

The Covenantal Hermeneutic

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Is the Sermon on the Mount directly applicable to Christians today? Is the Sabbath commandment still in effect? Should Christians baptize their infants? How we answer these and many other questions depends on the interpretive assumptions we have before we even open the Bible. We all come to the Bible with certain ideas about how it should be read, but herein lies the problem. If we bring these assumptions to Scripture, where did we get them in the first place? Are we deriving our assumptions from Scripture or bringing them in from the outside?

When we talk about the methods and principles we use to interpret the Bible, we are talking about hermeneutics. All of us practice hermeneutics every day, but we are usually unconscious of it. If we are reading works written in our own culture, in our own native language, and in our own time period, we usually don't have to give a second thought to the rules of interpretation. If we pick up a book that begins with the words *once upon a time . . .*, for example, we know that we should not read it as we would read an encyclopedia article. We automatically recognize that opening line as an indicator that this writing belongs to the genre of "fairy tale." We are also familiar with our own culture's way of referring to people, places, and things. If we are reading an author who says he visited "the Big Apple," we know he is referring to New York City and not a giant piece of fruit. New York City is what the author *literally* means by using this figure of speech.

But what happens when we pick up a book written thousands of

years ago in a different language? If we were to see this book on a fragile papyrus scroll with the original letters of the ancient language in which it was written, we might stop and realize that we will have to do some work before we are prepared to read it. We will have to learn the language. We will have to learn something about the culture in which it was written. We will have to find out what genre of literature it is. When we see an ancient scroll, we recognize that it isn't the same kind of thing as a modern novel. What if that ancient scroll has already been translated, however? What if it has been translated and published in a modern book format with nice leather covers? What if you grew up with that book and were somewhat familiar with the contents? Such familiarity could lull you into thinking that this book is to be read with the same cultural assumptions we bring to contemporary written works.

These are some of the issues we have to think about when we read the Bible. The Bible is a collection of ancient books, originally written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. The books of the Old Testament were written by numerous authors who lived in the ancient Near Eastern world with its own customs and assumptions. The books of the New Testament were written during the height of the Roman Empire. Those are not the worlds in which we have lived our lives. If we fail to understand the kind of books found in the Bible, we can easily misidentify genres, which leads to a misapplication of historical-grammatical hermeneutics. We can forget these things because our Bibles have already been translated out of the ancient languages. Our Bibles have also already been taught to us and read by us along the lines of certain hermeneutical systems we inherited, and some of these are more faithful to the text than others. Knowing which of these we bring to Scripture and why is important.

Over the last century and a half, two systems of interpretation, covenant theology and dispensationalism, have

been the dominant alternatives among evangelical Christians. Covenant theology was in seed form in the writings of the church fathers, but it saw significant developments during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It grew out of a recognition that the Bible reveals God as dealing with His people by means of covenants. At its most basic, a covenant is a formal arrangement between two or more parties. The specific kind of arrangement depends on various factors. Every type of covenant involves obligations for one or both parties. Some covenants also involve formal oaths, some involve ritual ceremonies, and some have external signs. All covenants effect some kind of relationship between the parties.

The covenantal hermeneutic recognizes and proclaims the one gospel of Jesus Christ.

Covenant theology emphasizes the importance of [Genesis 1–3](#) for our understanding of all of Scripture. It emphasizes the radical change caused by man's fall. Before the fall, God related to man according to a certain formal arrangement. Covenant theology speaks of this as the "covenant of works" or "covenant of life." After the fall, in order to save His people, God established a new arrangement, which covenant theology refers to as the "covenant of grace." As God prepared for the sending of the Messiah, He established various covenants throughout redemptive history (e.g., the Abrahamic covenant, the Mosaic covenant, and the Davidic covenant), all of which laid the groundwork for the coming of the Messiah and the new covenant. All these covenants were parts of God's redemptive plan under the one covenant of grace—the one overarching plan of salvation by grace alone through the work of Christ alone. The emphasis here is the Protestant insistence on the fact that after the fall, the only way for sinful man to be saved is by faith alone in Christ alone. Covenant theology is simply an outgrowth of the five *solas* of the Reformation.¹

1. The five sola Scriptura: **sola** fide, **sola** gratia, solus Christus, and soli Deo gloria, which mean God's Word alone, faith alone, grace alone, Christ alone, and to the glory of God alone.

