

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine hermeneutics, the principles that we use to properly interpret the Bible. Last time we discussed the Christocentric focus of the Bible. We ended by starting to discuss covenants and we mentioned two at that time, the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. Dr. Spencer, we don't use the word covenant much in our society today, but if we do we use it to refer to a serious, formal agreement between people. How is the term being used here?

Dr. Spencer: In his book *Foundations of the Christian Faith* James Boice defines a covenant as “a solemn promise confirmed by an oath or sign.”¹ That is a fairly good brief definition, and it includes the important idea of an oath or a sign, but in his *Systematic Theology* Wayne Grudem gives a better one, he says that “A covenant is an unchangeable, divinely imposed legal agreement between God and man that stipulates the conditions of their relationship.”²

Marc Roby: Why do say Grudem's definition is better?

Dr. Spencer: Because it makes three very important points explicit. First, it states that these covenants are unchangeable. We are told in Numbers 23:19 that “God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?”³ Secondly, Grudem says that these covenants are “divinely imposed” by God. We tend to think of agreements between equals. For example, you and I may enter into a contract, but only if we both agree. I have no right to impose terms on you and you have no right to impose terms on me. Even our Declaration of Independence states that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed, so this idea is firmly rooted in our culture. But, as creator, God has every right to impose a legally binding agreement on us as his creatures. Thirdly, Grudem notes that these covenants stipulate the conditions of our relationship to God.

Marc Roby: That doesn't go along with the modern idea that my relationship with God is personal and I get to relate to him in whatever way I see fit.

Dr. Spencer: It doesn't go along with that idea at all because that idea is profoundly unbiblical. In fact, let me burst our egotistical self-focused bubbles a little further and point out that God's relationship to each of us, while certainly personal, is not primarily with us as individuals.

Marc Roby: What do you mean by that?

Dr. Spencer: I mean that God relates to us as members of a group. And the Bible speaks, ultimately, about only two groups of people; those who are “in Adam” and those who are “in

¹ James Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, Revised in One Volume, InterVarsity Press, 1986, pg. 603

² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 515

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Christ”. In 1 Corinthians 15:22 Paul wrote that “For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.” This speaks of those two groups and, implicitly speaks about the two main covenants, which we are discussing.

Marc Roby: How so?

Dr. Spencer: Well, the covenant of works was established by God with Adam in the Garden of Eden prior to his fall. And while we aren’t told everything about this covenant, we do know the most important stipulation in the covenant, Adam was forbidden to eat of a particular tree, which God called the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And the punishment for violating this prohibition was death. We also know that Adam was acting as the representative of the entire human race at that point. Paul wrote, in Romans 5:12 that “sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned”. Theologians sometimes refer to Adam as the federal head of the covenant of works.⁴

Marc Roby: Why is Adam called the federal head?

Dr. Spencer: The word federal in this context just means having to do with an agreement whereby a collection of people is viewed as a whole in some way. It is similar to the use of the term in our country. We have the federal government which is over the group of 50 states.

This whole idea of viewing the Bible in terms of God’s covenants with man is often called covenant theology, but has also been called federal theology, especially in the past.

Marc Roby: And Adam is called our federal head because he represented all of mankind in this covenant.

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. All of mankind was represented by our first father, Adam. We were viewed by God not just, or even primarily, as individuals, but as members of this class. And Adam was our head.

Marc Roby: I can imagine many of our listeners balking at this point and saying that it isn’t fair for them to be judged because of Adam’s sin.

Dr. Spencer: I had that exact objection the first time I heard this, which was before I was saved. But, if you object to Adam being your representative, then you have a serious problem because the only way to be saved is to have Jesus Christ as your representative. He is the federal head of the covenant of grace.

Going back to Romans 5, which we quoted from a minute ago, Paul wrote in Verses 15-16 that “the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! Again, the gift of God is not like the result of the one man's sin: The judgment

⁴ E.g., see Joel R. Beeke & Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life*, Reformation Heritage Books, 2012, pg. 28

followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification.”

