

Introduction

The doctrine of the covenants – let me ask you: do you ever think about it? If John Bunyan was right – and, alas, I am sure he has put his finger on the spot – many contemporary believers never think about the covenants at all. As he said:

If¹ one should ask you what time you spend, what pains you take, to the end you may understand the nature and difference of these two covenants [that is, the old and the new covenants], would you not say, if you should speak the truth, that you did not so much as regard whether there were two or more? Would you not say: ‘I did not think of covenants, or study the nature of them’?²

For most believers, alas, too right! And yet, as God has made so very plain in Scripture, the doctrine of the covenants is one of the most important matters the Bible deals with. God has shown us that he determined in eternity to save his elect through the redeeming work of Christ applied to them by the Spirit. Moreover, God also determined to reveal to men the glorious redemption that he – the triune God – the Father, the Son and the Spirit – planned and accomplished for his elect, and in time would apply to them. He has disclosed this glorious compact or agreement in the Godhead to us,³ doing

¹ Bunyan had ‘set the case’.

² John Bunyan: *The Doctrine of Law and Grace Unfolded*. See my *Bunyan*.

³ Covenant theologians jump the rails right from the start by taking a biblical word ‘covenant’ and using it in a way the Bible never does to speak of this compact within the Godhead as a covenant. Since ‘covenant’ is never used in Scripture to speak of God’s counsel in his eternal decree to save his elect, I prefer ‘compact’. I am not alone in this, of course. Oliver Cromwell, for instance, on occasion used the word (as well as ‘covenant’) in this way. See Michael A.G. Haykin (ed): *‘To honour God’: The spirituality of Oliver Cromwell*, Joshua Press Inc., Dundas, 1999, pp111-112. See also my *Spurgeon*.

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so by means of a series of covenants,⁴ culminating in the new covenant in the Lord Jesus Christ.⁵ And yet, despite this scriptural revelation on such a glorious matter, most believers never think about the covenants! Disgraceful! Reader, if you are a believer and this applies to you, put the matter right! Start – now – to think about your redemption revealed in Scripture through covenants.

In particular, there are two covenants which you need to distinguish and be very clear about. Of course, I am not leaving out of the account the Noahic, Abrahamic and Davidic covenants, but the two covenants that you must be clear on above all are the Mosaic covenant – the covenant which the Bible calls the first covenant, the old covenant – and the new covenant.⁶ In other words, we are talking about law and grace, or law and gospel.

Now the Abrahamic covenant plays a vital role in these two covenants, and this is where we need to be clear and biblical. I stress this. A very common way of going astray over this question is to start with a theological template or construct, and then fit Scripture into that template. This is fatal to a right understanding of the subject. As I have observed, this is not a nicety; eternal salvation is bound up in it.

How should we understand the Abrahamic covenant? Clearly, God made promises to Abraham and his descendants, to the nation of Israel (yet to be brought into existence, of course),⁷ and those promises included physical

⁴ Basically, a covenant is an arrangement devised by God, to which he gives the name ‘covenant’.

⁵ See my *Redemption*.

⁶ The Abrahamic covenant contained within it elements of both the old and new covenants. The real issue here, however, is the ability to distinguish between the old and new covenants.

⁷ The nation of Israel did not come into existence for some centuries after Abraham. Israel became a nation in Egypt (Gen. 46:3; Deut. 26:5), particularly at the exodus leading to Sinai (Gen. 12:1-2; 17:2-14; 46:3,26-27; Ex. 1:5,7; 2:24-25; 3:6-8,10,15-18; 4:5,22-23; 6:2-8; 7:4,16; 8:1; 9:1; 12:2,17; 13:3-10; 15:11-18,26;

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blessings in the land he had already appointed for possession by the children of Israel after their deliverance from Egypt.

But... was that all? Indeed, was that the great underlying purpose of this covenant with Abraham? Far from it. As always, the New Testament must interpret the Old – not the other way round. And the New Testament makes it plain that the Abrahamic covenant had far more within it than land for the nation of Israel, the possession of which depended on physical descent being ratified by the rite of circumcision. But long before we get to the New Testament, very soon after his original promise, God was telling Abraham that

