

#01:Covenant of Creation

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Let us pray.

We rejoice, oh gracious heavenly Father, for the opportunity that is ours to come in Jesus Christ's name and to seek bread for our souls. Grant to us we pray, merciful Father, the full assurance of the truth of God as it is found in Jesus Christ. Let us see in him the yea and amen, the alpha and the omega, of all that God has promised from the beginning to the end. Give to us hearts of faith receptive to hear your promises and to act in obedience to them, for we ask in Christ's name. Amen.

I hold before you this morning what is, perhaps, the greatest literary enigma of human history, one book which has been written over a period of approximately 1500 years yet whose binding is quit convincing. In recent biblical studies varied efforts have been made to try to discover and to solve the riddle of the unity of the holy Bible

How could it be that this one book written over such a long period of human history by so many authors of such various and diverse backgrounds could convincingly come as one bound volume. Certainly we know and are assured that the one Holy Spirit that has inspired this one Scripture is the ultimate source of its unity.

But what is the message that unites the Bible? What theme binds it so closely together?

In recent studies various efforts have been made to seek the theme which unites the holy Scripture. H. H. Rowley has written a book *The Unity of the Bible* in which he has tried to gather together the most recent offerings of men seeking the solution to this problem. As you read this book you see that even the most critical of scholars cannot gainsay the reality of the oneness of this book.

As we consider the topic of the unity of the Bible, two offerings that have been presented in recent days merit special consideration. One of these is the theme of the kingdom of God. The other is the theme of the covenant. Perhaps in one of these two offerings we may find that theme which unites all of holy Scripture.

If you study the Scripture looking for the theme of the kingdom of God you do not have to look far to see the beginnings of this great unifying concept in Scripture. Man as created received a mandate from God to rule and to subdue the whole earth. As Israel is being organized as the kingdom of God, they are called to be a kingdom of priests. Saul's life begins the long history of the kingdom of God, its rise and its fall.

Jesus Christ comes and following the preaching of John the Baptist himself preaches, “Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.”

Paul the apostle picks up this very same theme as he projects his imagery of the confirmation. Paul says in the end, “Jesus Christ shall deliver the kingdom unto the Father so that God may be all in all.”

It may well be that in this theme of the kingdom of God we may we find this one unifying concept that brings together the whole of holy Scripture.

Equally significant studies have wrestled with the unifying concept of the covenant in holy Scripture. Also [?] has written a two volume Old Testament theology built on this concept of the covenant of God. Indeed, from Old Testament to New Testament, from Adam to Christ, from beginning to end, the covenant concept prevails. The gradual unfolding of the truth of God follows quite closely the trail of the covenant throughout holy Scripture.

While both of these suggestions of a major unifying theme of holy Scripture have much to commend them, both also have their inherent limitations. Look, for a moment, at the concept of the kingdom of God. Indeed we see a large line of the kingdom concept running throughout Scripture. But can you be convinced that the kingdom of God is that one theme which unites, for instance, the patriarchal period? As Abraham and his descendants are wandering as nomads, do they think primarily and firstly of the kingdom concept? Perhaps we must admit that the kingdom concept—though it has beginnings earlier in the Scripture—has its full fruition only in the days of David and the monarchy.

We look, then, at the covenant concept. Is this a unifying theme which is adequate to sustain itself even under careful scrutiny? If you look at the covenant concept more carefully you will see that the covenant concept is, perhaps, the unifying framework of Scripture but does not present the unifying message of Scripture. The covenant concept is the vehicle by which the message of Scripture is communicated. The covenant concept speaks of a relationship in broad terms, but does not in itself define the nature of that relationship.

If we are going to find the one theme that unites the whole of Scripture, we must not speak only of a relationship, but we must define the specific nature of that relationship.

It is with this background in mind that we offer another possible theme—and this is only a possible theme—which would unite holy Scripture: Emmanuel, God with us. That is the theme which unites the whole of holy Scripture. Emmanuel, God with us. From beginning to end the theme of Scripture centers on this one concept, that God is with his people.

The Emmanuel concept explains the biblical theology of creation. God walks in fellowship with his people in the cool of the garden.

The Emmanuel concept explains equally well the biblical theology of consummation. Come, Lord Jesus. Be with us. It is the last prayer of Scripture which expresses the greatest heartfelt desire of every Christian believer, that in the ultimate sense, God may be with his people.

Between Genesis and Revelation the Emmanuel concept permeates the whole of Scripture and explains both judgment and blessing upon the people of God.

