



The Christ of the Covenants

O. Palmer Robertson

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The Christ of the Covenants successively treats the various covenants of the Old Testament from an exegetical and biblical-theological perspective. The richness of a covenantal approach to understanding the Bible is presented, along with interaction with other viewpoints.

The Christ of the Covenants Details

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Jason Lyle says

What a great book! Before the class I am taking, which required this book for reading, I had never understood covenant theology. This book by Palmer Robertson has really brought things to light for me. Well written and easy to understand. A must for anyone wanting to go further into reformed theology.

mpsipl says

Excellent, especially the first half. Some five star moments. I would recommend it for anyone wanting to see how the OT fits into God's unified plan of redemption.

Kelly says

A great introduction to covenant theology which surveys the various Biblical covenants, their relationships to one another, and dispensational counterarguments. Much more accessible as an introduction to covenant theology than Horton's God of Promise although both are worth reading.

Chad Warner says

A deep exploration of Covenant Theology through the entire Bible. It explores 7 covenants, which are really 7 administrations of 2 covenants: the covenant of creation (often called the covenant of works) and the covenant of redemption (often called the covenant of grace). It's not an easy read. Robertson is unnecessarily verbose and sometimes obscure.

If you read this, I recommend listening to this series on Covenant Theology by Dr. Ligon Duncan. Duncan learned from Robertson, and he references Robertson and this book in the series.

My notes follow.

Nature of Divine Covenants

Covenant: a bond in blood sovereignly administered.

Bond: establishment of committed relationship between people.

Bond in blood: participants are committed on principle of death; nothing less than shedding of blood may relieve obligations.

Sovereignly administered: God unilaterally dictates terms of His covenant.

Oaths and signs often involved in forming a covenant.

A covenant isn't a testament. God relates to His people through covenant, not testament. In a covenant, death stands at beginning of relationship, symbolizing potential curse factor. In a testament, death stands at end of

relationship, actualizing inheritance. Christ's death was covenantal, not testamentary, because He died for covenant-breakers, not Himself.

Extent of Divine Covenants

Grounds for calling God's relationship to man prior to Noah covenantal:

1. Doesn't matter that Bible doesn't use word "covenant" prior to Noah; relationship of God to David wasn't called covenant at time it was established, but it was.
2. Jer 22:20ff & Hos 6:7 apparently refer to God's relational relationship in covenantal terms.
3. Elements of covenant were present (Gen 2:15-17, 3:15).

Unity of Divine Covenants

Structural Unity

Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic covenants each build on previous. They have unity in historical experience (inauguration, Israel's life), in genealogical administration (covenant is with spiritual descendants), in incorporating new covenant (new covenant fulfills Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic; Jer 31:31ff; Ezek 37:24-26).

Covenantal administrations prior to Abraham are also part of unity because of covenantal relationship between God and man established at creation (Gen 8:22; Rom 16:20; Gen 3:15).

Thematic Unity

Recurring summation of covenant: "I shall be your God, and you shall be my people." This theme explicitly appears in connection with Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, new covenant. Theme is developed with God dwelling in midst of His people (tabernacle, temple, city of God). Theme reaches climax in Christ (Immanuel).

Diversity in Divine Covenants

Pre- and Post-Creation

Pre-creation bond among persons of Trinity not described in Reformed creeds of 16th and 17th centuries, but recognized among covenant theologians since. Because Bible doesn't speak of an intertrinitarian covenant, neither should we.

Covenant of Works & Covenant of Grace

Name "covenant of works" comes from period of testing Adam according to his works, to receive blessings.

Pre-Fall relationship required man's perfect obedience as meritorious ground of blessing.

Covenant of works did contain grace, because creational bond between God and man was gracious.

Covenant of grace contains works, because Christ works for salvation of His people, and the redeemed must work (Eph 2:10).

Would be better to call pre-Fall covenantal epoch "covenant of creation," and post-Fall "covenant of redemption."

Old & New Covenants

Old: bond of God with men before Christ. New: bond of God with men after Christ.

Contrast between old & new shown in Heb & Gal. Paul contrasts old & new covenants in Gal 3:23, 25, but

shows unity in 3:8-9. Paul contrasts Abrahamic & Mosaic covenants in Gal 3:15-19, showing that God's blessings are based on promise, not law, yet he shows unity in purposes of God's grace (Gal 3 & 4).