16:22-30; 18:1; 19:3-6; 31:13-17; 32:11-14; 33:13; Deut. 4:20,34; 16:1; 27:9; 28:9; Ps. 114:1-2; Ezek. 20:5-12,20; Acts 7:14,17), and this was confirmed – that is, their becoming a nation was confirmed – at the giving of the covenant just before entering Canaan (Deut. 26:18; 27:9). This was when God distinguished them from all other nations by starting their calendar, giving them the feasts and the sabbath as an integral part of his law. ‘What great nation is there that has such statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this law which I set before you this day?’ (Deut. 4:8). Deut. 4:7 shows the same in his nearness to Israel and his willingness to hear their prayers. Deut. 4:32-38 gloriously spells out this nearness of God to Israel. Israel’s position was *unique*, not merely *special*. Now these things are clearly contrasted to the creation-gift of beasts, birds, fish, planets and the like ‘which the LORD your God has given to all the peoples under the whole heaven as a heritage’ (Deut. 4:17-19). The contrast is enforced further: ‘But the LORD has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be his people, an inheritance’ (Deut. 4:20). And, as I say, one of the greatest distinctions God made between Israel and all other nations was to give his law on Sinai through Moses to Israel – and to no others (Deut. 4:6-45; 5:26; 7:6-11; Ps. 147:19-20; Rom. 9:4). The Mosaic law divided, separated, Israel from all other people. See Ps. 103:7; 1 Cor. 9:20-21. In stark contrast, not least of the glories of the new covenant under Christ is the unity – the union – of all the believing elect (whether Jew or Gentile) with each other because of their union in Christ, and only because of their union with him (Eph. 2:11-22). Compare *that* with the history of Jewish/Gentile relations apart from Christ, right down to the present day! What a message for this wretched world!

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there would be a clear distinction, even within his physical line of descent:

Abraham said to God: ‘Oh that Ishmael might live before you!’ God said: ‘No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation. But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year’ (Gen. 17:18-21).

Again:

Be not displeased because of the boy [Ishmael] and because of your slave woman [Hagar]. Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for through Isaac shall your offspring be named. And I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman also, because he is your offspring (Gen. 21:12-13).

In other words, there were to be two distinct lines of physical descent within the Abrahamic covenant; namely, through Ishmael and Isaac. The essential line would be through the younger son, Isaac, not Ishmael. This much God had made clear to Abraham right from the earliest days of the covenant.

Again, as always, the New Testament must expound it all. And it most certainly does. Indeed, it adds to the revelation; it does not merely clarify it. The essential line of descent from Abraham through Isaac was continued, in turn, through only one of Isaac’s twin sons; namely, Jacob (the younger, yet again), and not Esau.

The New Testament further explains that there is a spiritual meaning or dimension to this double line within the Abrahamic promise, a meaning of the utmost importance.⁸ As Paul declared, within the Abrahamic covenant there have always been two sorts of Jews; that is, outward and inward, physical and spiritual:

⁸ See my *Infant* pp78-113.

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No one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God (Rom. 2:28-29).

But it goes even deeper than this. The true descendants of Abraham, those in the Abrahamic covenant with whom God's eternal purpose has always been concerned, are not the physical descendants of the patriarch. No! God's eternal purpose has always been with the elect of all ages – those who will be brought to saving faith in Christ. This was, is, and always will be Abraham's spiritual seed:

[Abraham] received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised. For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. For if it is the adherents of the law [of Moses] who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression. That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring – not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all [that is, all believers] (Rom. 4:11-16).

As the apostle explained:

It is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but: 'Through Isaac shall your offspring be named'. This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring (Rom. 9:6-8).

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Paul had already⁹ made this clear in his letter to the Galatians:

Abraham ‘believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness’... Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying: ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed’. So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith...

For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise...

Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. But what does the Scripture say? ‘Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman’. So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman. For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery (Gal. 3:6-9,26-29; 4:28 – 5:1).

This is a vital point. Many go astray here, and so get the history of redemption through covenants wrong. God’s eternal purpose in making the covenant with Abraham never culminated in the nation of Israel and the promise of land. God, in that covenant, had always intended to form a spiritual people through faith, bringing them to everlasting salvation in Christ. Dispensationalists, alas, give the impression – to me, at least – that they consider the hope of a millennial establishment of the kingdom of Israel within the promised land as under Solomon (which I consider to be a mistaken expectation) after the return of Christ to be more important than the salvation of the elect. Covenant

⁹ Galatians, though it comes after Romans in the canon, was actually written first.

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theologians on the other hand – infant baptisers especially – mistakenly apply the spiritual promises of the Abrahamic covenant to their own physical seed, and do so with disastrous results.¹⁰ It is essential, therefore, to take full account of all the scriptural teaching on the Abrahamic covenant, God’s eternal purpose in saving his elect (whether Jew or Gentile) through Christ.

