**Fundamentals of Our Faith from the Beginning***Frameworks and the Future***Biblical Theologies: Covenant Theology**

1. **What is Covenant Theology?**
   1. Like dispensationalism, it is a theological framework for Bible interpretation.
   2. A covenant is “a relationship of ‘oaths and bonds’ and involves mutual, though not necessarily equal, commitments.”[[1]](#footnote-1)
   3. It sees the theological concept of covenant as the organizing principle for God’s dealings with mankind, from creation to fall to redemption to consummation and believes that God has always graciously dealt with mankind in covenant relationship beginning with Adam.
   4. It is closely tied to Reformed Theology and has also been called Federal Theology.
2. **What is the history of Covenant Theology?**
   1. Covenant theologians argue that this is the structural framework of the Bible, so it dates back to the Garden of Eden.
   2. Covenant Theology was most clearly systematized during the Reformation.
      1. Huldrych Zwingli and Johannes Oecolampadius were among the first to speak of God’s work of salvation in terms of a covenant of works and a covenant of grace.
      2. John Calvin’s *Institutes* articulated the foundations of covenant theology.
   3. The Westminster Confession (1646) provided the classical statements of covenant theology and established the standards for the Church of England and heavily influenced others (e.g. Church of Scotland, Presbyterians, etc.).
   4. Baptists (1689 LBC) and Wesleyans (Methodists) were also covenant theologians though with key variations.
   5. The Puritan divines were covenant theologians: John Owen, Samuel Rutherford, Matthew Henry, Jonathan Edwards, etc.
   6. CT remained prominent even as dispensationalism grew: Charles Hodge, B.B. Warfield, Gresham Machen, etc.
   7. Recent/current proponents include: J.I. Packer, R.C. Sproul, Michael Horton, John Frame, etc.
3. **What are the key beliefs of Covenant Theology?**
   1. A sound hermeneutic and consistent exegesis will reveal a continuity between the Old and New Testaments and will establish God’s plan of redemption as the focal point of God’s revelation.
   2. The narrative of the Bible is progressive and begins with creation and proceeds to the fall, to redemption, to consecration, and to consummation and is framed/worked out in covenants.
   3. There are three overarching covenants in the Bible:
      1. *The covenant of redemption*: the eternal agreement among the Godhead to redeem a people for God’s glory, in which God chose a people to save, the Son agreed to redeem them with His life, and the Holy Spirit agreed to apply the work of redemption to them.
      2. *The covenant of works (Creation/Adamic):* enacted by God with Adam as the representative of mankind (federal head) and in which God promised to confirm life to Adam and his posterity under the terms of perfect obedience.
      3. *The covenant of grace:* the promise of eternal life for all who believe on Jesus Christ who is the promised last Adam and the federal head of the elect and whose life and death is the substitutionary fulfillment of the covenant of works on behalf of all those given to Him by the Father.
   4. The covenant of grace is first revealed in Genesis 3:15 and runs through all of the covenants and, therefore, all of Scripture. All of the various covenants of the Old Testament are subsumed under this overarching covenant of grace.[[2]](#footnote-2)
   5. There has always only been one elect people of God, the Church, though she has existed as a remnant within the nation of Israel and now in the visible Church.
   6. In respect to the covenant of works (Sinai), the New Covenant is “an entirely different covenant with an entirely different basis;”[[3]](#footnote-3) while in respect to the covenant of grace it is not *new* but is a *renewal* that is only qualitatively different from what preceded it.[[4]](#footnote-4)
   7. God’s covenant people have always been a “mixed” community of elect (believers) and non-elect (unbelievers), and this continues in the church (invisible/visible).
   8. The genealogical principle of the Old Covenant is not abrogated in the New Covenant (“to you and your children”), and this is why the sign of the New Covenant (baptism) must be given to infants just as the Old Covenant sign was given to infants (circumcision).
4. **What are some key arguments for Covenant Theology?**
   1. The covenants are not simply theological concepts but were historical realities rooted in a cultural context and are the repeated themes of Scripture.
   2. The discovery of ancient treaty texts[[5]](#footnote-5) has provided great insight into covenantal form and has confirmed the structure of biblical covenants.
