

THE CHURCH AND COVENANT THEOLOGY

Morton H. Smith*

One of the pressing questions of our day has to do with the nature and mission of the Church. A wide variety of answers has been given to this question throughout the history of the Church. In the present study, an attempt will be made to survey the Biblical concept of the Church as it is revealed in that overall unifying theme of the Scriptures, namely, the covenants.

That the covenants are the unifying principle of Scripture may be seen in the way in which they begin in Eden and end in the final consummation. It shall be our purpose in this paper to outline briefly the overall covenant structure and to see how the idea of the Church is found in it throughout the ages.

I. DEFINITIONS

A. *Covenant*

In order to define "covenant" as used in theology, it is necessary to review briefly the history of the use of this term. Covenant theology itself is generally to be identified with the Reformed tradition. Though other branches of the Protestant Church have dealt with the covenants in their treatment of the Biblical concepts, it has been Reformed theologians who organized their theology around the covenants.

From the beginning of this development we find the term "covenant" defined as a contract or agreement between parties. For example, the *Presbyterian Child's Catechism* defines it as "an agreement between two or more persons." This definition is rooted in the earliest of Reformed writers on the subject. Ursinus says a covenant is

a mutual promise and agreement, between God and men, in which God gives assurance to men that he will be merciful to them. . . . And, on the other side, men bind themselves to God in this covenant that they will exercise repentance and faith . . . and render such obedience as will be acceptable to him.¹

Though this has been the case in the history of the development of covenant theology, there is a growing awareness among covenant theologians today of the necessity to re-examine the Biblical usage of the terms *b'rit* and *diathēkē* and to seek to come up with a better definition

*Morton Smith is professor of Reformed theology at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi.

¹Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954) 97.

of the term "covenant" as actually used in the Bible. A survey of the various applications of the terms in Scripture reveals that they are used in such a variety of ways that a single concise definition is not able to cover all the applications. For example, on the one hand covenants sometimes include conditions, threats and promises, as in the case of the Mosaic covenant (Exod 19); on the other hand they may be totally unconditional, without any threats, as in the case of Noah. Sometimes covenants involve mutual bargaining between equal parties, but at other times they are sovereignly administered by God without any bargaining. Sometimes the idea of contract is in view, while at other times the idea of a last will and testament is present (Heb 9:4).

Since there is such a great variety in usage, we shall not try to give a single short definition of "covenant" that covers all cases. Rather, let us list some of the basic concepts involved in Biblical covenants. Essentially, a covenant is a bond between two parties, a bond generally sealed in blood. The exact meaning of the blood associated with covenants is not perfectly clear. It probably has at least a dual meaning—namely, sacrifice (as in the case of Christ's blood in the New Covenant) and oath-taking. In the latter the parties of the covenant are seen as represented by the dead animals. They, as it were, call upon God "to do so to me and more also" if they are not faithful in keeping covenant. (See Genesis 15 for a case in which God passed between the parts of the animals Abram had laid out, and also Jer 34:18-20, where God threatens with death those who have broken the covenant that had been confirmed by passing between the parts of the calf in making it.)

The covenant idea stressed the legal, binding relation between God and his people. God sovereignly promised certain definite things to his people and could, according to his own good pleasure, make definite demands on them. Since the covenant binds men to God, covenants can only be effected on the basis of reconciliation between the holy God and sinful men. It is this that is the essence of the covenant designated the covenant of grace. God graciously provides in his covenant promises the reconciliation of sinners to himself, so that he can be a God unto them and they can be his people (Gen 17:7).

The covenant concept is used to describe the marriage relationship, and as such it speaks to us of the fact that the covenant is not just a legal contract but is also a loving relationship, a continuous fellowship between the parties involved. Associated with the Biblical covenants is the idea of mercy or lovingkindness (*hesed*). God is represented as a faithful, covenant-keeping God, even when his people are not always faithful. "Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God, who keeps covenant" (Deut 7:9). Zechariah celebrates this aspect in his song: "To show mercy toward our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant" (Luke 1:72).

B. *The Church*

Having thus considered something of the Biblical idea of what is

involved in the concept of covenant, let us now consider the idea of the Church.

It is interesting to see the difficulty that we have with this concept as reflected in the recently published *Encyclopedia of Christianity*, volume two, in which separate articles appear under the title "Church, Nature and Government." Seven different understandings of the Church are represented, namely: autonomous, collegial, erastian, episcopalian, quaker, reformed or presbyterian, and Roman catholic. A reading of these articles indicates the fact that a number of the writers fail to see the overall Biblical theological teaching on the nature of the Church. It is just at this point that a consideration of the Church in connection with the covenant may help us reach a more Biblical view of the Church.

The term "church" and its cognate forms, *kirche*, *kerk*, and *kirk*, is itself derived from the Greek *kyriakon*, meaning the "Lord's." It is used to translate another Greek term, *ekklesia*, which means "assembly" or "congregation." It may mean such without reference to religion, but with the Septuagint use of this term to designate the congregation of the Israelites, especially as gathered before God for religious purposes, it has taken on a more technical meaning, which is the general NT usage. There it is used of the congregation that the living God assembles around his Messiah, Jesus. William Childs Robinson defines the Church as "the spiritual family of God, the Christian fellowship created by the Holy Spirit through the testimony to the mighty acts of God in Christ Jesus."² Robinson's use of the language "Christian fellowship" is not intended to limit this definition only to the NT era. Rather, he goes on to say:

The existence of the church is a revelation of the gracious heart of God. The Father chose his eternal Son to become the Saviour of sinners, the Messiah of the whole Israel of God. In him God chose the people for his own possession and called individuals into this fellowship. This one people of God includes the patriarchs, the congregation of ancient Israel, Jesus and his disciples, the primitive community of his resurrection, and the Christian church.³

With this agrees the Belgic Confession in its definition of the Church:

We believe and profess one catholic or universal Church, which is a holy congregation of the true Christian believers, all expecting their salvation in Jesus Christ, being washed by His blood, sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit.

