

The Eschatology of Covenant Theology

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The aim of this paper is to give a survey of the eschatologies generated from within the school of Reformed Covenant Theology. Particular attention will be paid to the so-called “Covenant of Grace” as it functions as the main hermeneutical lens through which covenant thinkers interpret their Bibles.

1. The Idea of the Covenant in Reformed Covenant Theology.

Covenant Theology was outlined by some of the Reformers (e.g. Bullinger, Calvin, and, especially, Olevianus), but it received full systematization in England in the 17th Century in the Westminster Confession, in the writings of Robert Rollock, William Ames, and John Ball, and in Holland under Johannes Cocceius and Herman Witsius. It is an attempt to find a unifying principle between the Old and New Testaments. And, inasmuch as it is perceived to have succeeded, it gains a great authority in the minds of its adherents. Covenant theologians find two (sometimes three) Covenants which, they believe, govern all of God’s dealings with men. The first of these (in logical order) is the “Covenant of Redemption” – the agreement reached in eternity between the first two Persons of the Trinity to provide salvation for sinners. This covenant is the optional third in the system. The second is the so-called “Covenant of Works” which teaches that God entered into covenanted relations with Adam in the Garden of Eden. The third (and the most important to the system) is the “Covenant of Grace”. This is basically the covenant which God made with fallen man after Adam’s sin. Palmer Robertson defines it as “the relationship of God to his people subsequent to man’s fall into sin. Since man became incapable of works suitable for meriting salvation, this period has been understood as being controlled primarily by the grace of God.” It dictates all of God’s dealings with men – the elect (directly), and the non-elect (indirectly) alike. In a classic article, DTS Professor C. Fred Lincoln wrote:

“This covenant, it is declared, governs, qualifies, and limits all of God’s dealings with mankind from the Fall to the end of time. Their conception of the dispensations is that they are merely different “modes of administering” the Covenant of Grace. Therefore, in spite of the multitude of texts which place the “old covenant” of the law of Moses in direct contrast with the “new covenant” of grace in Christ, showing that the one was a failure and the other superseded it (comp. Jer 31:31–34; Heb 8:7–12, etc), in order to maintain the unbroken continuity of the Covenant of Grace, they are forced to the unscriptural and untenable position of saying that the law of Moses was a part of the grace covenant. Having refused to recognize the vital difference between man under the law and man under grace, which difference is so extensively set forth in Scripture, the covenant teachers naturally reject the thought of man being for the purpose of testing his submission to the will of God, under any responsibility distinct from grace in the centuries before Sinai.”

The Covenant of Grace is the “big idea” that pervades the thought of the Reformed believer. This can be seen in the way the phrase “the covenant” crops up in their writings, whether they be concerned with the past, the present, or, indeed, the future. A number of times in his book, Robertson makes it clear that the covenants are, in fact, one covenant. Furthermore, the Biblical

covenants like the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and the Davidic, are subsumed within the one grand “covenant of redemption (i.e. grace)” So that we may see this more clearly, it is needful to take a look at how the Covenant of Grace governs the way covenant theologians interpret the Scriptures.

2. The Covenant of Grace and The Hermeneutics of Covenant Theology.

As well as encompassing the explicit scriptural covenants like the Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and New Covenants, due to its extensive character, the “Covenant of Grace” basically flattens out these more easily identifiable covenants and merges them into one . This can be seen in the following except, which is one of the more blatant examples of using the Covenant of Grace as an interpretive “cookie-cutter” upon the explicit covenants:

“This one plan was hinted at even as Adam and Eve were driven from the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:15), and when God covered them with the skins of animals, requiring the shedding of blood to be an adequate coverage (Gen. 3:21), thereby giving a type of Calvary where the blood of Christ was poured out in order to institute the new covenant and make adequate coverage for our sins. However, from man’s perspective, that plan has been unfolded in sections as he was able to grasp it, and these integral parts of God’s eternal whole have been referred to (by accommodation) as the covenant with Abraham, the Mosaic Covenant, the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31), and so forth.”

Thus, the idea of the Covenant of Grace becomes the modus operandi of progressive revelation. This is what leads to a denial of the Biblical Dispensations and to a confounding of Israel with the Church. Covenant theologians see the “Covenant of Grace” as the unifying principle in Scripture which gives continuity to Biblical Theology. They dislike what they perceive to be Dispensationalism’s discontinuity, falsely charging it with teaching different ways of salvation, and with being preoccupied with the literalizing of the Old Testament eschatological promises to the nation of Israel.

