



Definitions of Covenant

Covenant

Robert Rollock (1555-1599)

The covenant of God is a promise under some certain condition.¹

Zacharius Ursinus (1534- 1583)

A covenant in general is a mutual contract, or agreement between two parties, in which the one party binds itself to the other to accomplish something upon certain conditions, giving or receiving something, which is accompanied with certain signs and symbols, for the purpose of ratifying in the most solemn manner the contract entered into, and for the sake of confirming it, that the engagement may be kept inviolate.² (

William Ames (1576-1633)

From this special way of governing rational creatures there arises a covenant between God and them. This covenant is, as it were, a kind of transaction of God with the creature whereby God commands, promises, threatens, fulfills; and the creature binds itself in obedience to God so demanding.³

Frances Turretin (1623-1687)

A covenant denotes the agreement of God with man by which God promises his goods (and especially eternal life to him), and by man, in turn, duty and worship are engaged... This is called two-sided and mutual because it consists of a mutual obligation of the contracting parties: a promise on the part of God and stipulation of the condition on the part of man.⁴

¹ David McKay, *Bond of Love*, (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publishers, 2001), 11.

² Zacharius Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, p. 97.

³ William Ames, *Marrow of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 111.

⁴ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, translated by G. M. Giger (Phillipsburg, 1992), Locus 8, Q3, para 3 (1.574).

Herman Witsius (1636-1708)

A covenant of God with man, is an agreement between God, about the way of obtaining consummate happiness; including a commination of eternal destruction, with which the contemner of the happiness, offered in that way, is to be punished.⁵

Wilhelmus a Brakel (1635- 1711)

A covenant is “a mutual, binding obligation between two or more individuals, who, contingent upon certain conditions, promise certain things to each other.”⁶

Herman Bavinck (1854- 1921)

Generally, a covenant is an agreement between persons who voluntarily obligate and bind themselves to each other for the purpose of fending off an evil or obtaining a good.⁷

M. J. Bosma (1874-1912)

A covenant is an agreement.⁸

John Murray (1898-1975)

A Covenant is a sovereign administration of promise and grace.⁹

T.M. Moore

In the most generic terms, a covenant is an arrangement entered into by various parties for the purpose of establishing a mutually beneficial relationship involving privileges and obligations.¹⁰

Meredith Kline (1922-2007)

...a berith (Hebrew word for covenant) is a legal kind of arrangement, a formal disposition of a binding nature. At the heart of a berith is an act of commitment and the customary oath-form of this commitment reveals the religious nature of the transaction. The berith arrangement is no mere secular contract but rather belongs to the sacred sphere of divine witness and enforcement. The kind of legal disposition called berith

⁵ Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man*, (Kingsburg, California: den Dulk Foundation, 1990) Vol. 1, p. 45.

⁶ Wilhelmus a Brakel, *A Christian's Reasonable Service*, I.429.

⁷ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, II.568.

⁸ M.J. Bosma, *Exposition of Reformed Doctrine*, 91.

⁹ John Murray, *Covenant of Grace*, 29.

¹⁰ T.M. Moore, *I Will be Your God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002), 5.

consists then in a divinely sanctioned commitment. In the case of divine-human covenants the divine sanctioning is entailed in God's participation either as the one who himself makes the commitment or as the divine witness of the human commitment made in his name and presence.¹¹

O. Palmer Robertson

A covenant is a bond in blood that is sovereignly administered.¹²

J. Ligon Duncan

Now, *berith* in the Old Testament signifies a binding, mutual relationship with mutual obligations, a binding mutual relationship with attendant obligations.¹³

Graeme Goldsworthy

A biblical concept which refers primarily to God's commitment to his people.

