blessings* of land and great nationhood for his descendants, and through them to bless all the nations of the earth. The *sign* of the covenant is the mark of circumcision. Circumcision is also the *condition* that Abraham and his descendants must obey in order to keep the covenant. By this covenant, God's family is takes a "tribal" *form*.

The Covenant with Moses (Exodus 19:5-6; 3:4-10; 6:7)

By this covenant, made with the *mediator* Moses in his representative *role* as the judge and liberator of Israel, God swears to be Israel's God and Israel swears to worship no other but the Lord God alone. The *blessings* promised are that they will be God's precious and chosen people. The *conditions* of the covenant are that they must keep God's Law and commandments.

The covenant *sign* is the Passover, which each year commemorates Israel's birth as a nation. By this covenant, God's family assumes the *form* of a "holy nation, a kingdom of priests."

The Covenant with David (2 Samuel 7:8-19)

God promises to establish the *mediator* David's "house" or kingdom forever, through David's heir, who will also build a temple to God's name. To David in his *role* as king, God promises to make David's son His son, to punish him if he does wrong but never take away his royal throne. "Your house and you kingdom shall endure forever" and through the *blessings* of this kingdom God promises to give wisdom to all the nations. The *sign* of the covenant will be the throne and Temple to be built by David's son, Solomon. By this covenant, God's family grows to take the *form* of a royal empire, a national kingdom.

The New Covenant of Jesus (Matthew 26:28; 16:17-19)

The sixth and final covenant is made by the *mediator* Jesus, who by His Cross and Resurrection assumes the *role* of royal high priest and fulfills all the promises God made in the previous covenants. The prophets, especially Isaiah and Jeremiah, had taught Israel to hope for a Messiah who would bring "a new covenant," through which God's law would be written on men's and women's hearts (see Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 8:8-12). The *conditions* of the covenant are that men and women believe in Jesus, be baptized, eat and drink His flesh and blood in remembrance at communion, and live by all that He taught. The Lord's Supper is the *sign* of the New Covenant. By this covenant, God establishes His family in its final *form* as a universal (*katholicos* or 'catholic' in Greek) worldwide kingdom, which Jesus calls His Church.

***Hesed* as God's Covenant Love and Loyalty**

The one God who made the world has acted in sovereign love to call out a people for himself, a people through whom he is already at work to anticipate his final purpose of reconciling things to himself, things in heaven and things on earth (Ephesians 1.10). The notion of God calling a people to be his own, a people through whom he will advance his ultimate purposes for the world, did not begin with Jesus. Jesus himself speaks of the time being fulfilled, and his message and ministry look back to the purposes of God in, through and for his people Israel.

A key term which emerges from much Jewish and Christian writings and which brings into sharp focus this whole understanding of God and God's purposes is covenant. God established covenants (*berit*) with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David. The purpose of these covenants was to address the problem of the human race and so of the entire created order. Across the Old Testament is echoed the claim that God has in principle solved that problem with the establishment of his covenants. The covenants are the story of God's uncaused, gracious and generous love: God is under no obligation to rescue humans, and the world, from their plight, but chooses to do so and takes the initiative to bring it about. As the story develops throughout the Old Testament this covenant love is referred to in various terms, but the main one is *hesed*.

According to *Vine's Expository Dictionary*, "The entire history of God's covenantal relationship with Israel can be summarized in terms of *hesed*."

Hesed is God’s lovingkindness—the consistent, ever-faithful, relentless, constantly-pursuing, lavish, extravagant, unrestrained, one-way love of God. It is often translated as covenant love, loving kindness, mercy, steadfast love, loyal love, devotion, commitment, or reliability. *Hesed* turns up regularly in the Old Testament, particularly in the Psalms. It is typically translated “love” and sometimes translated as “mercy” (Psalm 23:6). However, *hesed* has a much narrower definition than the English term “love” conveys. In the Hebrew Scriptures, *hesed* refers to a sort of love that has been promised and is owed—covenant love, that is—as in Hosea 1:1: “When Israel was a child, I loved him and out of Egypt I called my son.” Covenant love is the love God promised to give to his covenant people, and which they in turn were to respond with in kind, loving God with all their hearts, minds and strength. *Hesed* does not suggest some kind of generic love of everyone.