In order better to comprehend the importance of the Covenant of Grace in this matter, we shall give the observations of some dispensationalist theologians who have concluded that the idea of the covenant, with its soteriological implications, dominates the hermeneutical methodology of covenant theologians.

Referring to the hermeneutics of Willem VanGemenen, dispensationalist Paul S. Karleen paraphrases him thus:

“There is a soteriological unity in the covenant of grace; it joins all God’s people across the testaments; to ask if we are to take the prophets literally is to ask the wrong question; the issue of the interpretation of the prophets is not one of literal versus spiritual/metaphoric/figurative but of the relation of the OT and NT, which is determined by the Covenant of Grace.”

Karleen goes on to add, *“There can be no question that the covenant of grace is the deciding factor in the covenant theologian’s eschatology.”*

This imposition of the all-embracing Covenant of Grace is also noticed by John Feinberg in his excellent treatment of “Systems of Discontinuity” between the Old Testament and the New.

“...Ask a covenant theologian to sketch the essence of his system and invariably he will begin with a discussion of the covenant of works, the covenant of grace, and the covenant of redemption. But, of course, all these relate to soteriology; and when they are made the basic categories for understanding Scripture, it becomes obvious why covenantal systems usually emphasize soteriology to the exclusion of other issues.”

To summarize, there is no removing the spectacles of the Covenant of Grace from off the noses of Covenant theologians. They believe it is the grand unifying theme of the Old and New Testaments, as well as the great interpretive grid of Scripture. It is a magnificent schema which facilitates the purpose of God in revealing Himself to His people. As Gerhaardus Vos, in one of his best pieces of writing, could say:

“...the leading principle of the covenant...is nothing but the open eye and the clear vision of the Reformed believer for the glorious plan of the grace of God, which arouses in him a consciousness of the covenant and keeps it alive, and which causes him to be so familiar with this scriptural idea and makes this train of thought so natural to him. How else could he receive and reflect the glory of his God, if he were not able to stand in the circle of light, where the beams penetrate to him from all sides? To stand in that circle means to be a party in the covenant, to live out of a consciousness of the covenant and to drink out of the fullness of the covenant.”

To Vos’s mind, the “consciousness of the covenant” dictates the approach to Scripture that he takes. This paradigm inevitably affects his hermeneutical pre-understanding. Another amillennialist, Anthony Hoekema, writes in a similar vein: “Amillennialists do not believe that sacred history is to be divided into a series of distinct and disparate dispensations but see a single covenant of grace running through all of that history. This covenant of grace is still in effect today and will culminate in the eternal dwelling together of God and his redeemed people on the new earth.”

3. Eschatological Options Available To Covenant Theology.

From what we have just seen it is obvious that any system of eschatology which will be acceptable to a covenant theologian must place the covenant of grace at the very start of its prophetic interpretation so that it can dictate the hermeneutic from the outset. This means that options will be circumscribed by the dominant covenantal idea. It also means that Dispensationalism, with its emphasis upon the various distinguishable administrations throughout the progress of revelation history, is completely unacceptable. This is especially true since dispensationalism rejects the standard Reformed view pertaining to the covenant of grace. What is more, the idea of the covenant in Reformed thought makes it essential for a grammatical-historical hermeneutic to be supplanted on those occasions when the unity of that overarching covenant is threatened by a plain reading of the passage in question. This study will narrow its scope to the trademark millennial traits which, more than anything else, define the eschatology of covenant theology.

That said, the millennial options available to those who filter their Bible interpretation through the Covenant of Grace are, Amillennialism; Postmillennialism; and, what is sometimes referred to as Covenant (or Historic) Premillennialism. These options will now be reviewed below.

- Option One: Amillennialism.

Amillennialism is the eschatological viewpoint which, among other things, insists that there will be no literal thousand-year Messianic kingdom upon earth. Louis Berkhof admitted that the Amillennial point of view was, “as the name indicates, purely negative.” Amillennialists believe the promises made to Israel in the Old Testament are fulfilled spiritually by the New Testament Church. Most place a heavy emphasis upon denying the literalness of Revelation Twenty, especially the first six verses. For them the six-times repeated reference to a “thousand years” is not a thousand years but an extended period of time reaching from the first coming of Christ to His future Second Advent. Thus, the Millennium was inaugurated when Christ came. They stress the symbolic meaning of many (but not all) of the numbers in the Book of Revelation, employing a seemingly arbitrary numerology to secure their interpretations. This is even the case when the passages in view are neither poetic nor apocalyptic in genre (e.g. Ezekiel 40-48).

