INTRODUCING
COVENANT THEOLOGY

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THE BIG IDEA?

We live in a world of broken promises. A fragile web of truthful communication and practical commitments connect us to one another, and when any part of that web comes under significant stress, the trust on which our relationships depend can easily break. Self-interest—that is, outright violation of our commitments ("what we have done," in the prayer of confession)—isn't all that tugs on this web; often the pursuit of things that are in themselves worthy but subordinate goods ("what we have left undone") tug on it as well. Either way, we transgress the law of love.

As Jesus reminds us, there is an inseparable connection between the "two tables" of the Law: love of God (the vertical dimension) and love of neighbor (the horizontal). In the fall of humanity in Adam, recapitulated in the history of Israel, human relationships fray as a result of prior infidelity to their covenant Lord. Yet before, during, and after humankind's broken promises, the promise-making and promise-keeping God is present and will not let the web fall apart.

God's very existence is covenantal: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit live in unceasing devotion to each other, reaching outward beyond the Godhead to create a community of creatures serving as a giant analogy of the Godhead's relationship. Created in the image of the Triune God, we are by nature outgoing, interdependent relationship establishers, finding ourselves in the other and not just in ourselves. Unlike the persons of the Trinity, we at one time did not exist. But when God did decide to create, his decree was not that of a lonely monarch, but of a delighted Father, Son, and Holy Spirit establishing a creaturely, finite analogy of their eternal giving and receiving relationship. We were not just created and then *given* a covenant; we were created *as* covenant creatures—partners not in deity, to be sure, but in the drama that was about to unfold in history. As covenant creatures by nature, every person has a relationship with God. What exactly the nature of that relationship happens to be after the fall will be taken up at some length in this book, but there can be no doubt: everyone has a relationship with God, and that relationship is covenantal. Since that is true, it stands to reason that we would want to know more about the nature of that relationship.

So what exactly is a covenant? Anticipating the definition in the next chapter, we can start by saying that from the most commonly used Hebrew word for this concept (*berit*), a covenant is a relationship of "oaths and bonds" and involves mutual, though not necessarily equal, commitments. As we will see shortly, some biblical covenants are unilaterally imposed commands and promises; others are entered into jointly. Some are conditional and others are unconditional. In other words, under the overarching concept of oaths and bonds we encounter a substantial variety of covenants in Scripture.

How remarkable it is that a great God would stoop not only to create finite analogies of himself, but that he would condescend still further to establish a partnership with them, commissioning them to exercise his own righteous and generous reign over the rest of creation.

My goal for this brief survey is to show the richness of this covenantal web and its centrality to the organization of the Bible's diverse teaching. "Reformed theology is simply covenant theology," according to I. John Hesselink. In other words, Reformed theology is guided by a concern to relate various biblical teachings to the concrete covenants in Scripture as their proper context. But is that the usual perception today? People readily associate "Reformed" (i.e., Calvinistic) theology with the so-called Five Points of Calvinism, with its famous TULIP acronym (total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, perseverance of the saints). Encountering the God of sovereign grace is one of the most life-changing experiences in the Christian life, but it is only the beginning of what Reformed theology is all about. While some friends and critics of Reformed theology have reduced Calvinism to "five points," or further still, to predestination, the actual confessions, catechisms, and standard doctrinal works of the Reformed tradition all testify to a far richer, deeper, and all-embracing faith in the God of the covenant. *Reformed* theology is synonymous with *covenant* theology.

The last century of scholarship has helped to strengthen the traditional Reformed homage to the covenantal motif. In the mid-twentieth century, George E. Mendenhall, consolidating a number of studies by others, demonstrated the remarkable parallels between the Hebrew Scriptures (i.e., Old Testament) and ancient Near Eastern (i.e., secular) treaties. "The names given to the two parts of the Bible in Christian tradition rest on the religious conception that the relationship between God and man is established by a covenant."[1]

Although secular scholars also have their own presuppositions and biases, it is unlikely that the recent consensus on the significance of covenant in the Scriptures is the result of a commitment to a central doctrine. One hobby of theologians is to pick out a central teaching in a given religion or theological system by which all of its doctrines and practices can be understood. So, for example, it is said that Rome begins with the doctrine of the

church and deduces everything else from it; Lutherans do the same with justification, and Calvinists treat predestination and the sovereignty of God in that manner.