This Church has been from the beginning of the world, and will be to the end thereof; which is evident from this, that Christ is an eternal king, which without subjects He cannot be (Article XXVII).

Without having the time to demonstrate either of these definitions, either of covenant or of Church, but assuming them, let us now move to the more particular topic of this paper, namely, the relation of these

²W. C. Robinson, *Baker's Dictionary of Theology* (ed. E. F. Harrison; Grand Rapids: Baker) 123.

³Ibid.

two concepts. This will be done by giving an overview of the covenants as viewed by covenant theologians, tracing them throughout the Bible. Together with this will be a consideration of how the Church is viewed under each covenant.

II. THE COVENANTS TRACED

A. *The Eternal Covenant—Covenant of Redemption or Counsel of Peace*

In the 16th century and the early part of the 17th century the concept of covenant was restricted to God's provision of saving grace to men. By the middle of the 17th century, however, the relations of the Persons of the Godhead to one another were brought into the covenant concept. The language in treating this intra-Trinitarian covenant varies with the theologians. Johannes Cocceius referred to it as both a covenant and a pact, or counsel of peace, based on Zech 6:13: "And the counsel of peace shall be between them both." Francis Turretine calls it the counsel of redemption between the Father and the Son. Peter van Mastricht used the term "eternal" covenant as opposed to "temporal" covenant. Herman Witsius spoke of the compact or *pactum* between the Father and the Son. This compact was the foundation of our salvation. Samuel Rutherford used the term "covenant of redemption." Thomas Boston saw the intra-Trinitarian covenant not as a separate covenant from the temporal, but he distinguished the two as two aspects of the same covenant under different designations, depending on whether Christ or we are in view:

The Covenant of Redemption and the Covenant of Grace are not two distinct covenants, but one and the same covenant. . . . Only in respect of Christ it is called *the Covenant of Redemption*, forasmuch as in it he engaged to pay the price of our redemption; but in respect of us, *the Covenant of Grace*, forasmuch as the whole of it is of free grace to us.⁴

Herman Bavinck called it the counsel of redemption. Herman Hoeksema called it the counsel of peace. From this historical survey, we see the great diversity of usage in referring to this aspect of the covenant. It is not a question of whether there was such an intra-Trinitarian arrangement, but whether it should be called a covenant or not.

For our purposes in this paper we shall follow the position of Boston—that the whole treatment of man may be subsumed under the category of covenant, and that this itself is based upon intra-Trinitarian relations that may also be called covenantal. We shall use the term "covenant of redemption" or "counsel of peace" for the intra-Trinitarian aspect of this covenant, and the overall term "covenant of life" for the temporal aspect of the covenant. (The Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter VII, Paragraph III, speaks of the parties of the covenant of grace as God and believers in Christ, whereas the Larger Catechism speaks of the covenant as made with Christ.)

If we speak of the intra-Trinitarian relation as covenantal, then we

⁴T. Boston, *The Complete Works* (London: 1953), 1. 333-334.

may properly speak of God as existing eternally in covenant with himself. Since man was created in his own image, one of the aspects of this image was that man would be a covenant creature.

The covenant of redemption was the eternal pact in which God the Father chose a number of men for eternal glory with himself. God the Son agreed to redeem these after they had fallen, and God the Holy Spirit agreed to apply the work of Christ to the elect. The Father promised to give the elect to the Son as a reward for his saving work (Isa 53:12). The Holy Spirit was promised to the Son so that he could come and apply the redemption accomplished by Christ to the elect, to the Church.

Here in this covenant in eternity we see the fact that God has a body of people—the Church—in mind to be redeemed and to be cleansed from their sin, so that they might be one with God. "That they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us" (John 17:21a). Jesus spoke of the Church in terms of this covenant on several occasions. In John 17:2 he spoke of the fact that he had received authority over all flesh, "that to all whom thou hast given him, he should give eternal life." Again in John 6:37 he said, "All that which the Father giveth me shall come unto me: and him that cometh unto me I will in no wise cast out." This is a clear statement of the fact that the elect shall be gathered to himself. Thus we see the idea of the assembling of God's people to himself. How appropriate that not only does he speak of the simple fact that the elect shall come but that he also graciously speaks of the promise that those who respond to his call shall not be cast out! That all of the persons of the Godhead are involved in this assembling of the Church is seen in John 6:44, where he says, "No man can come to me, except the Father that sent me draw him: and I will raise him up in the last day." Here the work of drawing is ascribed to the Father, whereas John 3:5 ascribes it to the Holy Spirit. "Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except one be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." This effectual call rests upon the eternal covenant between the three Persons of the Trinity.

B. The Temporal Covenant—Covenant of Life

1. The Adamic Covenant—Covenant of Works. As we come to treat the outworking of the eternal covenant of redemption in time and history, we face the question of whether the original state of man should be spoken of as covenantal. It must be granted that the term "covenant" is not used prior to the Noahic covenant (Gen 6:18; 9:9 ff.). A study of the basic ideas involved in clearly designated covenants shows that these same concepts are found in God's dealing with Adam. Thus covenant theologians have felt that it is proper to designate this dealing as covenantal.