Enoch walked with God. To Abraham God manifests himself as friend. The glory of the Mosaic era resides in the shekinah. God has manifest himself in the very presence of his people as the center hub about which all the activity of Israel continues to operate is God's mysterious presence in the midst of his people. Through the prophetic movement in Israel God made known his determination to make his will intimately and plainly known to all his people. Through the priestly movement God made known his determination to be with his people despite their habitual and continual sinning and rebelling against him. Through the kingly rule and movement of Israel God manifests his determination to rule in Zion.

Central, naturally, to the entire message of the New Testament is the Emmanuel concept. Jesus' name manifesting his nature is to be Emmanuel, God with us.

Paul the apostle, expanding on this theme speaks of the Church alongside the kingdom. "Now the shekinah," says the apostle Paul, "dwells in you as the believer in Jesus Christ. Now God is with his people individually and corporately as his Spirit dwells in them."

The final vision of John the seer in the book of Revelation is a heavenly city where no need of light is to be found for there the Lamb is the light in the midst of the eternal city.

The concept of the kingdom of God finds its personalized counterpart in the Emmanuel concept. While the rule of God has various applications and implications, yet it finds its special significance in the fact that God is manifesting his presence amidst his people by ruling for them.

At the same time the Emmanuel concept provides the substance needed to fill this empty vessel of the covenant. "I will be to you a God and you shall be to me a people," is the theme of the covenant message.

It is in this context, then, that the present lectures are being offered. Emmanuel is none other than Jesus Christ. Christ comes to us by means of the covenant. The Christ of the covenant then summarizes both the message and the means of communication of the biblical message.

Now in anticipation of pursuing this theme throughout the week of the Christ of the covenant, we must begin this morning by offering preliminary solutions to some

particular problems. And the first of these is an effort to offer a definition of the term, “covenant.”

In order to offer a working definition of the term covenant we shall deal this morning very briefly with three particular suggestions that have been attempted in defining covenant and then offer our own working definition.

Perhaps if I asked the question rhetorically I might get an answer that I should have expected if I should ask the question: What is a covenant?

Immediately you say, “A covenant is an agreement between two or more persons.”

This is an answer given in the child’s catechism of the Presbyterian Church in the United States. The strength of this definition—a covenant is an agreement between two or more persons—is found in the recognition of the personal aspect of the covenant relationship. Covenant binds persons together. And therein we find the strength of this definition. This catechism definition represents a long stream in the history of reformed thinking. The writers of this child’s catechism were not the first to conceive of the covenant as an agreement between two or more persons. Yet we need to recognize that this definition does not represent the final conclusion of the ongoing process of reformers of our reforming, of Christians ever submitting their time honored tradition to the scrutiny of holy Scripture.

As a matter of fact, with all due regard to the child’s catechism, this definition better defines a term such as “contract.” A contract is an agreement between two or more persons. A covenant is something quite different.

Covenants in holy Scripture between God and man—although between man and man, they are indeed contractual in which mutual bargaining is involved—when God enters into the picture, the divine covenants never are presented as contracts whose terms are defined by a process of mutual consent. A covenant is not an agreement. Instead—and as Professor John Murray until late professor of Systematic Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary says—“A covenant is a sovereign administration of grace and promise.”

In Professor Murray’s definition then we have a second offering to the possibilities of defining this term “covenant.” A covenant is a sovereign administration of grace and promise. Herein we see very adequately emphasized the sovereignty that is involved in man’s relationship with God. God without counsel defines the terms of his bond to man.

Professor Murray’s definition, however, has not gone without critical evaluation. And, indeed, with great and due respect to this great man of God, we enter into possible discussion with this definition.

Professor Meredith G. Klein now Professor of Old Testament at Gordon Theological Seminary criticizes, with great respect and love, the definition of Professor Murray.

Professor Klein finds in the covenant concept not simply grace and promise. He finds also the possibility of curse and judgment.

In selecting the simplest of the biblical covenants—which was the covenant with Noah—it is, perhaps, possible that Professor Murray has not adequately unveiled all the aspects of the covenant concept as presented in Scripture. The element of curse and as well as blessing does have a basic part in the covenant relationship.

Professor Klein then proceeds to offer his own definition of covenant. And this is the third definition. You may find it in the book by M.G. Klein, recently printed by [?] page 15. A covenant is an administration of God's lordship consecrating a people to himself under the sanction of divine law. Or, in more general terms, says Professor Klein, a covenant is a sovereign administration of the kingdom of God.

We must hail with gratitude these contributions of Professors Murray and Klein as they have dealt with the concept of the covenant in the light of modern biblical studies. Yet, at the same time and with great caution, we dare to question even these definitions. It may be observed that the diversity of conclusion on the part of professors Murray and Klein may come from an effort on their part to define the nature of the covenant by applying one particular covenantal aspect to the totality of God's covenant dealing.