The impression is therefore given that a systematic theology is imposed externally on the biblical text, not allowing Scripture to speak for itself. That this has happened sometimes in Reformed as in other traditions is no doubt true. However, this whole approach to defining core beliefs has come under great suspicion for very good reasons in our day. It reduces a complex network of interrelated themes to a single dogma from which everything is logically made to follow. Although one can find some examples of this simplistic approach in Reformed circles, which always gives rise to various factions of those committed to this or that emphasis, one is hard-pressed to find much resemblance here to the mature development of Reformed theology in its most representative statements.

For example, while divine election is a crucial doctrine in Reformed theology, it is treated in the confessions and catechisms as an important doctrine alongside others. And it certainly never functions as a central dogma from which everything else can be deduced logically. Rather, it is articulated and defended within a web of associated beliefs, all of which are supported by careful exegesis (interpretation of the Scriptures).

So if predestination is not the "central core" of Reformed theology, what is? As a growing body of theologians is demonstrating these days, there is no such dogma. Reformed theology at least attempts to interpret the whole counsel of God in view of the principle that Scripture interprets Scripture. In other words, that which is clearest and is treated with the greatest significance in Scripture interprets those passages that are more difficult and less central to the biblical message. At least the *goal* is to say what Scripture says and to emphasize what Scripture emphasizes. If Scripture itself coalesces around the revelation of Christ as the fulfillment of the Father's plan of redemption, as Jesus himself said, then we are hardly imposing our own nonbiblical theological grid on Scripture in saying that Scripture is centrally a witness

to Christ. But we do not begin with a conception of Christ that we have already formed independently of Scripture, by which we judge the Scriptures (deductively); instead, we come to learn from the Scriptures (inductively) that Christ stands at their center.

Yet "Christ" would himself be an abstract idea or concept apart from the biblical doctrine of the Triune God or the Bible's teaching concerning humanity and the history of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation.

So what brings all of these themes together? What unites them is not itself a central dogma but an architectonic structure, a matrix of beams and pillars that hold together the structure of biblical faith and practice. That particular architectural structure that we believe the Scriptures themselves to yield is the covenant. It is not simply the concept of the covenant, but the concrete existence of God's covenantal dealings in our history that provides the context within which we recognize the unity of Scripture amid its remarkable variety.

According to Meredith G. Kline, "It will emerge, we believe, that for purposes of reappraising the Old Testament canon, the most significant development in the last quarter-century has not been the Dead Sea scroll finds but discoveries made concerning the covenants of the Old Testament in the light of ancient Near Eastern treaty diplomacy."[2] Of all the various forms of literature in the Bible, the treaty is the most basic.[3] Old Testament historical records "are extensions of the treaty prologues . . . linked to both law and prophecy, and on both scores served as an instrument of covenant administration."[4] In fact, Kline argues, there is "an architectural aspect to the Bible. . . . In this connection the imagery of God's 'house' comes to the fore in the book of Exodus. That house is built by means of the canonical Scripture which proceeds from the victorious Yahweh."[5]

Like the architecture of most buildings, the framework is largely hidden from view. To be sure, it is visible enough to distinguish one style from another. We can discern the difference between a neoclassical façade and a Victorian house even though we may not

have the terminology down. However, in most buildings at least, one rarely notices the intricate fabric of steel and concrete behind the walls. The same is true in Reformed theology. The covenant is the framework, but it is far from a central dogma. The various covenants are visible and significant, in some "rooms" (i.e., topics) more than others. The covenant of redemption is prominent in discussion of the Trinity, Christ as mediator, and election, while the covenant of creation is more obvious when we talk about God's relationship to the world (especially humanity), and the covenant of grace is most visible when we take up the topics of salvation and the church. However, whenever Reformed theologians attempt to explore and explain the riches of Scripture, they are always thinking *covenantally* about every topic they take up.

So what are the benefits of such an approach?

What Difference Does It Make?

First, as I hope to make clear in the opening chapters, this covenantal structure can be seen to arise naturally from the ordinary reading of the Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation. When we start with a central dogma, we can easily pillage the Scriptures for it and then discard them, no longer needing the Scriptures themselves, but merely logical deduction, to establish everything else as a consequence. How often have we heard important debates about biblical teaching dismissed with a shrug and the words, "You have your verses and we have our verses," as if the Bible itself were internally inconsistent or contradictory? For Christians all of the verses are "our verses." Our interpretation of a given point must be demonstrated not only as taught in this or that passage, but as consistent with the whole teaching of Scripture. Scripture is internally consistent, not contradictory, but we do not always know how to resolve complicated questions that arise from its diverse teaching. We need to have a framework that Scripture itself provides us; otherwise we will serve the whim of our own

assumptions about what should or should not be true, given our starting point. As the first chapters unfold, it is hoped that the reader will gain a fresh sense of wonder at this covenantal unity that undergirds the diversity in Scripture.