As Covenant Theologians, amillennialists interpret the Scriptures under the rubric of the Covenant of Grace – a covenant that is stated nowhere between the covers of the Bible. This means that amillennialism has to employ two methods of interpretation. The literal method, and the figurative, or, spiritualizing method. This latter method of interpreting Scripture is used in redirecting prophetic portions which would, if allowed to speak literally, overthrow the notion of one Church in both Testaments, (though oftentimes the prophecies concerning the first coming of Christ are assigned a literal meaning).

There are basically two forms of amillennialism: the Augustinian view, and the “Warfieldian” view. Augustinian amillennialism teaches that the thousand-year period mentioned in Revelation Twenty is figurative, and stands for the New Testament era from the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, through to the last judgment and the creation of the new heavens and new earth. The millennium, then, is what dispensationalists call the Church-age, upon earth. Christ is now reigning on a spiritualized throne of David, over a spiritual Israel, for a spiritualized millennium. The saints on earth are also presently reigning spiritually with Christ.

The second view, which we have called the “Warfieldian” view, affirms everything that is stated above save for the identity of those who are partakers of the first resurrection and the millennium. This view was earlier taught by the German scholar Klieforth, who, in 1874, posited that the martyred saints now in heaven, are reigning in the spiritual millennium. B.B. Warfield popularized this view in the United States. He believed the first resurrection represented “the symbolical description of what has befallen those who while dead yet live in the Lord.” They were in the “intermediate state” of those who were “saved in principle if not in complete fruition.” All amillennialists posit a spiritual resurrection in Revelation 20:4, but a physical resurrection in Revelation 20:5-6.

- Option Two: Postmillennialism

Postmillennialism was the predominant belief among both the Puritans and the Princeton theologians. It teaches that the Church brings in the kingdom through the preaching of the Gospel to fulfill the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20. They cite passages like Psalm 47; 72:1-11; 97:5; Zechariah 9:10; and Matthew 13:31-33 in support of their notion that the world will be successfully evangelized. After the Church-generated millennium (a spiritualized period of time which could conceivably last many millennia), in which the world will be “christianized,” Jesus Christ (who has been reigning invisibly in heaven), will return. The view might well be characterized as “Christian Utopianism.” Postmillennialists like to talk about the “Church-militant,” a phrase meaning to them that the Church will convert the world, or at least subdue it under Christian influence. Believing this as they do, postmillennialists like to point out that their eschatology is optimistic. As an example of postmillennial optimism we reproduce these words of J. Marcellus Kik:

“We need not wait for the so-called future millennium. What we do want is peace amongst the nations and less wickedness. But that is promised if we go forth conquering and to conquer in the name of Christ. Let us not be blind to what has already been accomplished and thus rob God of glory. The absence of greater victories is due to our lack of faith, and not because of the absence of millennium blessings.”

Besides a too materialistic conception of millennium blessings another difficulty is that we have not paid enough attention to the parables of our Lord which indicate that the millennial blessings will pervade the earth gradually...Both the amil and premil are in error when they maintain that the millennial blessings foretold in the Old Testament must come about by a cataclysmic act at the second coming of Christ. That is not the teaching of the Bible. Both in the Old Testament and in the New it is taught that the Kingdom blessings would come about by an almost imperceptible, gradual growth.”

This quotation reveals the driving mechanism behind postmillennialist optimism. The wondrous blessings of the millennium have already been given to the Church. The only difficulty is in the Church’s realization of those blessings. If only Christians would live up to their high calling the world and its institutions would be claimed for Christ! Is it any wonder that they often disparage the “pessimistic” view of the end-times advocated by premillennialists?