To go on with Galatians: right at the heart of that letter – in a chapter of the utmost significance – the apostle spelled out the ultimate and always intended fulfilment and purpose of God for the Abrahamic covenant.¹¹ As Paul declared:

The promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say: ‘And to offsprings’, referring to many, but referring to one: ‘And to your offspring’, who is Christ. This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise. Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made (Gal. 3:15-19).¹²

Let me repeat this, replacing ‘offspring’ with the more familiar ‘seed’:

The promises were made to Abraham and to his seed. It does not say: ‘And to seeds’, referring to many, but referring to one: ‘And to your seed’, who is Christ... The law... was added because of transgressions, until the Seed should come to whom the promise had been made (Gal. 3:15-19).

¹⁰ See my *Infant; Hinge; Conversion*.

¹¹ And not only the Abrahamic covenant. The same goes for the Mosaic covenant, the law.

¹² See my *Three* for my rendering of Gal. 3:23-25: ‘Before the new covenant came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming new covenant would be revealed. So then, the law was our child custodian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that the new covenant has come, we are no longer under a child custodian’.

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The real seed – the Seed – of the Abrahamic covenant is not national Israel;¹³ it is not even the elect. It is Christ. ‘Christ is all’ (Col. 3:11). And Christ, as the Seed of Abraham, came into the world to establish the new covenant in order to redeem all his elect (whether Jew or Gentile) of all ages:

You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins (Matt. 1:21).

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners (1 Tim. 1:15).

And, by the finished work of Christ (John 19:30), all the elect (whether Jew or Gentile), having been regenerated by the Spirit, on their coming to faith are united to Christ by that faith (Rom. 6:1-14), and thus show that they are the true descendants of Abraham and inheritors of the blessings of his covenant:

No one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God (Rom. 2:28-29).

For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith (Rom. 4:13).

Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham (Gal. 3:7).

As many of you as were [spiritually]¹⁴ baptised into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise (Gal. 3:27-29).

¹³ Do not miss Paul’s dogmatic emphasis on the singular ‘Seed’.

¹⁴ See my *Baptist*.

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Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise (Gal. 4:28).

The Gentiles are fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel (Eph. 3:6).

We are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh (Phil. 3:3).

No wonder, then, that Paul, in closing his letter to the Galatians, could speak of the one people of God of all ages – ‘the Israel of God’ (Gal. 6:16) – under the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2). This language is no makeweight conclusion to this vital letter. Indeed, it is its climax! The believing elect, in Christ, are the eternal people of God, and their salvation is the fulfilment of the eternal purpose of God in and through the Abrahamic covenant.

Addressing believers, Peter could tell them:

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (1 Pet. 2:9-10).

So, I say again, if we are to grasp the history of redemption through covenants, we must take full account of *all* the scriptural teaching – especially the apostolic teaching – on the Abrahamic covenant. I go so far as to say that the principles of that covenant dominate not only the history of redemption but the whole of Scripture.

And this is why I have published this work on Lynd’s Circular Letter. I think it is only right that another voice from the past, one from mid-19th century Ohio, should speak today. More, I hope my booklet will prove profitable. Lynd’s work, reinforcing the scriptural position on the Abrahamic covenant, certainly merits a wider audience. May God bless both it and my comments on it to the glory of the name of the LORD, the good of his people and the salvation of

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sinners. Yes, I mean it. As I have explained, the salvation of sinners really is intimately bound up with this study.

And now for Lynd's Circular Letter. Before I begin, however, I need to point out that even though the principles Lynd set out are perfectly clear, naturally enough he had his own way of expressing himself. For instance, whereas I speak of the double aspect of the Abrahamic covenant, Lynd talked of the covenants (in the plural) with Abraham. Since I do not find this way of speaking in Scripture, I continue to use the singular 'covenant', never forgetting its double aspect. Even so, Lynd and I are of one mind about the essential point. Furthermore, Lynd would occasionally use the phrase 'the covenant of grace', but he clearly meant 'the new covenant'. I have made this necessary alteration in the extracts in order to prevent any confusion. As I have explained and will confirm, this is not a minor matter, nor a question of semantics. Big issues hang upon it. In addition, I have had to edit Lynd's work, but only in a very limited sense. Some of the problems I met in this area have come from what I can only put down to digital slips which arose in the production of the Word document I have used.