As already indicated, man as created was created a covenant creature. That is, he was created in relation with God from the moment

that he was called into being by God. Involved in this original state was the obligation of man to obey his maker. There were various facets of obedience involved in this state. Adam was commanded to be fruitful and to multiply, to have dominion over the earth, to tend the garden, to name the animals. Then, in order to make the obedience of man a self-conscious choice by him, God gave a command regarding the tree of knowledge of good and evil. To all appearances this tree was one among many in the garden, and its fruit was desirable to eat. The one thing that made it different was the command of God. The test was whether Adam would obey God because he was God and because he commanded.

Because of the emphasis on obedience in this probation, it has been called the covenant of works. This is not to say that man earned salvation by works. He did not need to earn salvation. He was created good. He had immediate communion and fellowship with God. He would not have had to go through physical death. He would have continued in eternal life. It is of interest to note that the Westminster divines used both "covenant of life" and "covenant of works" to describe this covenant.

In a sense, the succeeding covenant of grace is also a covenant of life, for life is what is also provided in that covenant. It seems to this writer that if we are correct in understanding man to have been made a covenant creature from the beginning, we might do well to understand him as under the one overarching covenant of life, which in turn is developed in a series of lesser covenants. Had he kept the covenant of works, Adam would have entered into the full blessings of the covenant of life.

Before leaving this first covenant, it is appropriate for us to note the condition of the Church before the fall. Man as a covenant creature was created to serve his Maker. As such he was to fulfill the threefold office of prophet, priest and king. He was to be God's spokesman, as he was commissioned to name the animals. He was to worship God, being given one day in seven as a Sabbath to the Lord God. He was to exercise dominion over all of creation. Without sin, the Church would be identical with the whole of the human race. The family and the Church would be the same. As rational creatures they would have joined in the praising of God as the Creator, saying, "Worthy art thou, our Lord and our God, to receive the glory and the honor and the power: for thou didst create all things, and because of thy will they were, and were created" (Rev 4:11). In this they would have experienced forever the presence of God as their God, and they would have been his people. This is the thing for which they had been created, the essence of the Biblical religion, the essence of the covenant relation, the essence of the idea of the Church as the assembly of God's people.

2. The Seed Promise—Covenant of Grace. With the fall of Adam, the threat of the covenant of works was immediately effective. Adam

and Eve experienced spiritual separation from God—death—and estrangement from each other. When God confronts them, he does not leave them without hope but graciously announces the seed promise of the gospel that he will work out. One of the principles that we should note at this point is the organic character of covenant theology. Covenant theologians, since the time of the Reformation, have maintained that the whole plan of redemption since the fall is an organic unity. This is seen in the way in which the basic elements of the gospel announced in Gen 3:15 may be traced throughout the Scripture, reaching their fulfilment in Christ and in the final consummation. The enmity that God established continues to this day, with the sure victory already won by Christ as he was bruised while dealing the death blow to Satan on the cross. The seed promise was fulfilled in both a collective and a particular sense. Collectively, it designates the people of God—the church—as opposed to the seed of the serpent or the world. Particularly, it has reference to the Seed—namely, to Christ himself. This same dual application of the term “seed” occurs in the case of the seed of Abraham. Paul in Gal 3:29 identifies all believers—the Church—as the seed of Abraham, while also painting the particular seed as Christ himself (3:16). Again, in connection with the Davidic covenant, the seed of David refers to the royal line of kings in general as well as to the Seed of David—the Son of David—Jesus Christ (2 Sam 7; Isa 11:1-2).

The Church is the fulfilment of the seed promise in the collective sense. The line of Seth is traced as the line of God's own as opposed to the seed of Satan. The essence of the gospel was thus announced to Adam and Eve, and from them we see a line of believers stemming. Abel was a true gospel worshiper. The writer to the Hebrews spoke of him: “By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice, and obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts.” It appears that they worshiped at the gate of the garden, before the symbol of his presence, the cherubim, guarding the tree of life from men.

In short, there and then began the visible Church on earth, composed of the same materials, antagonist to the same wickedness and apostasy from the presence of the Lord, with the same creed, in substance, exercising the same living faith, and separated as the same body of peculiar people, which has existed in the world ever since. And to this peculiar people, thenceforth through all the ages, and not directly to mankind at large, did Jehovah communicate “the lively oracles of God.”⁵

Four basic elements are to be seen: (1) The materials of which the Church is made are sinners under conviction of sin and misery, seeking to flee the wrath to come; (2) the gospel of salvation is presented to these sinners, and they are to receive it by faith, the evidence that they have entered into newness of life; (3) this group of penitent believers constituted an organized community, under special covenant with

⁵S. Robinson, *Discourses on Redemption*, p. 72.

God; they are to grow in grace, nurturing holiness, and to separate themselves from the powers of evil in the earth; and (4) these organized penitent believers were to labor to call sinners from their sins to God. Enoch and Noah are spoken of as preaching to their generation. God manifested his blessing on them, as in the case of Enoch's translation and Noah's preservation.

