

I. WHAT IS COVENANT THEOLOGY?

“Covenant theology is a ‘big picture’ issue, describing the relationship between God and his people throughout the ages. It is not merely about some parts of the Bible or specific theological and practical questions. It shows us how to see the unity of the Bible’s message, how to read the whole Bible, how to know God, and how to live.” — Ryan McGraw¹

Covenant theology describes the relationship between God and his people throughout redemptive history. It is the framework that shows us the unity of the Bible’s message, teaches us how to read the whole Bible, and shapes how we know God and live before him.

Westminster Confession of Faith 7.1

“The distance between God and the creature is so great that, even though rational creatures are responsible to obey him as their Creator, yet they could never experience any enjoyment of him as their blessing and reward except by way of some voluntary condescension on his part, which he has been pleased to express by way of covenant.”

In this statement, we see that God must initiate a relationship with man — and he does so by way of covenant. God does not relate to us as individuals, but through covenant representatives.

II. WHAT IS A COVENANT?

- “A relationship that God establishes with us and guarantees by his word.” — *The Children’s Catechism*
- “A relationship between two or more persons.” — *Augustine*
- “A bond in blood sovereignly administered.” — *O. Palmer Robertson*
- “An agreement that binds two or more parties together by promises, conditions, and sanctions.” — *Ryan McGraw*

III. CHARACTERISTICS OF BIBLICAL COVENANTS²

- **Oaths.** Covenants were made by swearing an oath (Gen. 21:27; Ezek. 16:59; Hos. 10:4).
- **Sacrifices.** Covenants were often ratified by the shedding of blood. The parties would literally “cut a covenant” (Gen. 15:8; Jer. 34:18–20), sealing the deal by cutting animals in two and walking between the pieces.
- **Blessings and curses.** Keeping the covenant brought blessing; violating it brought a curse (Ex. 19:5). God even swore a curse upon himself should he violate the covenant made with Abraham.
- **Love.** Entering a covenant creates a relationship — a formal bond. The Hebrew *hesed* describes this covenant love: unfailing love, covenant loyalty (Deut. 7:9). The covenant is also meant to display God’s people’s love for him in return.
- **Witnesses.** Witnesses testify that the parties entered the agreement, confirm its terms, and can hold the parties accountable to their oaths (Gen. 31:44; Deut. 31:26).
- **Signs.** When God makes a covenant, he gives a sign as its seal:

Covenant	Sign	Key Texts
Adam	Tree of Life	Gen. 2
Noah	Rainbow	Gen. 6–9
Abraham	Circumcision	Gen. 15, 17
Moses	Sabbath	Ex. 19–24
David	Throne / Royal Line	2 Sam. 7; Ps. 89
New Covenant	Baptism & the Lord’s Supper	Jer. 31; Heb. 8

IV. THE THREE MAIN COVENANTS

- **1. Covenant of Redemption.** The eternal covenant among the three persons of the Triune God: the Father chose to save a people, the Son agreed to redeem them, and the Holy Spirit applies that redemption to God's people.
- **2. Covenant of Works.** The covenant God made with Adam at creation, before the fall. Life was promised to Adam and his posterity on condition of perfect, personal obedience.
- **3. Covenant of Grace.** The covenant made with Christ as the second Adam, and in him with all his elect. Christ represents his people and secures their salvation. This covenant is the broad framework in which God reveals his promises through a series of covenants running through redemptive history — each an administration of the one covenant of grace, seen in the table above: Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and the new covenant.

V. OTHER COVENANTS IN THE BIBLE

- **Friendship covenant.** Between two equal parties, as with David and Jonathan (1 Sam. 18:3).
- **Parity covenant.** Between rulers of equal power, as with Abraham and Abimelech (Gen. 21:27).
- **Lord-servant covenant.** Between a more powerful party and a lesser one, as with Joshua and the Gibeonites (Josh. 9:15).
- **Marriage covenant.** A permanent union between one man and one woman — one of the main ways the Bible describes God's relationship to his people (Hos. 3; Jer. 31; Ezek. 16; Eph. 5:25–33).

VI. THE BLESSINGS OF COVENANT THEOLOGY

1. **Covenant theology gives us a framework to understand and interpret the Bible.** The covenants are the unifying principle behind the big picture of the Bible. Understanding the Bible according to the unfolding of its covenants shows us how each part of Scripture relates to the whole — one story of redemption from Genesis to Revelation. God's promise in Genesis 3:15 that the seed of the woman would redeem his people is the thread that unites the promise to Abraham (Gen. 12, 15, 17), the promise to David, and the New Testament promise that those of faith are the true sons of Abraham (Gal. 3:14).
2. **Covenant theology shows us that salvation has always been by grace through faith.** The covenantal structure of the Bible reveals one people saved by grace throughout history. Old Testament saints looked forward to the coming of Christ; New Testament saints look back to his cross. Both Testaments focus on God's grace revealed through his Son — covenant theology emphasizes the unity and continuity between them.
3. **Covenant theology testifies to the glory of the Triune God.** The Father saves us by the work of the Son through the power of the Holy Spirit. Covenant theology is the unfolding story through which God reveals himself and his saving grace. The great covenantal promise of the Bible is, “I will be your God, and you will be my people” — revealing God's desire to redeem a people for himself and dwell with them forever (Gen. 3; Rev. 21–22).
4. **Covenant theology helps us live the Christian life.** Understanding the covenants helps us see how Christians relate to the law and the Ten Commandments. God redeemed Israel from Egypt by grace, then gave them his law at Mt. Sinai. Likewise, he has redeemed us by grace and calls us to obey his moral law.
5. **Covenant theology gives us a great love for the church.** Knowing the covenants helps us understand the importance of corporate worship and the role of the sacraments — the covenant signs — in the Christian life. God does not deal with us merely as individuals but as a covenant family, which clarifies the value of the human family, household faith, and corporate worship.

¹ Ryan M. McGraw, *What Is Covenant Theology? Tracing God's Promises through the Son, the Seed, and the Sacraments* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2024), 3.

² J. V. Fesko, *Signed, Sealed, Delivered: An Introduction to Covenant Theology* (Sanford, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2025).