Second, recognizing the covenantal framework of Scripture unifies what otherwise is too often divided or confused in our day. For example, in a lot of academic theology as well as popular piety, God and creation are either separated or confused. In other words, God is viewed as so completely beyond us that we cannot really know him or have a personal relationship with him. People don't know how to relate God to the world he has made. Some banish God from his own domain, as in deism, in which adherents acknowledge God's existence but deny his personal involvement in the world. God is thus often perceived as an impersonal force or abstract principle. Others simply identify God with the world, as if the difference between God and humans were merely quantitative (God as greater, larger, more impressive, intelligent, and powerful) rather than qualitative (different from that which he has made). Ironically, in either case, God is rendered irrelevant: either by being too distant from us or by being absorbed into us—our will, our intellect, our emotions, our experience. The point of idolatry is to maintain our own autonomy (i.e., sovereignty) over God, either by banishment or absorption. In the one case, we ignore the reality of God; in the other, we use God as a projection for our own felt needs and make him serve our own ends. As we will see, the biblical understanding of God's relationship to the world as covenantal is both a *bridge* that deism ignores and a *bar* to any confusion of the Creator with his creation.

Covenant theology also speaks of the unity of the human and nonhuman creation without simply erasing the difference. In our age, a lot of harm has been done to the natural creation because of the pretensions of human sovereignty. Whereas the covenant of creation places humanity in a privileged position in order to conserve and shepherd the rest of God's creatures for his glory and their good ends, our atheistic culture knows of no obligation to

a sovereign God that stands over our own ambitions and drives. At the same time, recognizing humanity's poor stewardship of creation, many of our neighbors today confuse humanity with the nonhuman world just as they collapse the Creator into his creation in an effort to ground ethical responsibility in a divine creation instead of a divine Lord of creation. Covenant theology speaks to this crisis quite definitely.

Further, we see on all hands a tendency to either separate or confuse the individual and the community. On one hand, a rampant Western individualism has unleashed a war of all against all. The individual self is sovereign. This has infected the church profoundly, in both its faith and practice, wherever the emphasis on "me and my personal relationship with God" has supplanted the biblical assumption of covenantal solidarity. Covenant theology, in fact, requires such solidarity: that of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the covenant of redemption; our solidarity with all of creation and especially our being "in Adam" by virtue of the creation covenant and "in Christ" in the covenant of grace.

Significantly, nearly all of the emphasis in Scripture in this regard falls on metaphors of solidarity: the people of God, the holy nation, the congregation, the body with its head and various parts, the vine and its branches, living stones being built into a spiritual temple, a family, and so on. Yet many Christians today are tempted to overreact to individualism by emphasizing the corporate aspect to a degree that seriously downplays the importance Scripture attributes to the personal relationship to God that must be accepted and acted upon by each individual within the covenant. How do we bring the individual and corporate aspects of our theology and practice together in the face of such circumstances? Only, I will argue, by recovering not a concept or an idea, but a concrete covenantal context and practice within which the self is no longer sovereign and self-enclosed *or* lost in the crowd of the "community," but liberated to belong to God and to each other.

Related to all of the preceding is the opposition between body and soul that one often encounters in popular piety. Salvation is

often conceived of in terms of being freed from this world and going to another world that is superior in that it is spiritual rather than physical. This concept, however, is far from the biblical understanding of salvation, which confesses its faith in the resurrection of the body and the life to come—not apart from our bodies and the physical creation all around us, but with both! This is the good news that Paul announces in Romans 8:18–24: we are only fully saved when our bodies are raised and the whole creation joins us in its liberation from the effects of the fall.

Much of Christian faith and practice has also tended either to divorce the kingdom of God from or confuse it with the kingdoms of this world. Divorcing the kingdom of God from the kingdoms of this world is accomplished by failing to recognize that all of creation, especially all humans, stand already in a relationship to God as creator and judge in the covenant of creation. We all are bound together ethically in mutual responsibility. Each person, Christian or not, bears God's image, and we can work side by side with non-Christians to fulfill the scriptural command to show love to our neighbors. We must therefore take this world seriously, because we share with non-Christians that image of God and participate with them in ordinary secular callings and cultural endeavors. At the same time, the fall in Eden marks the breaking of this covenant, and since then humanity has developed along two distinct lines: those who build cities and those who call on the name of the Lord (Gen. 4:17–26). Those two lines intersect in the individual Christian, who is a citizen of both kingdoms. But the two kingdoms are distinct. The covenant of creation is not the same as the covenant of grace, and the world is not the church. The kingdom of God does not advance through cultural achievement but through divine rescue. Covenant theology marvelously unites these crucial commitments without confusing them.