Stuart Robinson comments on our failure to see the Church in that age thus:

A large part of the confusion of ideas which unhappily prevail among us, concerning both the Church of God and the revelation of God in his Word, arises from a failure to perceive that the Church began with the very first sinners of our race, and that the gospel began to be revealed also at the beginning of our race. The Bible, therefore, is the record of only one religion; the development of one and the same way of salvation; and is the history of one and the same Church from first to last. . . . It is one gospel, developed through the successive covenants which God made, and in exposition of which he spake in time past by the Prophets, then by his Son and his Apostles.⁶

3. The Noahic Covenant (Genesis 9). We shall touch only very lightly on the covenant God made with Noah and with all flesh following the flood. It was a covenant that renewed the dominion of man over the earth. It was a covenant that dealt with the preservation, propagation and protection of man, with the promise that God would not again curse the earth with a universal flood. It is one of the clearest examples of a unilateral, monergistic covenant. God initiated it, he keeps all the conditions of it. He set the bow in the clouds, and it is he who sees the bow and remembers his covenant. It is totally unconditional, being promised not only to Noah but to all flesh. Though it did not deal directly with redemption, it provided the necessary background for the further development of the covenant of grace. It stands in much the same relation to the covenant of grace as the original creation covenant did to the specific probation we call the covenant of works.

4. The Abrahamic Covenant. All who are familiar with Biblical history are aware of the fact that the Abrahamic covenant holds a very prominent and unique position in that history. One may partially account for this as we think of the condition of the race prior to and after the time of Abraham. Prior to Abraham, particularly before the flood, the protracted period of human life allowed the extension of the life of individual patriarchs to cover many centuries. Thus the organization of society into either Church or state was tied to that of the family structure. After the flood, however, the days of men on earth were shortened, thus no longer leaving the natural head of a family the right of government because of age or paternity. Instead it became necessary for the development of the state and its government apart from the family government. Not only was this necessary for society in general, but the seed

⁶Ibid., pp. 73-74.

of the woman must also be given a governmental structure apart from the family structure. This God provided in the Abrahamic covenant.

Thus it is to the Abrahamic covenant that we look to see the beginnings of the Church as a formal organization. We have already noted that the Church existed in the line of the seed of the woman from Adam to Noah, and yet it did not have the formalized structure that was given to it by God in the Abrahamic covenant. This covenant is especially distinguished as an ecclesiological covenant. Its provisions all have special relation to a chosen people as an organized and visible body on earth through which all nations shall be blessed. From this time onward the promises of the Messiah, the victory over Satan, are associated with a definite form of a visible body of men. Stuart Robinson says:

It is a marked peculiarity of the Abrahamic covenant that it brings into view the Church visible, not simply as the external manifestation and development of the ideal mediatorial body of the Redeemer in the eternal covenant, but at the same time, also, as an actual institute for the calling and training of the elect people of God. From this time forward, through the entire revelation, the visible Church is exhibited as a body externally called to the privilege of receiving the oracles of God, and of being specially under the charge of Jehovah as his peculiar nation, the special beneficiary of his promises, and enjoying the special agency of his Holy Spirit.⁷

Let us now look at the elements of this covenant as they relate to the Church. The idea of God's calling the assembly of his people is found in Genesis 12, where we have the call of Abram:

Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will show thee: and I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless them that bless thee, and him that curseth thee will I curse: and in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed.

Here is a call from the world to God's land, a call to become a great nation, a call to become a blessing to all the rest of the world. We see the fulfilment of this in part in the OT Israel—but how much more in the NT Israel, the Christian Church! The condition Abraham met was faithful obedience to God. The element of faith was particularly designated in Gen 15:6: "And he believed in Jehovah; and he reckoned it to him for righteousness." Paul cites this as evidence that the gospel has always been a gospel of grace and that justification has always been received by faith alone (Rom 4:3). He further indicates that all who believe are blessed with faithful Abraham (Gal 3:9) and that, if we believe, we are the sons of Abraham (Gal 3:7, 29). Not only is this so, but the kind of faith expected of Abraham is the kind of faith expected in the Church today. It must be a living faith, a faith that results in godliness of life. So James cites Abraham as demonstrating his faith by his works. So also Jesus teaches that if we love him we will keep his commandments.

The essential promise of the covenant is found in Gen 17:7: "And

⁷S. Robinson, *The Church of God*, p. 54.

I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee, throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee and to thy seed after thee." This was the relation that Adam had had in his original created state and that he lost in the fall. It is this that God restored to sinful man in the gospel. This is the very essence of the Biblical religion. Notice that God says to Abraham that this is the covenant—nothing more nor less. God will be God to Abraham and to his seed after him, in an everlasting bond. This is one of the most repeated themes throughout the rest of the Bible. It is the theme of all the rest of the covenants, regardless of their particular area of amplification. We shall note this as we continue. It is sometimes called the Immanuel theme, for the meaning of this title of Christ is "God with us," which epitomizes the covenant promise. This idea, of course, is that which distinguishes the Church from all other assemblies. The Church is the assembly of God's people with God.

This covenant of the highest spiritual fellowship between God and men was sealed with the physical sign of circumcision. It is of interest to note the fact that the covenant is identified with the act of circumcision: "This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; every man among you shall be circumcised" (Gen 17:10). One is struck immediately with the fact that the sign was applied in connection with family relationships. Believers and their seed were to be circumcised. This reminds us of the principle that is operative in the other covenants as well, namely that of family representation. Adam had represented all of his posterity in his sin, so that in Adam all die. Christ also represents all of his spiritual seed, and thus in Christ all are made alive. This principle of family representation is brought out in the emphasis of the Abrahamic covenant on the inclusion of Abraham and his seed.