Michael Horton

So what exactly is a covenant? Anticipating the definition in the next chapter, we can start by saying that from the most commonly used Hebrew word for this concept (*bent*), a covenant is a relationship of "oaths and bonds" and involves mutual, though not necessarily equal, commitments. As we will see shortly, some biblical covenants are unilaterally imposed commands and promises; others are entered into jointly. Some are conditional and others are unconditional. In other words, under the overarching concept of oaths and bonds we encounter a substantial variety of covenants in Scripture.¹⁴

Federal Vision Adherents Definition of Covenant

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Covenant of Redemption (*pactum salutis*)

Louis Berkhof

"The covenant of redemption may be defined as the agreement between the Father, giving the Son as Head and Redeemer of the elect, and the Son, voluntarily taking the place of those whom the Father had given Him."¹⁵

¹¹ Meredith Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2006), 1-2.

¹² O. Palmer Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*, p. 4.

¹³ <http://www.fpcjackson.org/resources/apologetics/Covenant%20Theology%20&%20Justification>

¹⁴ Michael Horton, *God of Promise* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 10.

¹⁵ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1939, Reprint 1993), 271.

In Reformed theology, the *pactum salutis* has been defined as a pretemporal, intratrinitarian agreement between the Father and Son in which the Father promises to redeem an elect people. In turn the Son volunteers to earn the salvation of his people by becoming incarnate...by acting as surety of the covenant of grace for and as mediator of the covenant of grace to the elect. In his active and passive obedience, Christ fulfills the conditions of the *pactum salutis*...ratifying the Father's promise, because of which the Father rewards the Son's obedience with the salvation of the elect. And because of this the Holy Spirit applies the Son's work to his people through the means of grace.¹⁶

Covenant of Works (*foedus operum*)

Westminster Confession of Faith

The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.¹⁷

God gave to Adam a law, as a covenant of works, by which He bound him and all his posterity, to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience, promised life upon the fulfilling, and threatened death upon the breach of it, and endued him with power and ability to keep it.¹⁸

Westminster Larger Catechism

The covenant being made with Adam as a public person, not for himself only, but for his posterity, all mankind descending from him by ordinary generation, sinned in him, and fell with him in that first transgression.¹⁹

Berkhof

He entered into a legal compact with man, which includes all the requirements and obligations implied in the creaturehood of man, but at the same time added some new elements. (1) Adam was constituted the representative head of the human race, so that he could act for all his descendants. (2) He was temporarily put on probation, in order to determine whether he would willingly subject his will to the will of God. (3) He was given the promise of eternal life in the way of obedience, and thus by the gracious disposition of God acquired certain conditional rights. This covenant enabled Adam to

¹⁶ David VanDrunen & R. Scott Clark, *Covenant, Justification and Pastoral Ministry*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2007), 168.

¹⁷ WCF, 7.2 Of God's Covenant with Man

¹⁸ WCF, 19.1 Law of God

¹⁹ WLC, Question 22

obtain eternal life for himself and for his descendants *in* the way of obedience.²⁰

Covenant of Grace (*foedus gratiae*)

Westminster Confession of Faith

Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace; wherein He freely offers unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ; requiring of them faith in Him, that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life His Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe.²¹

This covenant of grace is frequently set forth in scripture by the name of a testament, in reference to the death of Jesus Christ the Testator, and to the everlasting inheritance, with all things belonging to it, therein bequeathed.²²

Westminster Larger Catechism

God does not leave all men to perish in the estate of sin and misery, into which they fell by the breach of the first covenant, commonly called the covenant of works; but of his mere love and mercy delivers his elect out of it, and brings them into an estate of salvation by the second covenant, commonly called the covenant of grace.²³

Berkhof

The covenant of grace may be defined as that gracious agreement between the offended God and the offending but elect sinner, in which God promises salvation through faith in Christ, and the sinner accepts this believingly, promising a life of faith and obedience."²⁴

²⁰ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1939, Reprint 1993), 215.

²¹ WCF, 7.3 Of God's Covenant with Man

²² WCF, 7.4 Of God's Covenant with Man

²³ WLC. Questions 30

²⁴ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1939, Reprint 1993), 277.