

How old is covenant theology?

In one sense, I believe covenant theology is as old as the Bible. But church-historically speaking, when did Christian theologians begin to view the Bible as covenantally structured? I believe the answer to that question is quite long ago, way before the Reformation and the Westminster Assembly's *Westminster Confession of Faith*. I say this due to a book I read by Irenaeus of Lyons, *On the Apostolic Preaching* (see below).

Irenaeus lived from about A.D. 130-200. He is best known for his anti-Gnostic *Against Heresies*. The governing principle of his hermeneutic was the doctrine of recapitulation, according to Bray.¹ Inscripturated revelation was intended to take us back to what Adam had in the Garden. He viewed Christ as the new or last Adam who started the human race on a path of salvation that culminates in perfection. Though he viewed scriptural revelation as progressive, he denied any progressive or evolutionary view of mankind.² Irenaeus saw the various epochs of redemptive history structured around four covenants – Adam, Noah, Moses, and the Gospel.³

Irenaeus also wrote *On the Apostolic Preaching*. According to John Behr, this is the first extant “summary of Christian teaching.”⁴ Irenaeus claims to have known Polycarp of Smyrna, who had known the apostles, which makes his work especially important. Behr says that

Irenaeus follows the example of the great speeches in Acts, recounting all the various deeds of God culminating in the exaltation of His crucified Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the bestowal of His Holy Spirit and the gift of a new heart of flesh.⁵

What is striking is that Irenaeus utilizes the Old Testament for “the foundation of his presentation.”⁶ He viewed “Christ and Christianity as the fulfillment of the Old Testament by means of a christological-typological reading of the text.”⁷ He also saw biblical revelation as salvation history “structured according to the various covenants of God with man.”⁸

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¹ Bray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 81.

² Bray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 81.

³ St. Irenaeus of Lyons, Translation and Introduction by John Behr, *On the Apostolic Preaching* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997), 8, n. 1.

⁴ Behr in *On the Apostolic Preaching*, 7.

⁵ Behr in *On the Apostolic Preaching*, 7.

⁶ Behr in *On the Apostolic Preaching*, 7.

⁷ Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation*, 67. For an example of Irenaeus' allegorizing tendency see Johnson, *Him We Proclaim*, 103.

⁸ Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation*, 67. See p. 69 for a summary of Irenaeus' hermeneutical practice.

A Typical Objection to the Covenant of Works

Richard C. Barcellos

Introduction: Many have denied the covenant of works for various reasons. For sake of space, I want to deal with one typical objection.

Objection stated: Probably the most obvious objection, and a very common one, is that the word “covenant” is nowhere to be found in the first two chapters of Genesis. In fact, the Hebrew word for covenant does not occur in the book of Genesis until chapter 6. These observations lead to the conclusion, so goes the objection, that there is no covenant in the Bible until Genesis 6. The covenant of works, then, is unbiblical and absolutely lacks biblical evidence.¹ It is an extra-biblical, human construct imposed on the Bible to justify one’s theological system, which obviously needs re-casting. The covenant of works has human origins, not divine. It is man’s theology, not God’s. Put in the form of a question, this objection can be stated as follows: How can there be a covenant in Genesis 2 if Moses does not say so?

Objection answered: I will answer under the four points below.

First, this objection assumes that if a word is not in a text its concept cannot be there either. This is the word-concept fallacy. The Bible itself, however, sees concepts in texts and then uses words that do not occur in the text being referenced to describe those concepts. For example, consider Acts 2:22-31. Here Peter references Psalm 16:8-11. Then notice what he does in 2:31. He uses terms that are not in the Psalm to describe concepts from the Psalm. He says that David “spoke of the resurrection of the Christ.” The terms “resurrection” and “Christ” do not occur in the Psalm. Peter uses words to describe concepts implicit in the Psalm though not used explicitly by the psalmist. The point is this: Concepts can be present in texts without the words we normally use to describe them. If I said, “Base hit, home run, strike three, and walk-off single,” you would, most likely, reduce those phrases and the concepts indicated by them to a single word – baseball – yet I did not use the word baseball.

Second, there are words used outside of the Garden narrative to describe Adam and his Edenic vocation which are not contained in the narrative of Genesis 1-2. Let’s consider three texts.

¹ See Richard Mayhue, *The Master’s Seminary Journal*, 18.2, Fall 2007, 221 and 225 for such claims.

In Luke 3:38, Adam is called “the son of God.” However, Moses does not call Adam the son of God in Genesis and, in fact, the word “son” first occurs in Genesis 4:17 with reference to Enoch’s son. Here’s my point: If God tells me Adam was a son of God, it does not matter where He tells me. The case is settled, even if He tells me in Luke 3. Also, Adam did not first become a son of God when Luke penned his Gospel. He was constituted as such at his creation. Therefore, the concept of Adam as a son of God is implicit in the Genesis 1-2 narrative even though the word “son” is nowhere to be found there.