Emphases of manifestations of covenant of redemption:

Adam: commencement

Noah: preservation

Abraham: promise

Moses: law

David: kingdom

Christ: consummation

Covenant of Creation

General Aspects

Sabbath

Because Joshua couldn't give Israel "rest," a Sabbath yet remains for God's people (Heb 4:8-9).

Because of Israel's sin, land had to observe enforced accumulation of Sabbaths during people's exile (Lev 26:33-35; 2 Chron 36:11).

To speak of abolishment of Sabbath under new covenant is to deny continuing significance of 10 Commandments, and is breach of orders of creation, history, and consummation.

Reason for Sabbath observance relates not only to creation, but also to redemption (from Egypt; Deut 5:12).

In OT, believers worked for 6 days looking forward to rest. In NT, believers begin week rejoicing in rest accomplished by Christ, then enter joyfully into 6 days of labor.

Besides Sabbath, other general aspects are marriage (Gen 2:18, 22-24; Matt 19:4-6) and labor (Gen 1:27-28, 2:15).

Focal Aspect

Focal aspect: obey God's command to not eat of Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (Gen 2:16-17).

Redeemed man must fulfil, even surpass, the role of Adam, by fulfilling both the Great Commission (preach gospel) and the Cultural Mandate (form a culture glorifying to God).

Covenant of Redemption

Connection of covenants of creation and redemption: God intends for covenant of redemption to realize blessings of covenant of creation, and Man still has responsibilities of covenant of creation (cultural mandate, marriage, labor, Sabbath).

Adam: Covenant of Commencement

3 levels of enmity in Gen 3:15

Womankind vs. Satan (not necessarily all women universally)

Woman's seed (elect) vs. Satan's seed (reprobate)

Christ (as representative of woman's seed) vs. Satan

Satan's bruising the heel refers to subversiveness of attack as well as wound being partial, not fatal.

Satan's seed must be destroyed for God's purposes to be realized (Rom 9:22). This is reason for genocide in OT and for imprecatory Psalms.

Woman's blessing: to have children, and eventually give birth to Redeemer.

Gen 3:16 means that woman's sorrow, particularly related to pregnancy and bringing children into world, will be increased; not that conception itself will increase.

Man's blessing: he will eat bread; God will provide food and life.

Noah: Covenant of Preservation

Much of covenant with Noah renews provisions of creation (multiply, subdue).

Covenant with Noah binds together God's purposes in creation and redemption. Noah, his descendants, and all creation benefit from this gracious relationship.

God deals with families in His covenant relationships. God includes Noah's whole family in the ark on the basis of Noah's (God-given) righteousness.

God promises to preserve the earth from devastating judgment so that relief from sin's corruption can appear. Gen 8:20-22. God also sets provisions to preserve humanity (Gen 9:3-6).

Gen 9:6 is one of several verses sanctioning capital punishment. Others: Ezek 33:6; 34:10; Ex 21:12; Num 35:16-21; Rom 13:1ff; 1 Pet 2:13, 14.

Abraham: Covenant of Promise

Pledge-to-death of Abrahamic covenant is alluded to throughout Israel's history, including Ex 24:7-8; Deut 28:26; 1 King 14:11; 16:4; 21:24; 2 King 9:10; Jer 7:33; 16:4; 19:7; 34:17-20; Ps 79:2-3.

Curses incurred because of transgressions of old covenant have fallen on Christ. He bore covenantal pledge-to-death to deliver from curse (Heb 9:15-16).

Christ's blood removes curse of old covenant and introduces blessed condition of new covenant (Matt 26:28; Luke 22:20).

Seal of Abrahamic Covenant

Circumcision indicated need for cleansing. Hygienic act of removing foreskin symbolized purification necessary for covenant relationship between holy God and unholy people. Uncleaness of nature must be taken away. Cutting off foreskin represents violent removal of sinful nature of man. John 7:22-23.

Circumcision is a sign associated with propagation of human race, shown by its being applied to a reproductive organ, and to infants. This shows that race, not just individual, needs cleansing, and that God deals with families.

Gentiles could become Israelites by circumcision (Gen 17:12; Ex 12:48).

Baptism accomplishes all that was represented by circumcision. Col 2:12 says, "by being buried with him in baptism you were circumcised."

Moses: Covenant of Law

Mosaic "covenant of law" must not be confused with covenant of works. Mosaic covenant is with fallen Man, and doesn't promise blessedness for perfect moral obedience. The substitutionary sacrifices show this.