It is interesting to note how postmillennialism as a belief rises and wanes depending on the attitudes of the times. If the age is progressive and optimistic, if there have been no wars for a time, postmillennialists point to the fact that the world is getting better. Thus they often increase or decrease in numbers according to the drift of current events. It has been noted that this eschatology flourished in the late eighteenth, and the early to late nineteenth centuries, fuelled by progress in science, Revivals, and the growth of missions. After the Second World War, there were scarcely any postmillennialists, save for the liberal theologians who believed that man is innately good, and is getting better and better. But in the last thirty years, a movement has grown in America which is stridently postmillennial. This is the movement known as Dominion Theology, or, Reconstructionism. This is the name given to the movement within Reformed Theology which seeks to reconstruct society to fit its template of Christian law and ethics. Their great foundational text is Matthew 5:17-19, though they take pains to translate *plerosai* as “confirm” rather than “fulfill,” an interpretation that is exegetically suspect to say the least.

The unofficial founder of this movement is the late Rousas J. Rushdoony, but many of the basic premises of Reconstructionism can be seen in the works of the Swiss Reformer Pierre Viret, as well as among some of the Presbyterian Puritans. It is certain that the recent upsurge in interest in postmillennialism is due in large part to this movement. Reconstructionists believe that the “theonomic mandate” demands an optimistic view of the subjugation of the kosmos by the Gospel prior to the Second Advent.

- Option Three: Historic Premillennialism

Historic Premillennialism (also called Covenant Premillennialism) has a long history in the Christian Church. It basically goes along with amillennialism and postmillennialism in holding to two methods of interpretation, but it does see a thousand-year reign of Christ in Revelation Twenty. Although not all historic premillennialists believe that the thousand years is literal (e.g. George Eldon Ladd), for the most part, they do. Many early premillennialists saw a correlation between the six days of creation, with its seventh-day rest, and a six thousand year history of the world followed by a thousand year “sabbath.” Historic Premillennialism, because it accepts covenant theology, does not see different administrations (dispensations) in the history of revelation. A key difference between Covenant Premillennialism and Dispensationalism is the fact that Dispensationalists hold to a distinction between the Church and Israel, whereas Covenant Premillennialists blur this distinction, believing only that Israel has a future in the plan of God, but not as the head nation among the nations of the world in the Messianic kingdom. All historic premillennarians are post-tribulationists.

4. Inductive Versus Deductive Eschatologies.

I have tried to show that the covenant theologian is implacably devoted to a view of the covenant of grace which prevents him from considering any eschatology that will not bend under its guiding authority. Dispensational Premillennialism is just not an option for them. The blinkers are on and they are content to keep them on. For this reason dispensationalists need to be wary of critiques of their system from covenant theologians. This is not to sound superior; we need and appreciate good sound criticism, and there are few better at it than these brethren. But it is the case that any critique from that quarter will inevitably presuppose the single covenant of grace, and that it will form the foundation for their censures. Here, for example, is John Gerstner, in full flourish, expostulating with dispensationalists about this very thing:

“Does the Scripture not set forth the idea that God gave His Son to die as a sacrifice for our sins and that, when we accept that sacrifice, we are saved by that grace? When the dispensationalist says that there is no way of salvation in any dispensation except the way of the blood of Jesus Christ, is he not affirming the “all-time covenant of grace”? Is he not therein showing that the covenant of grace is not only not untenable, but is absolutely indispensable? Does the dispensationalist, in other words, have any objection to the covenant of grace except the absence of the very expression itself?”

We may reply to the above by answering, “yes”, “no”, “no”, and, “yes.” Gerstner’s problem is that to him, the covenant of grace is so all-encompassing it blots out the wording of Scripture. The sacrifice of Christ was on the basis of the New Covenant (1 Cor. 11:25). There simply is no

such thing as “the covenant of grace!” All of God’s dealings with sinners are by grace, but there need not be and is not any covenant of grace.

5. Conclusion.

In this essay we have tried to show that the eschatology of Covenant Theology is proscribed by the parameters of the covenant of grace. Although we recognize that this covenant is not the only one which Covenant theologians speak about, yet it is the covenant which they see as ruling over all the others now that the covenant of works is broken (Gen. 3). We believe that the external stipulations of this theological, but, extra-biblical, covenant act as a faulty lens which distorts proper exegesis of the prophetic passages of the Old and New Testaments. Dispensational premillennialism, with its onus on a single-sense, normative, grammatical-historical hermeneutic, can deal much more honestly with these portions of the Bible, allowing them to speak hope to the saints of God whether they be Christians or citizens of the forthcoming kingdom of Israel.