   3. CT firmly establishes the doctrines of grace and esp. the doctrine of salvation by grace alone over against dispensationalism which denies the covenant of redemption and sees God dealing with His people differently in each epoch (differing “tests” imply different requirements).[[6]](#footnote-6)
   4. The Law/Gospel distinction is more clearly recognized and established by CT.
   5. The New Testament consistently uses the language and images of covenant (e.g. “beloved,” “elect,” “sons,” “people,” “bride,” “treasured possession,” etc.) to describe the Church.
   6. CT sees one tree in Romans 11 while recognizing different kinds of branches (natural vs. wild) whereas dispensationalists see only the different branches and mistake them for the tree.
   7. The meaning and significance of the sacraments in CT better accord with NT teaching, are more firmly established in the local church, and are not made subjective.[[7]](#footnote-7)
   8. The importance of the local church as covenant communities is rightly recognized, and covenant establishes the duties of members to one another—there is a real covenant community (over against the dispensational rejection of covenant membership and a corresponding emphasis upon the universal church).[[8]](#footnote-8)
5. **What are some key arguments against Covenant Theology?**
   1. CT amounts to a “replacement theology” and tends towards antisemitism.
   2. Without warrant, CT abrogates the land promises that were given to national Israel.
   3. CT does not use a literal hermeneutic when interpreting much Old Testament prophecy but tends to spiritualize or even allegorize the text.
   4. By denying the dispensational framework, CT does not properly divide the Scriptures and overlooks the clear evidence for God’s differing treatment in these differing epochs.
   5. CT tends to collapse the Covenant of Grace into the Abrahamic covenant and to reduce the Abrahamic covenant into its spiritual aspects alone.[[9]](#footnote-9)
   6. CT’s hermeneutic regarding the genealogical principle is similar to the dispensationalist’s insistence on the land promises and doesn’t account for the newness of the NC.
   7. In CT the only practical differences between the OC and NC peoples are that the NT Church is racially mixed and gospel knowledge is more advanced and widespread, but this does not account for the teaching found in Jeremiah 31 and throughout the NT.
   8. In the NT the sacraments are explicitly tied to faith (the outworking of regeneration) and nowhere explicitly tied to infants (the genealogical principle), and “birth” into the covenant is spiritual in contrast to physical (John 3; cf. 1:12-13) and is tied to regeneration (Jeremiah 31:33-34; Ezek. 36:25-28; ch. 37).
   9. Even within CT there is an intramural debate about the nature of the NC which betrays a basic problem with paedobaptism, i.e. is the NC made with the elect only or does God covenant with believers and their children, even those who are not elect. [[10]](#footnote-10) In other words, “are non-elect children who are baptized made to be true members of the NC and therefore become breakers of it?” (cf. Jeremiah 31:32, “not like the covenant which I made with their fathers…which they broke”; Ezek. 36:25-28; ch. 37, etc.).
   10. The NC formulation and promises do not seem to allow for the “mixed” community of CT.
   11. Because unbelievers do gather with the church and falsely profess Christ, CT concludes that the community is “mixed”, but this conflates our perception of the community with God’s reality (2 Tim. 2:19).
   12. The NC formulation and promises lead some CTs in the direction of baptismal regeneration.

1. Michael Horton as quoted by Stephen Wellum in *Kingdom through Covenant*, p. 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. There are differences of opinion as to this point. Some classify the covenants as either *works* or *grace* (e.g. Mosaic vs. Abrahamic). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Michael Horton as quoted by Stephen Wellum in *Kingdom through Covenant*, p. 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For example, Doug Wilson writes, “…the difference between the [Old and New] covenants is that the promises in the New are much better—meaning that the ratio of believer to unbeliever will drastically change” (*To a Thousand Generations*, p. 34-35). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. There are two broad treaty types: the Suzerain Vassel treaty (conditional) and the Royal Grant treaty (unconditional). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. CT overwhelmingly embraces the doctrines of grace whereas most dispensationalists tend toward Arminianism. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Dispensationalists tend toward strict memorialism and disconnect the ordinances from the local church. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In his book *Progressive Dispensationalism,* Craig Blaising connects this dispensational emphasis upon the universal Church with the formation of parachurch organizations like Navigators. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Louis Berkhof wrote, “This covenant [Abrahamic] is still in force and is *essentially identical* with the ‘new covenant’ of the present dispensation” (*Systematic Theology*, p. 633, emphasis added). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Cornelius Venema, “In the strictest sense of the covenant as a saving communion with God, the parties of the covenant of grace are the triune God and his elect people” (as quoted by Wellum, p. 68) vs. Horton, “[The NC] is a covenant made with believers and their children.” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)