Malachi 1:1-5 is a clear presentation of *hesed*. Malachi opens with the declaration of the word of Yahweh: “I have loved you.” This affirmation of God’s choice of and affection for the nation provides a powerful beginning to the message to be given. On the one hand, it will soften the tone of the messages—they will be delivered in love, but on the other hand it will underscore the nation’s ingratitude.

The people were not immediately convinced of this declaration; to them, because of their state of spiritual rebellion, it sounded good but was not convincing, not convincing because things had not worked out to their satisfaction. “How have you loved us?” they asked. And the prophet’s response reminded them of their status as the chosen people of God: “Was not Esau Jacob’s brother?” Yahweh says. “Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau have I hated.” The point that Malachi was making to his audience was that their existence as the people of God was the clearest evidence of the love of God. God chose the Israelites to be his kingdom of priests in the world. He gave them the Scriptures, the temple, the priests, the prophets, the covenants, and the Messiah. And His love for them was an everlasting love—even though they failed Him again and again, He still retained His covenant with them.

Not only did God choose Israel (“Jacob”), but He also cared for the Israelites whenever they were in trouble. The simple fact was that Israel was protected down through the ages. This should have told Malachi’s audience that the love of God was genuine. Not only had God protected Israel from the treatment they received from Edom, He also restored Israel to her land and left the mountains of Edom a wasteland. This too was a clear demonstration of God’s love for his people.

Rabbi Harold M. Kamsler, *Hesed— Mercy or Loyalty?*

[Published in *The Jewish Bible Quarterly*, Vol. XXVII:3.]

Rabbi Kamsler opens his article with a reference to Psalm 136:1, a Psalm that is very familiar to both Jews and Christians: “Give thanks unto the LORD; for He is good; for his mercy endures forever.”

The word that interests the rabbi is *hesed*. He points out that the Septuagint has influenced the way translators have translated the Hebrew text for centuries. The Septuagint translated *hesed* as *eleos*, which means either “mercy” or “compassion.”

About *hesed*, Rabbi Kamsler writes: “These translations use HESED as a single, one-way rather than reciprocal relationship. HESED, however, describes a mutual relationship between man and between God. Translating it as ‘mercy,’ ‘compassion,’ or ‘love’ destroys the concept of mutuality. (For a complete discussion see Nelson Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible* [Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1967]).” For Kamsler, the key to unlocking the full meaning of *hesed* is to notice that covenant parties are involved in a covenant or “reciprocal relationship.”

The *Brown, Driver, Briggs Hebrew Lexicon* describes two dimension of *hesed*:

(1) HESED of man - kindness of men towards men, in doing favors and benefits; kindness extended to the lowly, needy and miserable; mercy. (rarely) affection or love of Israel to God, piety; lovely appearance.

(2) HESED of God - redemption from enemies and troubles; in preservation of life from death; in quickening of spiritual life; in redemption from sin; in keeping the covenants, with Abraham; with Moses and Israel.

When *hesed* is used to describe the actions of God, it refers to: redemption of Israel from its enemies and troubles, preservation of life from death, quickening of spiritual life, redemption from sin, and keeping the covenants. Rabbi Kamsler suggests that the best English word to use as a translation for *hesed* would be “loyalty,” which refers to God’s covenant loyalty because of his love for his people.

***Hesed* in Psalms, Exodus, and ministry of Jesus**

It has been suggested that *hesed* is best expressed by “covenant loyalty,” since it often expresses Yahweh’s particular favor toward Israel, a favor often showed toward Israel in the face of sin and rebellion (e.g., Num 14:19). Thus, *hesed* is used in several Psalms as a basis for forgiveness and salvation: Save me because of thy lovingkindness (Ps 6:4); Save me in thy lovingkindness (Ps 31:17); Rise up, be our help; and redeem us for the sake of thy lovingkindness (Ps 44:26); Be gracious to me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness (Ps 51:1); Save me according to thy lovingkindness (Ps 109:26).