Still another benefit of the covenantal grid is the way in which it gives proper place to doctrinal and practical concerns without simply surrendering one to the other. I have found covenant theology particularly enriching when it comes to the frequent warfare

between faith and practice—in other words, that all too common debate between doctrine and life or "head knowledge" and "heart knowledge," knowing and doing. In the covenantal thinking we find in Scripture, there is no such thing as true knowledge without love and obedience. To know God is actually, in the Hebrew language, to *ac*knowledge God—that is, to walk after God in the way that a servant walked behind a king in a solemn procession, recognizing his sovereignty. One of the rich biblical terms here is *hesed*, or "covenant loyalty." Because such a theology does not arise out of abstract concepts and supposedly universal principles, but out of the historical fact of an actual covenant constitution, it is simultaneously theoretical and practical. The very context of covenant theology is practical: a concrete community life framed, criticized, normed, and corrected by a divinely prescribed pattern of existence.

Related to this is the concern to relate justification and sanctification. In our day, as in others, the truth that we are declared right before God on the basis of someone else's "covenantal loyalty" (*hesed*)—namely, Christ's—is under attack. Covenant theology sees the justification of the individual before God and the justification of God in the great trial of history as two sides of the same coin. It also sees God's declaration in justification as crucially related to this verdict's effect in the new birth, sanctification, and finally, glorification. With its distinction between God's "command" and "promise," the conditional type of covenant God made with humanity in Adam and at Sinai and the unconditional oath he made to the eternal Son, to Adam and Eve after the fall, to Abraham, David, and now to us in Christ, covenant theology is able to articulate the subtle but important nuances that we find in Scripture. It does this without either divorcing law from gospel or confusing them.

Similarly, covenant theology provides a broader biblical context for relating divine and human agency. A covenant involves two parties, so if we begin with the covenant rather than with abstract philosophical questions, the whole discussion changes

significantly. It is often supposed that Calvinism highlights a set of biblical passages on God's sovereignty, while Arminians emphasize other passages that teach human responsibility. Thus, this rivalry is simply the consequence of not teaching both with the correct scriptural balance. There certainly is a hyper-Calvinism that fits this description, preoccupied with a distorted concept of God's sovereignty that then pushes everything else to the periphery. Here we do encounter that deductive approach of a central dogma criticized above. But hyper-Calvinism is not Calvinism. When Reformed theology hears Scripture teaching both divine sovereignty and human responsibility, divine election and the universal offer of the gospel, it affirms both even though it confesses that it does not know quite how God coordinates them behind the scenes.

But Arminianism, like hyper-Calvinism, seems to begin with an all-controlling presupposition from which it deduces the possible interpretations of Scripture. That central dogma appears to be a certain libertarian concept of human freedom according to which human responsibility requires a will that is not only free of external coercion, but free of the preferences and character of the willing agent.

When we read all of these passages on divine sovereignty and human responsibility within the context of the covenant and its historical unfolding, however, abstract and speculative questions are exchanged for concrete and historical ones. God does not limit his sovereignty, or any of his other attributes, to make space for human freedom. Rather, his freedom is the very space within which our creaturely freedom is possible (Acts 17:24–28). But neither is God a capricious despot who exercises arbitrary power. Instead, he condescends not only to create, but to bind himself to his creation in the form of covenants.

By articulating its view of God's sovereignty within the context of Triune love in eternity (the covenant of redemption), solidarity with all that he has made (the covenant of creation), and his saving purposes in Christ and by his Spirit (the covenant of grace),

covenant theology is able to give proper place not only to "pro-sovereignty" verses in Scripture, but to those passages that emphasize also the significance of human action. In the covenant, both the Lord and the Servant are on trial for their faithfulness: there simply can be no choice between whose action we take seriously. This focus curbs our speculative tendencies. Not by probing God's secret counsels in eternity, but by concentrating on the historical unfolding of his covenants with us do we come to know that we are heirs in Christ. Doing so keeps our feet on the ground.