Marc Roby: Alright, I like that representation.

Dr. Spencer: So do I. But, you really can't consistently like the one and reject the other. And, at the end of the day, it really doesn't matter at all what I like or don't like. Nor does it matter what you like or don't like. God is the creator and this is how he has chosen to govern his creation. I have no real say in the matter.

But, we must also note that I cannot accuse God of dealing with me unjustly because Adam represented me when he sinned. Perhaps I would have some argument if I myself had never sinned, but there is no one who can make that claim. Now, of course, I also inherited my sinful nature from Adam, but the blame belongs to him for that, not God.

Marc Roby: You're not helping my self esteem by saying that what I like doesn't matter.

Dr. Spencer: I could say I'm sorry about that, but it wouldn't be true. The reality is that what we like has nothing to do with what actually exists. We've talked about this before, but the fact that I don't like getting sick, or getting old has nothing to do with the reality.

Getting back to hermeneutics though, there are several important things to know about these two main covenants, and which are extremely helpful in developing a comprehensive understanding of the Bible as a whole and of God's way of dealing with human beings. We've already seen that God deals with us as members of a group, we are either in Adam, which means we are subject to the curse of death in its full eternal sense, or we are in Christ, which means that we have been redeemed and are no longer subject to that curse.

Marc Roby: I think that once you understand this structure, it really helps to organize the Bible's teaching in our minds. It also shows the extreme importance of the literal truth of Adam and Eve and the fall.

Dr. Spencer: It does make the importance of that point clear. God's whole plan of creation, fall and redemption comes into clearer focus. And it all redounds to his glory, which is the purpose of creation.

But, there is a lot more that can be said. The covenant of works is called the covenant of works because Adam was judged based on his own works. If he obeyed, most theologians conclude that he would have at some point been confirmed in his obedience and granted the reward of eternal life. In Genesis 3:22 we are told of another tree, the tree of life, which grants eternal life and from which man is to be kept as a consequence of his sin. John Murray speaks about this in his wonderful chapter on the Adamic administration in Volume 2 of his collected works.⁵

Marc Roby: It's interesting that Murray doesn't use the term covenant of works.

⁵ John Murray, *Collected Works*, Vol. II, Banner of Truth Trust, 1977, pg. 54

Dr. Spencer: He objects to the term for two reasons: first, it doesn't have all of the marks of a true covenant; and secondly, the name can be misleading. The contrast between works and grace can be seen to imply that this first covenant was not gracious, when it most certainly was, and the contrast can also be seen to imply that works are not part of the second covenant, when they definitely are.

The first covenant was, in fact, entirely gracious. God gave Adam life, he had fellowship with him and he gave him the ability to obey. God didn't owe Adam eternal life or anything else, so the entire covenant was gracious. And while works are not the basis of our salvation in the covenant of grace, they are nonetheless essential as proof that we have been saved. In Beeke and Jones' book on Puritan Theology we read that "Works function antecedently to [that means before] the reward in the first covenant, whereas works follow the reward ([which is] justification) in the second covenant."⁶ As James says in James 2:26, "faith without deeds is dead." You can claim to be a Christian, but if you don't live like one, your claim has no validity.

Marc Roby: As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. And a new creation cannot look exactly the same as the old one. Paul also wrote, in Ephesians 2:10, that "we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

Marc Roby: But, of course, these so-called good works are the result of grace.

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. In the covenant of grace we are united to Jesus Christ, our federal head, by faith. And that faith is one necessary result of the gracious gift of new birth, or regeneration, but it isn't the *only* necessary result. The fact that our nature has been changed means that our behavior will also necessarily change.

Prior to being born again, we were in Adam and spiritually dead, subject to eternal death in hell. We were also unable to do anything pleasing to God. As Paul wrote in Ephesians 2 Verses 1-2 and 4-5, "you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. ... But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved."

Marc Roby: Praise God! The gospel is so indescribably gracious. To think that God loved sinners enough to send Jesus Christ to be the once-for-all atoning sacrifice for our sins just blows my mind.