In these Psalms, the Psalmist is asking for God to act out of His *hesed* in order to redeem and save him. Yahweh’s *hesed* is expressed soteriologically, and in Psalm 51:1 at least the plea for salvation includes a plea for forgiveness of sins. *Hesed*, in short, is one of several Hebrew words that might fit T.E. Kohl’s definition of grace: “It is God’s loving favor toward the unlovely, toward sinners.” R. Laird Harris gives further support for this in commenting on the use of *hesed* in Exodus 34:6-7: “The text of Ex 34:6-7 is fuller and more solemn [than Exodus 20], coming as it does after the great apostasy. It was a tender revelation of God’s self to Moses. Sakenfled is right here ‘that forgiveness must always have been latent in the theological usage of *hesed*’ even before the exile. . . . The association with divine mercy is

surely patent in the words and in the context of the occasion of the apostasy. The word *raham* with its overtones of mother love, and *hannun* ('grace') combined with the phrase 'slow to anger' all emphasize the character of God who is love. He is great in *hesed*...He keeps *hesed* for thousands which is immediately related to forgiveness of sin. That all this simply says that God keeps His oath seems trivial. The oath is kept because it is the loving God who speaks the truth."

Harris concludes that *hesed* sometimes includes the connotations of *hannun* in certain contexts: "it is by no means clear that *hesed* necessarily involves a covenant or means fidelity to a covenant. . . . It is a kind of love, including mercy, *hannun*, when the object is in a pitiful state."

However, the link of *hesed* with the Greek word *eleos* in the NT connects the ministry of Jesus to the previous covenants. *Eleos* is used to describe God's action in sending the Christ to fulfill His covenant and save His people from their enemies (Lk 1:72); to express the saving mercy God has shown to the Gentiles (Rom 15:9); in benedictions upon the Israel of God (Gal 6:16); to describe God's rich mercy that leads to our being raised from death in sin to be alive with Christ (Eph 2:4); to describe what we seek as we draw near to the throne of grace in time of need (Heb 4:16). In a few quotations from the OT, *eleos* stands in the place of *hesed*. In response to Pharisaical criticism of Jesus' meals with tax gatherers and sinners, Jesus quotes Hosea 6:6: "I desire mercy and not sacrifice" (Mat 9:13). Hosea uses *hesed*, while the translation of what Jesus said is *eleos*. In the context, Jesus has drawn an analogy between His ministry and the ministry of a physician among the sick (Mat 9:12). Jesus shows the compassion of a physician toward his helpless patients. He is among the tax gatherers and sinners out of compassion for their suffering, and He comes as the physician to relieve them of suffering. And this compassion is explained as an expression of *hesed/eleos*. Clearly, this Greek word often used to translate *hesed* continues to carry the connotations of saving, redemptive mercy toward the undeserving.

When we turn back to Psalm 136, we find that this rich word that can carry the connotation of "redemptive mercy" is used in several different ways within the Psalm. Throughout verses 10-24, the Psalmist celebrates Yahweh's mercy toward Israel. *Hesed* here might carry the connotation of covenant loyalty, since God is acting in accordance with His promises and commitments to Israel. And *hesed* also carries the connotation of redemptive mercy. Having seen the sufferings of Israel in Egypt (Ex 2:23-25), Yahweh smote the firstborn, brought Israel through the Red Sea, gave them a land, and has continued to remember "us in our low estate" (v. 23). Yet, within the same Psalm, we are exhorted to celebrate the *hesed* of God expressed in the creation of the world: Spreading out the heavens by wisdom, establishing the earth above the waters, making the sun, moon and stars are all expressions of God's *hesed*. And at the end of the Psalm, God's *hesed* is expressed in the fact that He gives food to all flesh (v. 25).

Brief History of Covenant Theology

[R. Scott Clark, "A Brief History of Covenant Theology,"

http://public.csusm.edu/public/guests/rsclark/History_Covenant_Theology.htm.]

The importance of covenant theology to the Reformed faith cannot be overstated. B. B. Warfield called covenant theology, "architectonic principle" of Reformed theology. The early fathers used the doctrine of the covenant in various ways: to stress the moral obligations of Christianity; to show God's grace in including the Gentiles in the Abrahamic blessings; to deny that Israelites received the promises simply because they were physical descendents of Abraham; to demonstrate the unity of the divine economy of salvation; and to explain the discontinuity between the old and new covenants in Scripture.