In Romans 5:14, Adam is called “a type of Him who was to come.” However, Moses does not call Adam a type of Christ in Genesis and, in fact, the word “type” first occurs in Romans 5:14. If God tells me Adam was a type of Christ, it does not matter where He tells me. The case is settled, even if He tells me in Romans 5. Also, Adam did not first become a type of Christ when Paul penned Romans. Therefore, the concept of Adam as a type of Christ is implicit in the Genesis 1-2 narrative even though the word “type” is nowhere to be found there.

In 1 Corinthians 15:22, Paul says, “For as in Adam all die...” However, Moses does not tell us that Adam was the representative of men in the Genesis narrative. The phrase “in Adam” is not in the book of Genesis or anywhere else in the Old Testament. As a matter of fact, the phrase “in Adam” occurs only in 1 Corinthians 15:22. If God tells me “in Adam all die,” it does not matter where He tells me. The case is settled, even if He tells me in 1 Corinthians 15. Also, all did not die in Adam when Paul penned 1 Corinthians 15. Therefore, the concept of Adam as the representative man in the Garden is implicit in the Garden narrative even though the words “in Adam” are nowhere to be found there.

Third, the Bible itself, looking back upon Adam in the Garden, uses the explicit language of covenant.

Consider Moses’ subsequent and inspired reflection upon the acts of God at creation as recorded for us in Genesis 2:4ff. It is important to understand the relationship between God’s acts and the Holy Scripture. In large part, the Scripture is the recording, interpretation, and application of God’s previous acts. In other words, the Scripture writers don’t simply record God’s acts (such as the Garden narrative), they interpret them; they do theology. For example, our Lord Jesus Christ lived and died before the divine interpretation of His sufferings and glory were given to us in the form of the New Testament. Likewise, the creating act of God occurred prior to Moses’ writing about it. My point is this, in Genesis 2:4,

Moses goes from the term Elohim for God to the phrase Yahweh Elohim, Yahweh being the covenantal name of God and known to be that by those for whom Moses wrote (i.e., the ancient Israelites). Most believe that at Genesis 2:4 Moses goes from creation in general to the apex of creation, man in God's image and his responsibility to God. The use of Yahweh here could indicate the covenantal status of man in relation to God. This suggests that covenant and the creation of man go together. Moses, reflecting upon God's act of creation, uses the covenant name of God in the context of discussing Adam and his Edenic vocation.

Consider the words of the prophet Isaiah.

⁵ The earth is also polluted by its inhabitants, for they transgressed laws, violated statutes, broke the everlasting covenant. ⁶ Therefore, a curse devours the earth, and those who live in it are held guilty. Therefore, the inhabitants of the earth are burned, and few men are left. (Isa. 24:5-6)

First, the curse which extends to the entire earth came about due to transgressed laws, violated statutes, and a broken covenant. *Second*, since the earth was cursed due to Adam's sin as our representative, Adam broke covenant with God in the Garden of Eden and the effects of his covenant-breaking affects "those who live on the earth." *Third*, here is a prophet, writing long after Adam was created and long after Moses wrote, utilizing principles that first started with Adam to explain the universal guilt of man. In this sense, Isaiah was very Pauline.

Consider the words of the prophet Hosea. I realize this text is disputed as far as its translation goes. I think the NASB's translation is the preferred one. You can read B. B. Warfield's study of the history of this text in his *Selected Shorter Writings*, I, for details, as well as the chapter in *The Law is not of Faith* on this passage. Herman Witsius cited this text in support of the covenant of works, as did Brakel and others. In fact, Richard Muller says, "The text indicated, as virtually all of the patristic and medieval commentators concluded, a prelapsarian covenant made by God with Adam and broken in the fall."²

First, in Hosea 6:7, Israel is likened unto Adam. "But like Adam they have transgressed the covenant..." (Hos. 6:7). *Second*, both Adam and Israel broke a covenant imposed upon them by God. They both disobeyed, they sinned and violated a covenant. *Third*, both covenants were conditional, requiring the

² Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* (Volume Two): *Holy Scripture – The Cognitive Foundation of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003 [second edition]), 437, *PRRD*, II, hereinafter.

obedience of those in the covenant to enjoy the benefits of the covenant. "...in the day that you eat from it you will surely die" (Gen. 2:17; cf. Exod. 19:5-6 for the conditional nature of the Mosaic Covenant). *Fourth*, here is yet another prophet looking back at previous revelation making explicit what was implicit in it. Subsequent revelation often makes explicit what was implicit in antecedent revelation. The inspired prophet gives us God's understanding of one of the similarities between ancient Israel and Adam. Both had a covenant imposed on them by God and both transgressed their covenants.