The covenant concept is a vessel, a form which does not in itself define the content of that form. Professor Murray defines covenant as containing...

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...basically on his study of the covenant of Noah. Professor Klein defines covenant by working from the Mosaic covenant with its emphasis on law and therefore defines a covenant as an administration of God's lordship based on God's law.

Therefore, for this reason, we offer something of an alternative definition for the term "covenant." Quite obviously we are tempting on the very cautiously to proceed in the work of continuing discussion with these biblical scholars.

The following aspects of a working definition of the term "covenant" may be noted. First of all, a covenant is a bond. Though there is great debate concerning the etymology of the term **ברית** (ber-eeth') in the Old Testament, the most convincing case may be made for the concept that **ברית** (ber-eeth') comes from the terminology of related languages which speaks primarily of a bond.

As you study the covenant concept in Scripture that is the essence of the covenant concept. Covenant binds people. Covenant brings personalities into interpersonal relationships. At the very heart of the biblical imagery of the covenant is the concept of a bond inviolable.

Even if a man should violate the stipulations of a particular biblical covenant that bond has not been broken. Only the negative aspects of the covenant relations then come into effect so that judgment comes rather than blessing.

So we say that, first of all, the most basic elements and concept of a covenant is that a covenant is something which binds people.

Secondly, we note from the biblical concept of the divine covenants as they are related to men, a covenant is a bond of life and death. This particular aspect of the covenant concept finds confirmation both in the biblical and in the non biblical covenant. The commitment to life and death of the covenant bond becomes especially apparent when the oath involved in covenant relationship is steady.

Notice the study of G.E. Mendenhall and his work *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East*. He cites Max Weber who says that in the ancient Near East every covenant—even personal relationships, but especially the covenant between Israel and God—was conceived as a bond committed by oath in which the parties were subjected to life and death if they should break this covenant.

Now in accord with the distinctive and very unique way by which the ancient the Near Eastern covenants were administered and instituted, we shall include this concept of life and death as an intimate aspect of the covenant definition by the phrase “bond in blood. “ A covenant is a bond in blood.

As men entered into covenant relationships with one another, as God entered into covenant relationship with his people, sacrifice was offered symbolizing the ultimate death of the covenant breaker. A covenant, therefore, is a bond in blood.

Thirdly, we may note that a covenant is a bond in blood sovereignly administered.

Well, the practical outworking of the covenant relationship there must be one type of administration or another. We must have one way or another to administer this bond of life and death that has been established. Yet no particular administration may be identified intimately with the covenant concept. The covenant may be administered by a variety of methods. This will become especially plain when we get to the Mosaic covenant, when we see that law and covenant cannot be convincingly and totally interchanged.

Though in some respects, law and covenant may be interchanged, yet law is subservient to covenant. Covenant is a broader aspect. Law is one form of administration of the covenant relationship.

Indeed, every covenant made has law as a portion of its relationship. Yet law and covenant cannot be equally related.

So we note, finally, that a covenant is a bond in blood, sovereign administered. As has been established and sustained so adequately by recent biblical scholarship, the sovereign aspect of the covenant relationship must be realized. No trace of compact, agreement or contract may be related to the divinely initiated covenant. The sovereign Lord of heaven and earth establishes on his own initiative the precise relationship which he desires with his people.

Now we want to go to a second matter of a preliminary nature, having defined a covenant as a bond in blood sovereignly administered.

This second preliminary matter concerns the basic division of the biblical covenant. Classically reformed theology has spoken of two divisions of the biblical covenant, of a covenant of works and a covenant of grace. The covenant of works is the phrase used to describe God's bond or relationship to man prior to his fallen state. If man should work properly, if man should observe the stipulations of this bond prior to his fall, then he would enter into the blessings of the covenant relationship.

The covenant of grace has been used as a phrase to describe the overarching dealing of God with man since man's fall into sin. Though there have been various administrations of this covenant of grace, the covenant is one.

This classic reformed division of God's covenant dealings has much, indeed, to commend it. It emphasizes properly the absolute necessity of recognizing a pre fall state of man, something that modern man must be recalled to recognize, that there was a condition of man, a perfect relationship with his Maker, preceding the current state of man.

This classic division also commends to us the unifying aspects of the covenant that has come in the covenant of grace. So the covenant of grace binds all of Old and New Testament into one. The covenant of grace concept will rid our church of all Marcionite efforts.

However, we do stop here for a moment to deal with a specific terminology, not with the concepts involved, but with the terminology offered in the classic reformed distinction.