In *The City of God* (16:27), Augustine taught the outlines of what would become central elements in classic Reformed theology, the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. After Martin Luther and before John Calvin, Johannes Oecolampadius taught a developed covenant theology. The great Reformed theologian Amandus Polanus considered Oecolampadius the first Reformed covenant theologian. In 1534, Heinrich Bullinger published the first treatise devoted to explaining the covenant. In 1585, Caspar Olevian did the same thing in *On the Substance of the Covenant of Grace Between God and the Elect*. Johannes Cocceius and Herman Witsius wrote entire systematic theologies structured by the covenants.

The two most important Reformed covenant theologians of the late 16th century were the chief authors of the Larger Catechism, Caspar Olevian and Zacharias Ursinus. In his *On the Substance of the Covenant*, Caspar Olevian argued that the covenant can be considered in a broader and narrower sense. In the narrower sense, the covenant can be said to have been made only with the elect. It is the elect who are united to Christ by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, who receive the benefits of the covenant, strictly speaking. Those who are in the covenant in the broader sense, or externally, do receive some of the benefits of the covenant, but they do not receive what Olevian called the "substance of the covenant."

The theology of the early 17th century Reformed theologians William Ames, Johannes Wollebius, and Amandus Polanus relied on the works of Olevian and Ursinus. The high point of Reformed covenant theology was the work of Johannes Cocceius, Francis Turretin, J. H. Heidegger, and Herman Witsius. Cocceius is notable for writing one of the most comprehensive accounts of the Biblical covenants, *Summary of the Doctrine Concerning the Covenant and Testament*. Francis Turretin is known for his *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*. In this text, Turretin outlines the main tenants of Reformed covenant theology and defended them against the Socinians, Arminians and Amyrauldians. In 1675, J. H. Heidegger and Turretin produced the *Helvetic Consensus Formula*, a summary of Reformed covenant theology in the late 17th century.

In the United States, Charles Hodge, B. B. Warfield, G. Vos, and J. G. Machen followed the main lines of the classic covenantal view, teaching the covenant of redemption, the covenant of works (Law) and the covenant of grace (Gospel). The single greatest influence on covenant theology in the 20th century has been that of the Swiss theologian Karl Barth. Barth rejected much of classic Reformed covenant theology as "scholastic" and unbiblical. He rejected the covenant of redemption and the classic distinction between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace as "legalistic." Many contemporary Reformed theologians, including T. F. Torrance and G. C. Berkouwer, followed this critique of the Reformed covenantal tradition. In

the Netherlands, Abraham Kuyper taught the three-covenant view, distinguishing between those who were in the covenant only outwardly and those who were in the covenant inwardly.

Excerpt from “Covenant and Participation” by Justin Holcomb (in *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition*, edited by James K. A. Smith)

For Reformed theology, the covenant is the central theological framework by which it interprets all of creation. It is impossible to discuss covenants without returning to the Hebrew bible and the Jewish tradition. N. T. Wright writes: “The Jews believed in a specific God, of whom there was only one, who had made the whole world, was active within it while remaining sovereign over it and mysteriously other than it.”¹ God was the creator of all that exists, and remained powerful and involved within, though by no means reduced to terms of, the creation itself. Wright continues that God was not remote or detached, nor was God simply a generalized sense of a sacred dimension within the world, nor was God the objectification or personification of forces within the world.² Jewish monotheism came to believe that there was one God, who created all and who remained in close and dynamic relation with creation and that this God called or elected Israel to be God’s special people. This sense of mission was sometimes linked with creation: YHWH had chosen Israel for the sake of the larger world.³

The twin beliefs of creation and covenant (or monotheism and election) were never simply a part of abstract principles or propositions arrived at by philosophical enquiry of hypothetical speculation. As Wright explains: “It was discovered through a particular history, and characteristically expressed through telling and retelling that history in one shape or another. The history was that of Abraham’s family going down into Egypt, becoming enslaved, being rescued, and being dramatically rescued and given their own land.”⁴ Remembering this redemption gave shape to Israel’s continuing life, by telling and dramatically re-enacting it in various festivals. Whatever happened, whether oppression, suffering, exile, seeming annihilation, the covenant family of Abraham looked back to the Exodus to rediscover that YHWH was their God and they were God’s people.⁵ Through retelling and reliving the story in liturgy and festival, in reading and singing and prayer, Israel was able to rekindle the sense of God’s presence.