NT uses "law" in several different ways. Rom 6:14 and similar passages don't mean that NT believers aren't under 10 Commandments. They mean righteousness doesn't depend on law-keeping. Christian no longer relates to law as external, impersonal code. Spirit ministers law in his heart.

Law is still relevant in New Covenant. Christians are told their blessedness derives from law-keeping (Eph 6:1-3; Matt 7:24-27; Jam 1:22). Christians who disobey are chastised (Heb 12:6; 1 Cor 11:30-32). Christians will be judged according to their deeds.

David: Covenant of Kingdom

Each covenant had a conditional aspect. Although God certainly redeems His people, and that ensures that conditions will be met, the individual must meet conditions. Under Abraham, uncircumcised male was to be cut off. Under Moses, disobedient wouldn't enter rest. Under David, sinful king was to be beaten.

Consummation

Exile shows judgment for covenant-breaking, but also that God would not fail to redeem His people.

Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic covenants are called everlasting, which is true in their realization in the new covenant.

God's law continues into new covenant (Jer 31:33).

"Israel" and "nation" referred to in context of new covenant in Jeremiah refer to elect, not ethnic Israel in Palestine.

New covenant is still corporate and genealogical as well as individual (Jer 32:39).

Richard Minor says

Covenant Theology, with all of its intricacies is a topic that is both difficult and quite rewarding. The Scriptures begin to make more sense as you see God's plan unfolding through the covenants that God has made with His people through the ages.

Here is an excellent book to get started down exploring that path.

K. says

Best book on covenant theology I've read. I suspect Witsius may be better, for comprehensiveness if nothing else. Nevertheless, this is extremely lucid and logical. He ably anticipates objections and, surprising considering the age of the book, also argues for a diversity in the covenants reminiscent of "new covenant theology" without that position's considerable shortcomings. A great place to either start one's exploration of the topic or remind oneself of the basics.

Alexandre Amin says

Um excelente manual da teologia da aliança. Robertson consegue ser simples e objetivo, sem ser superficial, e oferecer um panorama muito didático do desenvolvimento da aliança da graça, do Éden a Cristo. Leitura obrigatória para o público reformado.

Fraser Daniel says

Excellent book on the different covenants of the Bible. He goes through each covenant with solid and deep exegesis. I would highly recommend this book.

Peter Kim says

Robertson does a simply amazing job succinctly yet sufficiently examining the covenantal dynamic between God and man throughout Biblical history in just a matter of 300 pages. This is clearly a difficult task that many have failed to hope to accomplish. Robertson's approach of highlighting the connectivity and the diversity between the different covenants helps the reader properly assess the biblical reality of diatheke without eliminating the other end of the argument.

Peter B. says

This book is the classic book on covenant theology done in the last hundred years. The idea of covenant pervades and structures Scripture and history. It is the way God relates to man, and thus forms a central importance in creation and redemption. Because of covenant theology we can see the consistency between redemption in the Old and New Testaments, instead of seeing God dealing with sinners in separate ways in history. We can also see the way the covenants build upon each other and richly culminate with Christ and the new covenant, restoring even more to us than what we lost in Adam.

Brian Algie says

Having limited exposure to covenant theology this book was a great introduction to that very thing. Robertson does a great job throughout showing bringing you to and through the Scriptures.

Christopher says

A pretty standard and reliable overview of the biblical covenants with some minor deviations (e.g. Robertson prefers to call the covenant of works a covenant of creation). Robertson shows how each covenant is part of

a unified plan of salvation and each builds upon the other and points to Christ as the ultimate fulfillment of all of God's covenant promises. His brief excursus on why the covenants of promise rather than dispensations ought to structure our view of redemptive history is excellent. Though I do not feel the book was anywhere near exhaustive of the subject, it works as a concise introduction. I read it as part of a seminary course along with a 35 part lecture series on the covenant by Dr. Joe Morecraft III.

Bob Hayton says

This book is not a covenantal theology manual, as some might suspect. *The Christ of the Covenants*, by O. Palmer Robertson, is a book about the many Scriptural covenants: the covenant with Noah, Abraham, and David, to name a few. Robertson departs from many covenant theologians in refusing to call the pre-Creation Divine determination to redeem fallen man an actual covenant, even as he argues for the basic correctness of the covenantal position on Israel and the church.