The sign of circumcision was a mark of "fallen man's nature, and the need of a new nature in God's covenant."⁸ Vos said of it:

Circumcision has something to do with the process of propagation. Not in the sense that the act is of itself sinful, for there is no trace of this anywhere in the Old Testament. It is not the act but the product, that is, *human nature*, which is unclean and disqualified in its very source. Sin, consequently, is a matter of the race and not of the individual only. The need of qualification had to be specifically emphasized under the Old Testament. At that time the promise of God had proximate reference to temporal, natural things. Hereby the danger was created that natural descent might be understood as entitling to the grace of God. Circumcision teaches that physical descent from Abraham is not sufficient to make true Israelites. The uncleanness and disqualification of nature must be taken away. Dogmatically speaking, therefore, circumcision stands for justification and regeneration, plus sanctification (Rom 4:9-12; Col 2:11-13).⁹

⁸Rushdoony, *Institutes of Biblical Law*, p. 756.

⁹G. Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948) 104-105.

Rushdoony goes on to say, "Circumcision, by a symbolic cutting of the organ of regeneration, declared that in generation there is no hope, but only in regeneration; man can only reproduce his fallen nature; he cannot transcend it."¹⁰

The inclusion of the children as citizens in the commonwealth of Christ is much like that of the citizen of a nation. By virtue of birth a child born in America, for example, is a citizen of the United States, and yet he may not exercise all the rights of that citizenship until he has reached maturity. So also with God's people. The children of believers have the right to the covenant sign, even though they have not yet come to their own faith.

The covenant theologian sees this sign of the covenant continued in the NT in baptism, which carries the same basic meaning as circumcision. Paul identifies the two in Col 2:11-13. Both circumcision and baptism are the figurative expressions of the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. (Compare Deut 10:16; 30:6; Lev 26:11; Rom 2:29; 4:11; Phil 3; Col 3:11-13.)

One of the remarkable things to be noted about the Abrahamic covenant is the intimate relation into which this covenant brought Abraham to God. It was a relation as "friend of God" (Exod 33:11; Isa 41:8; 2 Chr 20:7; Jas 2:23). Jesus addressed his disciples in the same way (John 15:15), which again suggests the unity of the OT and NT. As the covenant with Abraham brought him into the relationship of friend to God, so also does the covenant in Christ's blood bring us into this same relationship. Douglas Bannerman says:

In the Church of the Old Testament, in short, as set up in patriarchal times, we find the true spirit of "the Gospel preached beforehand unto Abraham." We see in substance the New Testament priesthood, with its direct access to God, with its liberty of prayer and intercession, with its reverent childlike confidence in drawing near to God as a covenant God and Father. It was a fair and gracious dawn of the Gospel day. Clouds came over it through sin and unbelief in the children of Abraham; but the light from heaven never wholly passed away. It shone out again in full glory in that "day of Christ" which the patriarch saw afar off, and which we see reflected beforehand in our own.¹¹

5. The Mosaic Covenant. Though much more could be said about the Abrahamic covenant, it is necessary for us to move on to the next great covenant of the OT, namely the Mosaic or Sinaitic covenant. Covenant theology maintains that this is but a stage in the development of the great covenant of grace first announced in Gen 3:15. Others, however, have suggested that it was a break from such a development. Even in some covenant theologians the suggestion is found that it was a return to the covenant of works, thus constituting a distinct break from the gracious covenant of promise given to Abraham.

¹⁰Rushdoony, *Institutes*, p. 756.

¹¹D. Bannerman, *The Scripture Doctrine of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955) 58-59.

It shall not be our purpose to argue fully the case here but to indicate something of the position held by covenant theologians favoring the idea that this covenant is a part of the gracious unfolding of the covenant of grace, and not the contrary. First, the Sinaitic covenant was identified with the Abrahamic as to the essence of that covenant. In Exodus 19 God called Moses to gather the people at Sinai for the giving of the covenant there. He said in part, "Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself. Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be mine own possession from among all peoples: for all the earth is mine: and ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation" (Exod 19:4-6a). This is but another way of stating the same thought given in Gen 17:7: "I will be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee." It is of interest to note that the NT writers saw the NT Church as the fulfilment of this statement. 1 Peter 2 paraphrases the promises here and applies them to the Church: "But ye are an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation..." (1 Pet 2:9). John in Rev 1:6 borrows the language of Exodus in a doxology of praise to Christ: "And he made us to be a kingdom, to be priests unto his God and Father; to him be the glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen."

Secondly, the announcement of the Sinaitic covenant itself begins with the reminder to the people that they have been the recipients of salvation from Egypt. "I am the LORD thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Exod 20:2). This being the case, it is a mistake to understand the ten commandments as given to the people as a means of their salvation. They are a people who have already been redeemed through the sacrifice of the Passover lamb and delivered by the mighty arm of Jehovah. The law is thus to be understood as God's revelation of how they are now to live before him as a nation. It might be pointed out at this point that all of the ten commandments had already been known prior to Sinai. For example, the sanctity of the Sabbath and of the marriage bond were part of the creation ordinances. The ten commandments constitute a codification of that which was already revealed. As Israel was about to move from the status of a tribe of slaves into that of a separate nation under God, God gave to them this greatly amplified statement of how he wanted them to live. Ultimately, the purpose for this was to bring before man more clearly his sinfulness and his inability to live righteously. The Pharisaical presumption that men could earn their own salvation was a total misunderstanding of the true purpose of the law, which was to serve as a schoolmaster to lead us to Christ.

Included in this covenant were provisions for the failure of sinners to live up to God's perfect demands. The priesthood, the tabernacle and the Levitical sacrificial system were all a part of this covenant. God provided the way of access to his throne room through the shed blood of the lambs of sacrifice. The tabernacle itself, set in the midst of the camp, and later the temple in the midst of the nation, represented

the principle of Gen 17:7 of God being a God to Israel and they being his people. God symbolically established his throne there in the holy of holies, and though the heaven of heavens could not contain him he chose to dwell in the midst of this people as his own people. All of this in turn was but a foreshadowing of the coming of Immanuel, even as Jesus standing in the presence of the temple building made reference to his death by saying, "Destroy this temple" (John 2:19). This became the basis for one of the charges made against him at his trial (Mark 14:58).