Covenant theology also helps us to read the Old and New Testaments together without confusing them. Many of us were raised in churches where we only rarely came into contact with the Old Testament, and even then it was usually in the form of Bible stories in which some moral trait could be held up to us for our emulation. But many Christians are not quite sure what to do with that part of their Bible. Does Scripture read as one book from Genesis to Revelation? Is there one plot? And related to this, one people? Or does the Old Testament give us one plan of salvation for one people (Israel) while the New Testament gives us a different plan of salvation for a different people (the church)?

Covenant theology begins with continuity rather than discontinuity, not because of any a priori bias, but because Scripture itself moves from promise to fulfillment, not from one distinct program to another and then back again. At the same time, covenant theology recognizes in Scripture itself a distinction between specific types of covenants. Some demand unswerving obedience as a condition of their fulfillment, such as the covenant made by the people at Sinai.

To read Deuteronomy, for example, as if it were timeless principles of blessing and cursing is to confuse this covenant concerning a national, geopolitical entity (i.e., the nation of Israel) with the eternal plan of redemption carried forward in the unconditional divine promise to Abraham and fulfilled in Christ. Again, covenant theology helps enormously in understanding both the continuities and discontinuities as we read Scripture. It helps us to see the basic

continuity between the old and new covenants in terms of a single covenant of grace running throughout, as well as the *discontinuity within* even the Old Testament itself when it comes to the principle of a unilateral divine promise and an arrangement dependent on personal obedience to all that God commands.

Covenant theology can also help us pull together the often ambiguous relationship between Word and sacrament. Throughout the history of God's covenantal dealings, a verbal pronouncement of the covenant, including its blessings and curses, is enacted, sealed, and ratified by public and visible rituals. Today, various Christian traditions are divided between Word-centered and sacrament-centered orientations. Some churches seem at least in practice to assume that we could get along fine without baptism and the Lord's Supper as long as we had preaching (and perhaps a good choir!). Other churches seem—again, in practice if not always in theory—to assume that the real business is the spectacle of the sacrament itself. Instead, we need to reaffirm in our day that preaching and sacrament, verbal renewal of the covenant and visual confirmation of our participation in it, are inseparable. This mutual interdependence of Word and sacrament is best confirmed not by theories about what we think is useful in church, but by appeal to scriptural context in which both arise as the "cutting of a covenant."

Finally, we could mention the cleavage one often feels today between the nurture of the Christian body and its mission to the world. Alongside an emphasis on the covenant community and therefore the intergenerational shape of disciple-making through the public gathering there is the call to extend the family through personal as well as corporate witness.

From Timeless Ideas to Historical Events

As Old Testament scholar Walther Eichrodt argued, "the covenant-union between Yahweh and Israel is an original element in all sources, despite their being in fragmentary form."[6]

From the very beginning, the Israelites regarded themselves as a coalition of tribes committed not to nationalism nor bound by political aims, but "called out" by God to belong to him by means of a covenant. Thus, "God's disclosure of himself is not grasped speculatively, not expounded in the form of a lesson; it is as he breaks in on the life of his people in his dealings with them and moulds them according to his will that he grants them knowledge of his being."[7] The promissory character of this covenant "provides life with a goal and history with a meaning."

> Because of this the fear that constantly haunts the pagan world, the fear of arbitrariness and caprice in the Godhead, is excluded. With this God men know exactly where they stand; an atmosphere of trust and security is created, in which they find both the strength for a willing surrender to the will of God and joyful courage to grapple with the problems of life. . . . In this way history acquires a value which it does not possess in the religions of the ancient civilizations. . . . Their view of the divine activity was too firmly imprisoned in the thought-forms of their Nature-mythology. In Israel, on the other hand, the knowledge of the covenant God and his act of redemption aroused the capacity to understand and to present the historical process, at first only in the limited framework of the national destiny but later also universally, as the effect of a divine will.[8]

It was chiefly the concept of covenant (with its corollary, election) that guarded against a civil religion and made Yahweh's will rather than national aspirations the basis for life.[9] Not only the Old Testament, but the New Testament as well, can be understood only from the perspective of God's covenantal ways.[10]

Indeed, we do live in a world of broken promises and broken dreams. Furthermore, there are lots of "covenants" in the Bible. But is the covenant motif so crucial in Scripture, important enough to be regarded as its architectural structure? And if so, what specific kinds of covenants are definitive here? Answering those two questions will be the purpose of the following chapters.