What this book does best is show how the covenants (and not dispensations) truly structure Scripture. Indeed without understanding the covenants, one will inevitably fail to understand much of Scripture.

Being raised a dispensationalist, I had a somewhat vague understanding that there are several covenants mentioned in Scripture. But I never understood how important and influential they really are. Interestingly, in an excursus focusing on dispensationalism, Robertson compares the Old and New Scofield Bibles and shows that contemporary dispensationalism now also emphasizes the importance of the Biblical covenants.

Starting with the basics, Robertson defines the term “covenant” against the backdrop of ancient middle-eastern covenants. He concludes that in Scripture a covenant is “a bond in blood sovereignly administered.” Robertson delves into the technical discussions surrounding this concept, but at the same time manages to keep it somewhat simple. A relationship is established unilaterally, and loyalty is demanded on pain of death.

Robertson moves on to discuss the extent, the unity and the diversity of the Biblical covenants. He makes a good case for understanding the Gen. 1-2 in terms of a covenant of creation, citing Jeremiah 33 and Hosea 6:7 as proof. He contends that after the fall, the Biblical story is a progression of covenants each more specific and more glorious, culminating in the new covenant which was begun and inaugurated with the death of Christ. Yet he maintains that there are important differences worth noting between the covenants, and particularly between the Law and the new covenant.

Then he begins a discussion of all the important Biblical covenants, starting with the covenant of creation. He admits that the focus of that covenant is on the prohibition concerning eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but claims the covenant establishes a gracious relationship whereby man is called to rule God's creation and given instruction concerning marriage and Sabbath observance (he contends that there is a binding Sabbath principle to be observed on Sundays still today). He rightly emphasizes that ignoring the foundational teaching of how man should relate with the rest of creation has negatively impacted how Christians relate with and think about culture today.

Then he takes up the covenant of redemption which he sees as started in Gen. 3:15, and progressively developed through the covenant with Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and then the new covenant. He develops each covenant insightfully, focusing on the Scriptural passages which establish the covenant idea, and applying important truths in a fresh way for all of us today. His discussion of the new covenant, and particularly Jer. 31:3-34, is particularly rich and insightful.

That is Robertson's book. Except I should note he stresses how the idea and promise of Christ is developed through each covenant. And he also has a great excursus chapter on dispensationalism. In that chapter he tries to show how dispensationalism has grown and changed. He finds contradictions within the system, however, and argues the point that dispensationalism depends on a false dualistic view that the physical and the spiritual must necessarily be distinguished. His chapter on dispensationalism (a mere 26 pages in length) alone is worth the price of the book. It would be well for those studying out the dispensational/covenant theology debate to listen to Robertson's insights. Perhaps I will try to flesh out the arguments in that chapter in a later post.

In conclusion, I highly recommend Robertson's book. After 300 pages one gets a thorough education in the Biblical covenants. At times it may be difficult reading, but the rewards gained are worth the effort spent. Mostly, Robertson has a gift for cutting to the heart of the matter. And a detailed study on the nature and teaching of the Biblical covenants demands the attention of any Biblical student. This book will help you understand Scripture better, and will increase your wonder at the glorious workings in God's plan of redemption.

Steve Hemmeke says

A rare five stars! Biblical depth and balance on what a covenant is, and how God has dealt with His people with them. The first 60 pages looks at what a covenant is: a bond in blood sovereignly administered. The rest of the book looks at God's activity with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David and finally in Christ.

Some important points.

A covenant is a structured relationship. Some emphasize the structure, others the relationship, but both are essential.

All covenants with God are gracious. Those after the Fall involve God's grace in spite of our sin. The covenant with Adam at first is also gracious in a different sense, as God's creation and provision for Adam and Eve was unnecessary, an act of sovereign love.

One covenant did not replace the previous one, but developed and expanded God's dealings with us, the previous covenant promises remaining in force until all were fulfilled in Christ.

Chapter 11 offers an excellent analysis of dispensationalism.

This is the perfect book for the interested reader who wants to go deeper in studying the Word.

Tony Huy says

Great book on a difficult subject.

Like Stott and Packer and Piper, I found O. Palmer somehow threaded in devotional "feels" to the content while staying biblical and technical. I love books like that. I am both learning in my mind and stirred in my heart.

Now onto a good book on dispensationalism because this book challenged a lot of my understanding.