The view that the law is foreign to the covenant of grace has arisen from the fact that Paul argued so strenuously in Romans and Galatians against our being under the law. The position that Paul was answering was the perversion of the law by the Pharisees, namely that the law was given as a means of salvation. They taught that salvation was earned by the keeping of the law in all its details, and they sought to keep it, at least externally. Even Paul could speak of himself as blameless as touching the law (Phil 3:6). This was, of course, in the external sense, not the full spiritual sense of the law as taught by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. When the law is properly understood, then the Christian should say with Paul that he delights in the law in the inward man (Rom 7:12, 22). Again, it is of great interest to observe the fact that when the author of Hebrews is making direct comparison of the old covenant (the Sinaitic) and the new covenant (Heb 8-9), the deficiency of the law was not its legalism but the fact that it called for repeated sacrifices and therefore was but a foreshadowing of the gospel. Under the new covenant, we have a better Priest, a better sacrifice, a better sanctuary. The contrast is not one of absolute antithesis but rather of the shadow as compared with the reality.

Having thus seen something of the line of argument for the Sinaitic covenant being understood as part of the overall covenant of grace, let us look more closely at the Church as reflected in this covenant. Here we see the first great assembly of God's people before Sinai. In a real sense this assembly becomes normative for all lesser assemblies that are to follow it, and a picture of that final great general assembly of all of God's people, when they shall be summoned by the trumpet of God to assemble before their Messiah (Heb 12:18-28).

E. P. Clowney states concerning this:

The great assembly of the people of God in the Old Testament was the assembly at Sinai. The great day of Israel's history was the "day of the assembly" (Deut. 9:10; 10:4; 18:16) when God spoke with His people "in the mount out of the midst of the fire." The assembly at Sinai was centered in God and in His saving grace. God brought His people out of bondage in Egypt unto Himself. He assembled them before His face to give them His covenant and to make them His people (Deut. 4:10). To call the people of God his *assembly* is to recognize the relation to God that brought them into existence.... The assembly pattern is... centered on God. ... Without God in the midst, the assembly at Sinai loses its meaning. The blessing of Moses pictures God sitting as king in the midst of the ten

thousands of his holy ones (Deut. 33:1-5). The heavenly and the earthly holy ones, the angels and the saints, are all assembled in the presence of the living God. After God marched from Sinai to Zion, leading his people into the land of their possession, he dwelt in the midst of them in his holy place.¹²

The very fact that the word *ekklēsia* meaning "assembly" is applied to God's people is drawn from the assembly of Israel before God at Sinai. Stephen in his defense, therefore, spoke of Israel under the name "congregation" or "church": "This is he that was in the church in the wilderness with the angel that spake to him in Mount Sinai, and with our fathers: who received living oracles to give unto us" (Acts 7:38). The assembly had been summoned by the sound of the trumpet (Exod 19:16, 18). This was to become the means of summoning the people to solemn assembly on later occasions (Num 10:1-10). The trumpet is again to be used to assemble his people at the end of the age (1 Thess 4:13 ff.).

There were various solemn assemblies of the people in the OT. They assembled for worship, for war, for renewal of the covenant with God. Leviticus 23 provided for assembly every Sabbath: "Six days shall work be done: but on the seventh day is a sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation; ye shall do no manner of work: it is a sabbath unto Jehovah in all your dwellings" (v 3). In addition to these weekly convocations there were to be three special "holy convocations" each year. Besides these scheduled assemblies, there were special great assemblies recorded in the OT. Among these was the assembly to announce Solomon as David's successor (1 Chr 28, 29). Solomon called such an assembly to dedicate the temple (2 Chr 5:2). Other kings also assembled Israel—Jehoshaphat (20:5, 14), and Joash (23:3)—as did Nehemiah after the exile (Neh 5).

Joel prophesied the restoration of God's people after their judgment and exile under the figure of an assembly (2:15-20). Not only was the figure used of Israel, but also the gathering in of the Gentiles to God's people was prophesied in this language (Isa 2:2-20; 56:6-8; Ps 87). From the first great assembly, the thought of the assembly included heaven and earth. "God was present on Mount Sinai in the midst of the heavenly assembly of His holy ones and with the earthly assembly at His feet (Deut. 33). Those who stand in God's assembly are 'all his holy saints' (Deut. 33:3)." ¹³

This assembly was the prototype of the Church as is seen in the NT, particularly in Heb 12:18-28: "For ye are not come unto a mount that might be touched, that burned with fire, and unto blackness, and darkness, and tempest . . . but ye are come unto Mount Zion, unto the city of the living God, the general assembly and church of the firstborn

¹²E. P. Clowney, *By God's Grace . . . the Church* (Chestnut Hill, Pennsylvania: Westminster Theological Seminary) 10-11.