All the signs are that the earliest Christians very quickly came to the conclusion that they were under covenant obligations, without ceasing to be Jewish monotheists, to worship Jesus.⁶ The New Testament authors are not moving away from the Jewish monotheism nor dabbling with pagan dualisms, in which the good God would be opposed to the bad God—the redeemer over the creator. According to Paul, in 1 Corinthians 8:6, “There is one God, the father, from who are all things and we through him, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things.” This is a stunning adaptation of the Jewish prayer (the Shema: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One!”). It emphasizes creation and redemption as equally originating in the

¹ N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering the Jesus Who Was and Is* (London: SPCK, 2000), p. 74.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., p. 75.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., p. 78.

Father and equally implemented through the Son, and it encapsulates everything that later generations and creeds would struggle to say about God as the Trinity.⁷

An overview of the covenants will help us see the new covenant of Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of the previous covenants. The first covenant, the covenant of commencement, was with Adam. His covenant role was to be a husband, the covenant form was marriage, and the covenant sign was the Sabbath. Noah's covenant was a covenant of preservation and his covenantal role was father. The covenantal form was the household and the sign was the rainbow. The covenant of promise was with Abraham. He was a chieftain within the covenantal form of the tribe. Circumcision was the sign of the covenant with Abraham. The Mosaic covenant was a covenant of law. Moses was the judge and liberator of the people of God. The covenant sign is the Passover, which each year commemorates Israel's birth as a nation. God's family assumes the form of a "holy nation, a kingdom of priests." In the covenant of the kingdom, David was the covenantal king and the kingdom was the covenantal form. The Davidic throne was the sign of the covenant. The covenant of consummation was with Jesus Christ. His covenantal role was Royal High Priest. The Church is the covenant form and the covenant sign is the Lord's Supper.

According to the Reformed tradition, the members of the church are united in the sacrificial family banquet of the body and blood of Christ. Christians are also united through baptism, rebirth, and adoption into God's family in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The sacramental bond of baptism reflects the covenant oath, which Christ has established as the New Adam. This bond is strengthened when we receive the flesh and blood of the Father's first-born Son in the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the Trinity is the eternal and original covenant family. The Trinity is the eternal source and perfect standard of the covenant; covenant is what God does because covenant is who God is. When Jesus Christ institutes the Lord's Supper as a covenant meal all of the Hebrew bible covenants should be called to mind. The coming of Christ is the unveiling of an incarnational vision that was there from the beginning.

According to Reformed theology, what is required for contemporary theology and delivered by a focus on covenant is a theological method that is already conceived, shaped, and determined by the content of its confession.⁸ Gererhardus Vos writes that the Bible feels its own anatomy or is conscious of its own organism. He explains that "the principle of successive *Berith-making*" plays a large role in this, and should be carefully heeded. Alongside of this periodicity principle, the grouping and correlation of the several elements of truth within the limits of each period has to be attended to."⁹ Similarly, David Tracy writes: "Christian theology, therefore, should not hesitate to begin with its own inner history and reflect upon its own special occasion or illuminating event as the properly self-evidencing reality of its foundation."¹⁰ Michael Horton argues that the redemptive-historical aspect of the covenant is the organic unfolding of the divine plan in its execution through word as announcement, act as accomplishment, and word as interpretation. Revelation, therefore, is the servant of redemption, circumventing any conception of revelation as mere enlightenment, gnosis, information, or presence.¹¹ Vos warns against replacing the scriptural particularity and identity with extra-biblical concepts: "The Bible

⁷ Ibid., p. 79.

⁸ Michael Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama*, p. 4.

⁹ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), p. 16.

¹⁰ David Tracy, *Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroads, 1987), pp. 65-66.

