

God Revealed in History: Covenant Realities for Today

by David Orton

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"In the beginning God..."—Unlike the pagan gods of antiquity, the God of the Bible is revealed as the God of history, not only as the eternal and infinite God but also as the Creator and Governor of the time-space world. This God purposed, from his eternal counsels (Jn 17:5, 24; Eph 1:4; 1 Pet 1:20; Rev 13:8), to bring together – in the fullness of the times (i.e. in history) – into one all things in Christ (Eph 1:10).

This then demands that the sovereign self-existent God who declares, "I AM WHO I AM" (Ex 3:14), freely condescend from his high and holy estate (Isa 66:1-2), to not only *create* but also *communicate* with man. He is thus the self-revealing God. This he has chosen to do by graciously and sovereignly making a covenant with man, under various administrations. Beginning with Adam, through to Abraham, Moses, and David, finally climaxing in his only begotten Son, the God-man, Jesus—the last Adam and the second man (1 Cor 15:45, 47; Heb 1:1-2).

Covenant Defined

Covenant may be defined as a legal bond that establishes a favourable relation between parties based on specified terms, and promises blessings for faithfulness to those terms, while stipulating consequences for unfaithful departure from them. This will be expanded further later in the article.

Through the covenants and the promises, the patriarchs and the prophets, and finally the apostles, God's nature – his inherent properties or attributes – are revealed and inerrantly inscripturated by inspiration of the Spirit and providentially preserved as the Bible, the Word of God (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:20, 21). Here we learn of the tri-*unity* of God: one essence in three persons—God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This unity of God then undergirds the unity of his revelation—the unity of the covenants and the unity of Scripture.

The one God has one mind, one purpose, and one word. This then demands continuity between covenants and thus of the Scriptures from Old to New Testament (NT). The old and new covenants are not in conflict. While the administration of the covenants may change with the increasing revelation of God, the purpose does not. For example, the Aaronic priesthood of the old economy gives way to the superior priesthood of Christ after the order of Melchizedek (Heb 7). Nonetheless, while the administration changes – from the blood of lambs and goats to that of the 'Lamb of God' himself – the ultimate purpose of the covenant in providing a sacrifice for sins does not. The progress from one covenant-administration to another guarantees the fulfilment of God's eternal decrees and covenant promises, culminating in the King-Priest, the Lord Jesus Christ. One God, one covenant, one purpose—various administrations.

This then settles the argument of *continuity* or *discontinuity* from the old to the new economy. Continuity is the norm, grounded in the nature of God as one; discontinuity is the exception, relating only to details of the administration of the covenant in the progress from type to anti-type (i.e. in matters of priest, sacrifice, and temple). Because of this confusion many by default have fallen into the dualism of Marcion, delineating between two Gods: the vengeful Hebrew God of the Old Testament (OT) and the all-forgiving Christian God of the New. This then feeds into its concomitant: an antinomian (anti-law) emphasis where NT *grace* trumps – indeed supersedes – OT *law*, completely misconstruing the relationship of Law and Gospel.

Covenant & Jesus

On this hinges the whole future of God's covenant purpose for humankind and history. Jesus, in demonstration of the unity (oneness) of God – and thus of *covenant continuity* – when asked which commandment was the greatest, rehearsed the *shema* of Deuteronomy 6, reinstating the old covenant law in the new:

Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The

second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

Mark 12:29–31

This reinstatement, using two summary statements – 1) Love the Lord your God, 2) Love your neighbour – encompasses the whole Ten Commandments, the first four relating to our love for God, and the final six, our love for man. Then in turn the Ten Commandments are also summary statements, encompassing the whole judicial and case law of the OT. In other words as Paul declares:

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:16–17

All of Scripture, including the Law, was given by the Spirit for our training and correction as God's holy nation. Not only so, but it was also given for the unregenerate – for all nations, for society – in the curbing of sin:

Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane...

1 Timothy 1:8–9a (see also Deut 4:1–8)

Additionally, Jesus categorically rejects the notion that he has come to abolish the law:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 5:17–19

Rather, he has come to 'fulfil' (*pleroo*) or, alternatively rendered, 'reinstate' the law. Despite the various renderings of the word, one thing is clear: not a dot or iota of the law is to be relaxed and the one who teaches so is least in the kingdom of God (v 19).