¹³E. P. Clowney, "Toward a Biblical Doctrine of the Church," *WTJ* 31/1 (November, 1968) 34.

who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant. . . ." Again Clowney says: "To this heavenly assembly we come, for here is Christ, the Mediator of the New Covenant. Indeed, the Christian church consists of this assembly. The active sense of the people of God assembled in the heavenlies with Christ dominates the New Testament conception of the church. The outpouring of the Spirit on the festival of Pentecost manifests the continuity of the church with the prophetic promises for the renewed and reformed people of God."¹⁴

As we consider further the situation at Sinai, it should be observed that though this was the first great assembly of God's people, it was not the establishment of the people as a Church. The covenant at Sinai was made with a Church already fully organized. Moses brought his first message of deliverance to a body of recognized elders (Exod 4:29). It was to the elders that he gave the instructions for the passover (12:21). It was before these elders in council or synod that he laid the message of Jehovah in preparation for the meeting at Sinai (19:7). Moreover, this Church already had its priesthood, prior to Sinai (19:22, 24). Thus there was already an organized Church at the time of Sinai.

The same may be said for the people as a civil commonwealth. They had already appointed elders to assist in the judging of the people at the suggestion of Jethro (Exod 18). Thus the covenant at Sinai was not for the establishment of the civil government of Israel, though it did greatly elaborate on how this government was to function as the people came to full national status.

What was it, then? We are not left to our own conjecture or to mere inference. Sinai was the making of a covenant with Israel: "He declared unto you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, even the ten commandments; and he wrote them upon two tables of stone" (Deut 4:13). It was a covenant with this Church as a representative body.

Moses, forty years after, when this generation that stood before Sinai had all perished, expressly says to the next generation, "The Lord made this covenant not with our fathers *but with us, even us who are all here alive this day.*" By parity of reasoning, the church that stood at Sinai, thus representing one, represented all succeeding generations. And, accordingly thenceforth in the succeeding ages, including that of the Apostles, the inspired teachers regarded the church as still under this covenant. And you will observe how, under the New Testament dispensation, Stephen expressly says, "Our fathers *received the lively oracles to give unto us.*" That is, they stood there as representing us.¹⁵

This was a covenant that was essentially spiritual in its significance. Moses summarized the ten commandments, even as Jesus did later, with the single spiritual commandment that we are to love the Lord our God with all our mind, soul and strength. Paul in Galatians 3 ex-

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵S. Robinson, *Discourses*, p. 125.

pressly argues that this covenant had not disannulled that spiritual covenant with Abraham but was given only for the purpose of more fully amplifying its provisions for spiritual blessing. This is explicitly carried out by its bringing afresh to man his need for a Savior and the fact that he cannot earn salvation by his own works but must be justified by faith alone.

Stuart Robinson summarizes the whole matter to this point in the following paragraph:

The substance of the whole matter, therefore, is this: That as the covenant with Adam, for blessing of a divine human redeemer to restore a part of the race through vicarious atonement, was more distinctly developed with Noah, establishing the blessing in the line of Shem; and both these, again, more fully developed in the covenant with Abraham, establishing the blessing in the line of Isaac, and organizing the redeemed body as a church, settled in a promised inheritance; and all three of these, again, more fully developed in the passover covenant, bring out more distinctly the engagement to redeem this church by faith in the atoning blood; so now this Sinai covenant is a still fuller development, in detail, of all the preceding covenants, intended to teach and to produce a conscious conviction of the need of a vicarious atonement; the method of applying its benefits by faith for the pardon of sin, and purification of the nature; and the relation of the believers to their redeemer, as king and head of the organized commonwealth.¹⁶

Before leaving our treatment of the Sinaitic covenant we should note a few additional points with regard to the Church as revealed in this covenant. One is the interesting fact that not only was Israel established as a kingdom of priests unto God, but she was also called "son" by God: "Israel is my son, even my firstborn." "When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt" (Exod 4:22; Hos 11:1; Jer 4:19; 31:9). It should be observed that this same language is used of the NT Church. It is spoken of as children of God, heirs of God, joint heirs with Christ (Rom 8:17; 1 John 3:1-2). Again Israel is spoken of as the betrothed of God, the bride of God (Hos 2:19, 20), and the NT Church is also spoken of in this same relationship (Eph 5:23 ff.). The point of these references is to bring out the fact that the Israel or Church of the OT sustained the same relations to God that the Israel or Church of the NT sustains.

6. The Davidic Covenant. With the completion of the conquest of the land of Canaan, which God had promised Abraham would be given to his seed, David was given rest (2 Sam 7:1). This marked a distinctive point in the Biblical revelation. At this time David raised the question of whether he might build a temple for God. God did not permit him to do so, because he was a man of war (1 Chr 22:8). He indicated that Solomon, his son, would have this privilege. God did indicate to David, however, that he would establish his house forever as the royal house

¹⁶Ibid., p. 126.

through which the Messiah would come (see 2 Sam 7). That this is a covenant is expressly stated in Psalm 89: "I have made a covenant with my chosen, I have sworn unto David my servant: thy seed will I establish forever, and build up thy throne to all generations" (v 3). "My covenant will I not break, nor alter the thing that is gone out of my lips. Once have I sworn by my holiness: I will not lie unto David: his seed shall endure forever, and his throne as the sun before me" (vv 34-36).

For our purposes, in considering the Church in relation to the covenant, the Davidic covenant especially brings to the fore the idea of kingship and the kingdom. The fact that it was not just an earthly kingdom but was to be eternally established is obvious from any of the messianic passages announcing the coming of the Messiah as King. This royal theme becomes one of the major messianic themes for the rest of the OT. The NT opens with John announcing the fact that the kingdom is at hand. Christ was sent to the cross by Pilate, in part because he affirmed that he was a king—though he indicated that his kingdom was not of this world (John 18:36-37). Jesus asserted his kingship following the resurrection when he said that all authority in heaven and in earth had been delivered unto him. He then gave the great commission to the Church as his particular domain of rule, to go into the world and to evangelize it (Matt 28:18-20). This he did by right of royal prerogative.