Fourth, consider why it is called the covenant *of works*. It is called this due to the fact that the covenant was conditioned on Adam's obedience or works. The term "works" in the phrase "covenant of works" is a synonym for "obedience." It is a term that reflects subsequent biblical (and therefore infallible) reflection upon Adam's Edenic vocation (Rom. 5:12-21). Romans 5:19 justifies this term, when it says, "For as through the one man's *disobedience* the many were made sinners, even so through the *obedience* of the One the many will be made righteous" (emphases mine). The opposite of "disobedience" is "obedience." A legitimate synonym for "obedience" is "works." The term "works" is also a good choice of words because it contrasts with "grace" and "gift" in Romans 5:17. Paul says there:

For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of *grace* and of the *gift* of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ. (Rom. 5:17; emphases mine).

Adam's disobedience brought death; Christ's obedience brings life, a quality of life Adam did not have, i.e., eternal life (John 17:3), by the way.

Conclusion: I think the objection is cleared, though I could give more counter-arguments. The account of Genesis 1-2 contains more than meets the eye. It is a narrative, not an exhaustive theological essay drawing out all the implications embedded or assumed in the terms it uses. It is one of those texts that ends-up being referenced many times in subsequent revelation. Other texts assume it and draw out of it what is implied in it. What is implicit in it becomes explicit by the subsequent inspired and infallible word of God. The biblical writers were theologians after all. Remember, subsequent revelation often makes explicit what is implicit in antecedent revelation. In other words, the Bible often comments upon and explains itself. And, in the case of Adam in the Garden, this is exactly what happens. The Bible uses covenantal language at times when it looks back upon Adam's Edenic vocation and it uses language that warrants the term works to

describe the nature of that covenant. Simply because the phrase “covenant of works” does not occur in Genesis 1 and 2 does not mean the concept is absent.

Was Adam placed in a covenantal relationship with God?

Unfortunately, some deny a covenant at creation between God and Adam. I think they are wrong. Here is a brief attempt to show that Adam was in a covenantal relationship with God from the beginning.

At Genesis 2:4, Moses goes from using the word *Elohim*, translated “God,” to using “LORD God.” The word “LORD” is *Yahweh*, the covenant name of God. This could well indicate the covenantal status of man at creation. Surely, ancient Hebrew readers or hearers would have noticed this change. This at least suggests that covenant and the creation of man go together.

The prophet Isaiah may help us here.

⁵ The earth is also polluted by its inhabitants, for they transgressed laws, violated statutes, broke the everlasting covenant. ⁶ Therefore, a curse devours the earth, and those who live in it are held guilty. Therefore, the inhabitants of the earth are burned, and few men are left. (Isa. 24:5-6)

The curse which extends to the earth came about due to a violated covenant. Since the earth was cursed due to Adam’s sin as our representative, Adam broke covenant with God in the garden of Eden.

The prophet Hosea may help us further. In Hosea 6:7 Israel is likened unto Adam. “But like Adam they have transgressed the covenant; There they have dealt treacherously against Me” (Hos. 6:7). Both Adam and Israel broke a covenant imposed upon them by God. Both disobeyed and violated a covenant. Both covenants were conditional, requiring the obedience of those in the covenant to enjoy the benefits of the covenant. “...in the day that you eat from it you will surely die” (Gen. 2:17; cf. Exod. 19:5-6 for the conditional nature of the Mosaic Covenant).

These factors taken together argue that God brought Adam into a covenantal relationship with Him at his creation. Adam’s covenantal relationship with God, or his communion with God as a sinless image-bearer, depended upon his obedience to God’s law. This is what theologians call the covenant of works or obedience. It is called this due to the fact that the covenant was conditioned on Adam’s obedience. The term “works” in the phrase “covenant of works” is a synonym for obedience. It is a term that reflects subsequent biblical reflection upon Adam’s creational vocation (Rom. 5:12-21). Romans 5:19 justifies this term, when it says, “For as through the one man’s *disobedience* the many were made sinners, even so through the *obedience* of the One the many will be made righteous” (emphases mine). The opposite of “disobedience” is “obedience.” A legitimate synonym for “obedience” is “works.” The term “works” is also a good choice of words because it contrasts with “grace” and “gift” in Romans 5:17. Paul says there:

For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of *grace* and of the *gift* of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ. (Rom. 5:17; emphases mine).

A sinless image-bearer was called by God to be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth with others like him. He was to subdue the earth and rule over other creatures, starting in the garden of Eden and going out from there. He was made of body and soul outside the garden. He was put in the garden to begin the task assigned to him as a priest. He was given a law to obey and a helper to compliment him so he could fulfill his task. He was a son of God. He was a spokesman for God (i.e., a prophet) and a ruler (i.e., king). He was in covenant with God. But he violated

God's covenant. He sinned. He transgressed God's law. He was subsequently cursed, clothed with animal skins, then exiled from the garden at its eastern edge (Gen. 3:8-24). In essence, Adam got kicked out of God's house. Now he's sinful, is a terrible image of God, a covenant breaker, and no longer the keeper of God's garden-temple. What will God do now?

⁴ But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, ⁵ so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. ⁶ Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" ⁷ Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God. (Gal. 4:4-7 NASB)

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