¹¹ Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology*, p. 5.

exhibits an organism of its own. This organism, inborn in the Bible itself, the critical hypothesis destroys, and that not only on our view, but as freely acknowledged by the critics themselves, on the ground of its being an artificial organism in later times foisted upon the Bible, and for which a newly discovered better organism should be substituted.”¹²

Covenant (not the idea in general but the specific praxis developed throughout redemptive history) is the culture of the people of God, shaped by the drama of the two cities and the two seeds.¹³ Vos writes: “The circle of revelation is not a school, but a covenant.”¹⁴ In covenant, Horton writes, “there is more than a narrative to ‘absorb’ the reader into the divine world of the text; there is a covenant to reorient one’s ultimate loyalties, aspirations, and identity. ‘Absorption’ is more passive than ‘performance,’ and the latter seems more comprehensive of faith and practice.¹⁵ More than a script is needed but rather a drama in which the covenant establishes concrete performances that generates not only passively transformed readers, but also a new reality outside the text-script in which covenant partners actively participate in the ongoing and unfolding performance.¹⁶ Covenant is the more concrete category that can unite history and eschatology, the individual and the community, the divine and human agency, and it is scripture’s own method of contextualization.¹⁷

Covenantal theology is helpful because the content of theology is already defining its methodology.¹⁸ In other words, theology is not justifying its claims before secular standards. What contemporary theology needs now is not a theological method that one does independent of theology, which begins with and in the end is a salute to whatever branch of science is current reigning. This covenant approach is not a foundationalist project that looks for first principles outside of scripture, which then become the guiding principles to interpret the God-world relation, human personhood, christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, sacraments, and eschatology proper. Rather, in covenant the content for theology provides the source for its method and defines “theology” as the church’s reflection on its own witness to revelation in history, God’s performative action in words and deeds, and its own participation in the drama of redemption. Horton makes this point: “A biblical-theological understanding of covenant ties things together in systematic theology whose relations are often strained: ecclesiology (the context of the covenant), theology proper (the covenant maker), anthropology (the covenant partner), Christology (the covenant mediator), soteriology (the covenant blessings), eschatology (the covenant’s consummation).”¹⁹ Rather than forced relations between the loci of theology, these are natural in view of the way the biblical drama unfolds and meets the various loci.

Focusing on the significance of covenant for the Lord’s Supper, Rowan Williams writes:

Jesus, baptized, tempted, forgiving and healing, offering himself as the means of a new covenant, is himself ‘sacrament’: it is his identity that is set before us as a sign, the form of a new people of God...The eucharist recollects an event already complex, already ‘doubled’—the Last Supper interpreted as a sign of Jesus’ death and its

¹² Vos, *Biblical Theology*, p. 17.

¹³ Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology*, p. 13.

¹⁴ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), p. 17.

¹⁵ Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology*, p. 14.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 17.

effect, or, from the other end, the death of Jesus metaphorized as a breaking and sharing of bread. The central transition here, as in baptism, is a death, a death here presented as a passage into new solidarities: the wine poured out as a sign of the shedding of blood is the mark of a *covenant* being made, on the analogy of God's covenant with Israel.²⁰

According to Horton, the history of the covenant develops as a theology of proclamation. The eucharist serves alongside the word as a means of grace—not in terms of the analogy of infusion, but in terms of the analogy of declaration.²¹ This is why the Reformers called the eucharist God's "visible word." In support this view, Horton refers to 1 Corinthians 11:26: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." This leads to the main analogy for the eucharist: sign and seal. The covenant of grace founded in the Hebrew scriptures is not altered, but the covenant is administered with different signs and seals. Through baptism, circumcision is extended and believers and their children are incorporated into the divine drama. Similarly, the Lord's Supper, as a Passover meal, becomes a means of personal incorporation into the drama already in progress.²² In the eucharist, the divine drama takes on concrete form not only as a redramatization, but as the enactment of that redemptive-historical reality—the unfolding covenants. Contemporary actors in the covenant renewal ceremony actually participate in the reality that is indicated by the performance.²³ The covenant, and especially the covenant meal, is the context for reconciling faith and praxis; it is the covenant in its enacted forms that constitutes the theatre of grace and only secondarily engages the theatre of the world. Horton writes: "While there is a danger of becoming unduly introverted in such an account, this reconciliation occurs in this in-between time chiefly in the church, and only secondarily in the culture."²⁴

²⁰ Rowan Williams, *Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 203 and 214

²¹ Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology*, pp. 269-270.

²² *Ibid.* p. 270.

²³ *Ibid.* p. 271.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 273.