Paul declares him to be made "to sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule, and authority, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come; and he put all things in subjection under his feet, and gave him to be head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all" (Eph 1:20-23).

In Jesus' reference to his own authority and in Paul's reference to his having authority over all things, we see that his rule extends beyond the Church itself, though the Church is spoken of as his spiritual kingdom. We are said to be a kingdom of priests (Rev 1:5, 6). Christ's kingship includes not only the spiritual kingdom of the Church, but also the whole of the universe is under his dominion.

The idea of kingship is quite significant for the Church itself, in that if Christ is her king he is to be recognized as the only lawgiver. It is his law that should be obeyed in all things, both in faith and in practice. What he demands in matters of government and in matters of worship are to be the rule for the Church. If the Church would take seriously the kingship of Christ as a present reality and examine more carefully his word of law to the Church in all matters of faith and practice, there would come a greater expression of ecclesiastical unity in the life and practice of the Church.

The Davidic covenant with all of the messianic prophecies that are based upon it, speaking of Christ as the coming king, finds its fulfillment in his person and work together with the establishment of his spiritual kingdom, the Church.

7. The New Covenant. In Jeremiah 31:31 ff. we find the announcement of the fact that there will be a new covenant to come. The writer to the Hebrews in 8:7 ff. quotes this passage from Jeremiah and identifies it with the gospel of Christ. When Jesus instituted the Lord's supper he used the expression, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood" (1 Cor 11:25). When it is called a new covenant it is so called in relation to the Mosaic covenant. In addition to the passages in Jeremiah 31 and Hebrews 8, essentially the same promises are stated again in Jer 32; 33:14-16; Ezek 34:23-26; 36:25-27.

It should be observed that though the word "Israel" is used in connection with this promise it is not necessary to limit its fulfilment only to the physical nation of Israel. 1 Cor 10:18 speaks of Israel after the flesh, thus suggesting that there was an Israel after the spirit. Matt 15:24 says, "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel." This certainly is not limited only to the physical Israel but must also apply to the gentiles for whom he came and died; that is, it is the elect who are designated as "the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Acts 13:23 says, "Of this man's seed hath God according to his promise, raised unto Israel a Saviour, Jesus." Here too it is spiritual Israel that is meant. He did not save the nation at large, but he saved his own. Paul is quite explicit in Rom 9:6 where he says, "Not as though the word of God hath taken none effect. For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel." In this verse he is beginning his discussion of the rejection of the Jews and of the calling of the gentiles. What he sets forth here is the fact that spiritual Israel is not necessarily to be identified with physical Israel. The fact is that Jesus had spoken to physical descendants of Abraham as children of the devil (John 8:42, 44). Paul in Gal 3:7 says, "Know therefore that they that are of faith, the same are sons of Abraham."

It is on the basis of passages such as these that covenant theologians understand the new covenant not to be addressed primarily to physical Israel but to the new covenant Israel, namely, the Christian Church. Matthew Henry says this refers to Gospel times: "... for of Gospel times, the apostles understand it (Heb. 8:8, 9), where the whole passage is quoted, as a summary of the covenant of grace made with believers in Jesus Christ." John Owen said: "The first solemn promulgation of this new covenant, made, ratified, and established, was on the day of pentecost, seven weeks after the resurrection of Christ. It answered to the promulgation of the law on Mt. Sinai, the same space of time after the deliverance of the people out of Egypt. From this day forward the ordinances of worship and institutions of the new covenant became obligatory upon all believers."¹⁷

Specifically the passage teaches the fact that the old covenant, which was external in nature, being written on tablets of stone, will now become internally written by the Spirit on the hearts of God's people. Owen again comments on the passage in Hebrews, saying:

¹⁷J. Owen, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 1. 155.

There was in it a recapitulation of all promises of grace. God had not made any promise, any intimation of His love or grace unto the church in general, nor to any particular believer, but he brought it all into *this* covenant, so as that they should be esteemed, all and every one of them, to be given and spoken unto every individual person that hath an interest in this covenant. Hence all the promises made unto Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, with all of the other patriarchs, and the oath of God, whereby they were confirmed, are *all* of them made *unto us*, and do belong unto us, no less than they did unto them, to whom they were first given, if we are made partakers of this covenant.¹⁸

The writer to the Hebrews in citing this new covenant is seeking to set forth how it is better than the old. One of the points that he makes is that this covenant now takes the form of a testament, with the death of the testator thus putting it into force (Heb 9:15-17).

It is of interest to note that the essential promise of this covenant is the same as that given to Abraham in Gen 17:7, to Moses in Exod 19:5-6. "I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people" (Heb 8:9b). Further, this involves the forgiveness of sins and the sanctification of his people: "For I will be merciful to their iniquities, and their sins will I remember no more" (Heb 8:12).

In Heb 12:24 Jesus is designated as the Mediator of the new covenant, and his blood is the basis on which the blessings of this covenant come upon his own. This is stated in that passage to which we have already referred, in which the author of Hebrews described the Church to which we have come in the new covenant (cf. Eph 5:25-27).

One cannot conclude a treatment of the covenant and the Church without looking to the vision of the final consummation and finding there a symbolic picture of the Church as the new Jerusalem. Here the promise of Gen 17:7 is reiterated. It is striking to realize that the final consummation cannot be described in higher terms than those in which it was given to Abraham:

And I saw a new heaven and new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth are passed away; and the sea is no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of the throne saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he shall dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God (Rev 21:1-3).

¹⁸Ibid., 6. 126.