For more than a century, dispensationalism has been a widespread and popular hermeneutical system among evangelicals. Although it is best known for its distinctive eschatological views, dispensationalism's most important element is its distinction between two separate peoples of God: Israel and the church. Because of its understanding that God has two distinct plans for two distinct peoples, dispensationalism divides redemptive history into several separate time periods or dispensations. During each of these dispensations, God tests humanity. In each of these dispensations, man fails the test and a new dispensation is inaugurated. Most dispensationalists believe that there are seven distinct dispensations. The present dispensation, the church age, is unique because it is a parenthesis in redemptive history during which God turns His attention from Israel to the church. Dispensationalists claim that their system alone rests on a consistently literal method of interpretation. In reality, the claim itself rests on a very arbitrary definition of *literal* that is applied selectively and fails to take into account the kind of literature found in these ancient books.

These hermeneutical systems affect the way we read and interpret Scripture. Covenant theology, for example, sees much more continuity across all of Scripture. It also rejects the idea that God has two separate peoples. Dispensationalism sees much more discontinuity, on the other hand. It argues that much of Scripture applies only to Israel and not to Christians today. This radically affects the way we read the Bible. It also affects the preaching of the Bible. I recall one of my dispensationalist seminary professors telling our class that when we preach from the Old Testament, we should be able to

preach that sermon at a Jewish synagogue without anyone raising an eyebrow. That is only possible if we do not mention Jesus or the gospel. Is that the way the authors of the New Testament dealt with the Old Testament? Certainly not.

In recent decades, a number of Baptist theologians who were dissatisfied with the older options have offered alternatives that they believe provide a middle way between dispensationalism and covenant theology. Beginning in the 1980s and 1990s, a number of dispensationalists, for example, began advocating “progressive dispensationalism.” [Progressive dispensationalism](#) sees more continuity in Scripture than traditional dispensationalism does. It sees the dispensations as progressively developing and advancing God’s plan. Progressive dispensationalists continue to maintain a distinction between Israel and the church, but the distinction is not as radical as one finds in traditional dispensationalism.

Another alternative that is found in some Reformed Baptist churches is New Covenant Theology. As the name implies, the emphasis is on the newness of the new covenant. Proponents are known for their reevaluation of the Ten Commandments, specifically the Sabbath commandment. They tend to question or reject the usefulness of the distinction between moral, ceremonial, and civil law and specifically question whether the Sabbath commandment is part of the eternal unchanging moral law of God. Many differences remain among those who call themselves “new covenant theologians.” Some deny any covenant of works before the fall, while others affirm it. Some deny Christ’s active obedience. Others affirm it. This system is still evolving.

Progressive Covenantalism is a more recent view that has begun to gain some adherents. This view has some similarities with New Covenant Theology, but its proponents clearly affirm what they would call a creation covenant with Adam. They are also unanimous in affirming the necessity of Christ’s active

obedience. According to this view, the covenants in Scripture progressively reveal God's one plan of salvation. While affirming a covenantal distinction between Israel and the church, they affirm that there is only one people of God. The primary import of the distinction is the affirmation among Progressive Covenantalists that the old covenant people of God contained believers and unbelievers and the new covenant people of God contains only believers. This undergirds Progressive Covenantalism's insistence on believer's baptism.

The main question that must be kept in mind when examining these various hermeneutical systems is whether they derive their key principles from Scripture or are reading them into Scripture. We do not have the space to thoroughly examine each system on every disputed point. My goal is more modest—namely, to make readers more aware of the hermeneutical lenses through which they are reading Scripture.

Although we cannot thoroughly examine every disputed question, we must briefly look at one—the relationship between Israel and the church. Is dispensationalism's radical distinction taken from Scripture or read into it? The New Testament answer would appear to be clear. In [Romans 11:17–24](#), for example, Paul speaks of the people of God, Israel, as an olive tree from which unbelieving Jewish branches have been broken off, leaving only the true Israel. Believing gentile branches have been grafted into this already existing olive tree that is now the church. If unbelieving Jews repent and trust Christ, they can be grafted back into this olive tree. Note that there is only the one olive tree. If dispensationalism were true, Paul's analogy would have to change dramatically. He would have to speak of God's planting a new olive tree (the church) alongside the old olive tree (Israel). God would have to take believing Jewish branches from the Israel tree and believing branches from other gentile trees and graft those branches into the new church tree. As it stands, however, there is only one good tree—the true Israel. This is why Paul can say to the

largely gentile church in Ephesus that they *used to be* separated from the commonwealth of Israel ([Eph. 2:12](#)) and to the largely gentile church in Galatia that if they are Christ's, they are Abraham's offspring ([Gal. 3:16, 29](#)). Any hermeneutical system that posits two separate peoples of God is bringing something foreign to the Bible.

The covenantal hermeneutic begins with the Scripture as it is given, recognizing the kind of book it is and emphasizing what it emphasizes. It recognizes the beautiful underlying continuity of the plan of God for His people while also recognizing the biblical development and distinctions within that plan. Most importantly, it recognizes and proclaims the one gospel of Jesus Christ and the one way of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

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