Covenant & Paul

Paul, in harmony with Jesus, establishes in Romans 1–3 the universal moral culpability of humankind under the law of God, exposing its rebellious and sinful state, worthy only of the judicial condemnation of death (Rom 3:23; 6:23). Without the law of God there is no death penalty for sin (Rom 1:32; 2:12; 3:19; 7:7–12). And without man's predicament under the judgement of God there is no ground for the Gospel—for Christ's substitutionary death and rising again in the power of the resurrection. Thus, as a covenant theologian, Paul argues for the continuity of the covenant law (Rom 3:31; 7:7–14), declaring its high and holy function as the outshining of God's nature, and its corollary of Christ's justifying and renewing work. The latter, he explicates in Rom 4–8, climaxing in a statement of its victorious purpose:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

Romans 8:1–4

Those in Christ are now declared just, and freed from the judicial condemnation of the law's penalty for sin—death (Rom 3:23-26). And Christ having accomplished what fallen human nature could not (obedience to God's law), bore its just condemnation through death, so that now by the power of the Holy Spirit the "righteousness requirement of the law" might be fulfilled in us. Jesus became a 'curse' for us hanging on a tree, taking upon himself the full consequence of the law in death (Gal 3:13). And so, we are freed from the law as an indictment, to now pursue it as a charter for life (Lev 18:5). In the new covenant the law is not only reinstated but the power to obey and live by it is supplied (2 Cor 3).

In conclusion, we may ask, "Why, as claimed earlier, does the whole purpose of God hinge on the relationship of Law and Gospel?" *First*, because the Gospel is the solution to the just judgement and plight of covenant law-breakers, and *second*, because of the continuity of one mind and purpose of God through all the covenants.

Covenant Structure in the Ancient Near East

The discovery of the five-fold covenant structure of Ancient Near Eastern suzerainty treaties has provided a ground-breaking insight, confirming the Bible's own interpretation of the biblical covenants and their design.

A victorious king would form a treaty with his vassal king, establishing: 1) his supremacy; 2) his authority; 3) his laws; 4) his punishments and rewards; and 5) his succession.

Based on this, THEOS provides a convenient acronym: T (Transcendence); H (Hierarchy); E (Ethics); O (Oath); and S (Succession). The biblical covenants and various books of the Bible have been discovered to follow this pattern (e.g. Deuteronomy, Romans, Revelation).

With Christ as our victorious King and we his vassals, the covenant arrangement is clear: 1) he has sovereignly and graciously established covenant relationship with us (Transcendence); 2) he has established his authority in his Word and delegated it through his servants, ministers of the Gospel and ministers of the state (Hierarchy); 3) he has given his law as the standard of justice (Ethics); including, 4) penal sanctions and blessings (Oath); and finally, 5) provided for the continuity of his reign through the promulgation of the Gospel and through godly families, churches, and culture (Succession).

This is the Gospel of the Kingdom of God—the law-word of the King ruling over the whole of life. God in Christ (the Word) is sovereign over the totality of human existence. Through Holy Spirit regeneration his reign begins in self-government with a ripple-effect flowing through to all spheres of life: family, church, and culture.

Covenant Outworked in History

Based on the foregoing argument, history is the outworking of the covenant, of our response as covenant-keepers or covenant-breakers and the covenant consequences—God's judgements or blessings (Deut 28; Lev 26). The covenant blessings and curses (oath) are released according to our obedience to his Word (ethics) into three covenant institutions: family, church, and culture (especially the civil state). The role of the OT prophets was to interpret the circumstances of God's people in light of the covenant. In this way they were covenant enforcers, prosecuting the covenant-lawsuit against those who committed spiritual adultery with the false gods of the nations. Thus calling them to return to the Lord and to covenant fidelity. Even in the NT the ministry of prophets has not changed—there is continuity between covenants and prophetic function (Eph 4:11). And as equippers of Christ's body they enable the church to in turn be a prophetic people to the surrounding culture, calling it back to the touchstone of the covenant.

And so, God has purposed to bring his kingdom to earth through covenant; it is the legal constitution of God's government. By its judicial function the favour or judgement of God is released into the affairs of men, bringing either flourishing or wasting to nations and cultures. Through obedience to the Lord of the covenant and his laws, God has purposed the progressive development of the restored Edenic paradise to the whole earth.

Christ is the consummation of the covenant in history. His victory over sin and death and ascension to the right hand of the Father signalled his installation as the Governor and Judge of the universe and thus of history. This is the basis of his

declaration that his ecclesia would progressively prevail against the authorities and powers of darkness—human and diabolical (Mtt 16:18). This means that it's commission to disciple all nations of the earth in the laws and ways of God will be accomplished (Mtt 28:18-20; Isa 2:1-5). Christ is seated until all his enemies are made the footstool of his feet (Psa 110). And to the increase of his government there will be no end (Isa 9); it will advance in progressive personal and cultural transformation until the whole earth is filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord (Num 14:21; Hab 2:14).

These are the covenant realities for today!

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