To speak of a covenant of works in distinction from a covenant of grace suggest inherently that the covenant of works has no grace involved in it. We should recognize that grace was equally operative in the creation relationship of God with man, in his pre fall state as it was subsequent to the fall. No less grace may be seen in the covenant prior to man's fall than in the covenant subsequent to man's fall. This terminology or distinction between covenant of works and covenant of grace also seems to suggest that here are no works in the covenant of grace.

We know, indeed, that Jesus Christ has worked under the covenant of grace on our behalf. We know, also, that the redeemed are called to work. Scripture is consistent in stating that men shall be judged by their works whether pre fall or post fall man. So man is saved by faith. He shall be judged by works.

We would, therefore, adopt with gratitude, the recent suggestion of Professor Klein in designating the two major covenant categories as the covenant of creation and the covenant of redemption. These designations should be quite clear in their intent. The covenant of creation refers to the bond which God established with man by creation. The covenant of redemption encompasses all the varied methods by which God has entered into a bond or a relationship with man subsequent to the fall.

Having, then, this distinction in mind it may be of value to note the various historical manifestations of this covenant of redemption. These subheads would be as follows. Adam, the covenant of commencement; Noah, the covenant of preservation; Abraham, the covenant of promise; Moses, the covenant of law; David, the covenant of the kingdom; and Christ, the covenant of consummation.

It shall be our purpose throughout the week to deal with each of these various covenantal administrations of the Lord God. Throughout the whole the unifying theme will be Emmanuel, the Christ of the covenant.

Now we shall proceed this morning to go ahead with the covenant of creation dealing briefly with that first administration of God with his creation. The terminology “covenant” appears for the first time in the days of Noah and perhaps some would quibble with taking this term ברית (ber-eeth’) or covenant and relating it to man prior to its appearance in holy Scripture.

However, if we think, for instance, of the concept of the Messiah in holy Scripture, though the term for Messiah may appear only in the days of Moses, we know that much of Scripture deals with the messianic concept prior to that time. We know of the promise of the seed given to the woman. We know of the promise given to Abraham. We know of the singling out of the tribe of Judah as the one from whom the king would come even prior to the appearance of the terminology of Messiah.

So we can say, also, with the covenant terminology. Though the covenant terminology does not appear until the days of Noah, we may apply this concept prior to that period.

If we look at God’s original relationship with man, we may see all the elements necessary for a covenant relationship involved in this period. First of all, we have in the created bond, in the creation, a bond. God, by creating man, binds himself to man. God, by creating man, enters into an interpersonal relationship with man. God, by making man in his own likeness and image, enters into a covenantal bond. More specifically this covenantal bond involved the alternative of life as well as death. You know that the Scripture says, “That in the day that you eat thereof you shall surely die.”

Finally, we note that the covenant relationship established by creation is a sovereign administered relationship. Man does not come to God and quibble about the terms of his creation relationship. Instead, God sovereignly dictates the terms of his relationship with man.

And we do not have in the covenant of creation a definite time at which this covenant bond was administered. It is inherent in the principle of consecration found in the first chapters of Genesis. Even as the lower parts of human life, of life were consecrated to the higher, even as the higher were consecrated to man, so man had the obligation under the covenant of creation to consecrate the whole of the creation to his maker. That was the particular obligation of man under the covenant of creation, to take all that God had given him and to consecrate it to the maker.

Alongside this principle of consecration is the principle of probation. In the principle of probation we have the testing of man. In the principle of probation is a demand for radical obedience on the part of the man who has been created. This radical obedience demanded by man under the creation covenant is seen particularly as God makes the command concerning one tree in the garden.

God had given to man all that he had created. God had said to man, "You may take of all of the tree. But right in the midst of the garden there is one tree from whence man may not take."

We may suppose that there was nothing in this particular tree that should mark it from the other trees. It was only one in the midst of the garden, yet the Word of God came and said to man, "You shall not eat of this particular tree."

Herein was the great test of man under the creation covenant. He must listen to the Word of God and to the Word of God only as it demanded of him radical obedience to his maker. If the whole of creation were to be consecrated to God adequately, then man who had been created with the freedom of will, must consecrate by an act of the freedom of his will, in obedience to the raw Word of God, this whole of his creation.

So, then, we see the setting of the creation covenant. in which God requires of man this one deed of radical obedience, this one keeping of the Word of God. Herein lies the test and the center of the test of the covenant of creation.

And from this point tomorrow we shall begin with the covenant of redemption as man as man falls under the curse of the covenant of creation.

Let us pray.

We come, oh gracious God and heavenly Father, to give thanks for mercy and grace for all the needs of your people. We come to rejoice that though we have fallen into sin Christ has provided a way for us. Help us, we pray, oh gracious Lord, to know that you who art our Creator are the one who also is our sustainer of life. Give us that redemption which we alone may find in Jesus Christ for we ask in his name. Amen.