Dr. Spencer: It does mine as well. And understanding the covenants gives us a much deeper appreciation for what God has done. Before he created the universe, God looked at this mass of fallen humanity in his mind's eye so to speak, all of these sinful men and women who were in

⁶ Beeke, op. cit., pg. 29

Adam, and he freely chose to save some of them by uniting them to Christ through faith. As we are told in Ephesians 1:4-6, God “chose us in him [meaning Christ] before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.”

Marc Roby: That is amazing. Do you have anything else that you want to say about the covenants?

Dr. Spencer: Yes. We’ve only talked about the two major covenants, but there are many covenants mentioned in the Bible. There is a covenant made with Abraham, there is a covenant made with Noah and there is a covenant made with Moses, just to name a few. The covenant made with Moses is also called the Sinaitic covenant because God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mt. Sinai.

Marc Roby: And the Sinaitic covenant plays a prominent role in the New Testament.

Dr. Spencer: It certainly does. It is called the old covenant in 2 Corinthians 3:14 and it is called the first covenant in the book of Hebrews. We spoke last time about the fact that Hebrews presents Christ as the permanent high priest. In Hebrews 8 we read about the earthly priests who serve in the temple here on earth and then, in Verses 6 and 7, we are told that “the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises. For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another.”

Marc Roby: That always sounds strange when you first read it, to say that there is something wrong with the first covenant even though it was established by God, who is perfect.

Dr. Spencer: It can be troublesome when you first read that, for sure. But if you go on and read the next verse, Verse 8, we are told, “But God found fault with the people”. So, we immediately see that the fault was not really with the covenant itself, it was with one of the parties to the covenant, the people; in other words, us. The writer of Hebrews goes on to quote from Jeremiah 31:31-34. We read in the rest of Hebrews 8:8, “The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.”

Marc Roby: And this is the new covenant that Jesus spoke about at the Last Supper. In 1 Corinthians 11:25 we read that Jesus said “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.”

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. And this new covenant is better than the old one because it takes care of our sin problem. *We* were the problem with the old covenant because in our sinful nature we couldn’t keep the law. There is nothing wrong with the law as Paul tells us in Romans 7:12, the problem is with us. The writer of Hebrews then continues with his quote from Jeremiah, in Hebrews 8:9 we read that this new covenant “will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord.”

Marc Roby: Which again shows us some of the typology of the Old Testament history as we've noted before. The people of God were in slavery to sin in Egypt and God led them out of that slavery under the old covenant, but now, in the new covenant, he leads his people out of their slavery to sin.

Dr. Spencer: We can really see how this knowledge of the covenants helps us to get a more complete picture of God's work throughout history. It is a wonderful tool to help us understand the Bible better, which ought always to be our goal. We should study the Bible so that we have a better understanding of who God is and what he requires of us. It should be our desire to worship him properly and to obey him carefully.

Marc Roby: That verse you just read from Hebrews, Chapter 8 Verse 9, also gives us an implicit warning. God said that because the people did not remain faithful to his covenant, he turned away from them.

Dr. Spencer: He certainly did. And we have all of the Old Testament history, including the Babylonian captivity, to show us the consequences. But, that same history shows us over and over again how patient and faithful God is. What people don't like to hear is that God is not just faithful to keep his promises, he is also faithful to keep his threats. The vast majority of God's promises to us are conditional. He will bless us *if* we are faithful to keep his commands. It's true that his election is unconditional, but his blessings are generally conditional. There is a very pernicious and completely unbiblical teaching that is common in evangelical circles today that God's love for me is a one-way love; by which it is meant that he loves me independently of whether or not I love or obey him. That is complete nonsense biblically. We don't have time to go into that in detail right now, but as we just noted, if we have been born again, our nature has been changed. There is a desire to please God by keeping his commands. Our works are not meritorious, but, as Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:10, "we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

Marc Roby: We've gotten off topic a bit, although in a very good way. But, we are out of time, so I'd like to remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. And I look forward to continuing our discussion of hermeneutics next time.