

Westminster

A review of the Westminster Confession

Week 1: History and Context • Week 2: Sola Scriptura • Week 3: Sovereignty of God

Week 4: Covenant Life • Week 5: A Living Faith

Covenant

Definition:

A matter agreed upon by two parties, or undertaken or promised by either. In Biblical translations or allusions, an engagement entered into by God with a person, nation, etc.

Covenant of Works

The two-sided agreement entered into by God with Adam, Abraham & ancient Israelites. “You do what I tell you and I will bless you. If you don’t I will punish you.”

Covenant of Grace

One sided agreement entered into by God with the elect, made possibly by Christ. “Of no merit of your own, I have adopted you and granted your divine inheritance.”

Westminster’s Definition of Covenant

VII, ¶1 – *The distance between God and the creature is so great that, even though rational creatures are responsible to obey God as their Creator, yet they could never experience any enjoyment of him as their blessing, and reward except by way of **some voluntary condescension on his part, which he has been pleased to express by way of covenant.***

Covenant of Works

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VII, ¶2 – *The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, in which life was promised to Adam and, in him, to his posterity **upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.***

Bible Study: A series of covenants

Covenant with Adam – Gen. 2:15-17, 3:6, 22-24

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, ‘You may feely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you shall eat of it you shall die.’

When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.

Then the Lord God said, ‘See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat and life forever.’ Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.

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Covenant with Noah – Gen 6:17-18; 22; 9:8-13

[God said to Noah] I am going to bring a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die. But I will establish my covenant with you' and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife and you sons' wives with you. ... Noah did this; he did all that god commanded him.

[After the Ark had landed] God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 'As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, ... that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.' And God said 'This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds....'

Covenant with Abraham – Gen 12:1-4 (See also Gen, 15)

The Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. So Abram went.

Covenant with Israel – Ex 24: 3-8

Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, 'All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do.' And Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord. He rose early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and set up twelve pillars, corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel. He sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed oxen as offerings of well being to the Lord. Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he dashed against the altar. Then he took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people, and they said, 'All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.' Moses took the blood and dashed it on the people and said, 'See the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.'

Failure of the Covenant – Hosea 6:4-7

What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? You love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early. Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets, I have killed them by the words of my mouth and my judgment goes forth as the light. For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. But like Adam they transgressed the covenant; there they dealt faithlessly with me.

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1. What were the terms of these covenants? How did the people do?
2. Hosea 6 was a very important verse to the writers of the Westminster Confession. What might make it so important?

Covenant of Grace

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VII ¶3 – *Since man, by his fall, made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was then pleased to make a second covenant, commonly called the covenant of grace. In it **God freely offers life and salvation by Jesus Christ** to sinners, requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved, and promising to give his Holy Spirit to all those who are ordained to eternal life, to make them willing and able to believe.*

Bible Study – A New Covenant

The Promise of New Hearts – Ezekiel 36

The word of the Lord came [to Ezekiel]:

Mortal, when the house of Israel lived on their own soil, they defiled it with their ways and their deeds. ... So I poured out my wrath upon them ... I scattered them ... But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned.

Therefore say to the house of Israel: It is not for your sake I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name.

I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you and a new spirit I will put within you and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people and I will be your God.

I will summon the grain and make it abundant, and lay no famine upon you ...

I will cause the towns to be inhabited and the waste places shall be rebuilt ...

I will increase their population like a flock ...

They shall know that I am the Lord.

Freedom from Sin and Death – Romans 8:1-8

There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the must requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their

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minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law – indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit....

Abraham's Offspring – Galatians 3:15-4:7

... Now the promises were made to Abraham, and to his offspring ... to one person, who is Christ. ... The Law, which came four hundred years later, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. For if the inheritance comes from the law, it no longer comes from the promise; but God granted it to Abraham through the promise.

Why then the law? ... Is the law then opposed to the promises of God? Certainly not!

The law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

When the fullness of time had come, God sent his son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" You are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child than also an heir, through God.

A New, Everlasting Covenant – Hebrews 9:11 - 10:1-18

When Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, ... he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. ...

*For this reason [Christ] is the mediator of a **new covenant**, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, because a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant. Where a will is involved, the death of the one who made it must be established. For a will takes effect only at death, since it is not in force as long as the one who made it is alive. Hence not even the first covenant was inaugurated without blood. For when every commandment had been told to all the people by Moses in accordance with the law, he took the blood of calves and goats .. saying "This is the blood of the covenant that God has ordained for you." (Ex. 24:3-8) Indeed under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.*

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Christ has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself.

Since the law is only a shadow of the good things to come and not the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered year after year, make perfect those who approach. ... For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said: "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me, in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, 'See, God, I have come to do your will, O God.'" (Ps. 40:6-8)

By a single offering, [Christ] has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us, for after saying,

'This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds ... I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.

Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus...

Covenant or Testament

VII ¶4 – *This covenant of grace is sometimes presented in the scriptures by the name of a will or testament, with reference to the death of Jesus Christ (the testator) and to the everlasting inheritance – with all that belongs to it – bequeathed in it.*

Hebrews 9:15-17 (King James)

And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance. For where a testament is, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator. For a testament is of force after men are dead: otherwise it is of no strength at all while the testator liveth.

From J.V. Fesko

The covenant of grace is the execution of the will of Christ, the Testator, who not only fulfills the requirements of the law and offers satisfaction for sins, but also bequeaths the inheritance upon his children.

Fesko, 161

Difference between a Covenant and a Testament (From William Gouge, one of the Westminster authors)

- 1. A covenant is an agreement between at least two parties, whereas a testament is the declaration of one party.*
- 2. Both parties who make a covenant must be living. A testament, on the other hand, is enacted by the death of the one who made it.*

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3. *A covenant is ratified by the mutual consent of both parties, whereas a testament is ratified only by the one person who made it.*
4. *A covenant uses conditions on both sides, and a testament consists purely of the favor and grace of the testator.*

Fesko - 161

From JV Fesko

*Christ's testament is unlike Adam's covenant. Adam's covenant had conditions; if he failed, the blessings of the covenant were forfeited. By contrast, Christ's testament bequeaths legacies to the recipients without condition, but out of free mercy. True, the reception of the gospel required faith and repentance, but they are not conditions strictly speaking, such as Adam's conditions in the covenant of works, but are instead **the means by which sinners receive and partake of the blessings of the inheritance.***

Summary of Difference Between the Covenant of Works and Covenant of Grace

(From James Ussher, an Irish bishop who did not write Westminster but was very, very influential upon those who did.)

Covenant of Works (Law)	Covenant of Grace (Gospel)
May be conceived by reason	In all points is beyond reason
Commands to do good, but gives no strength	Enables us to do good and the Holy Spirit writes the law upon our hearts (Jer. 31:33)
Only promised life	Promises life and righteousness
Requires perfect obedience	Requires the righteousness of faith (Rom. 3:21-22)
Reveals sin and rebukes us for it	Reveals the remission of sins and frees us from punishment
Is a ministry of wrath condemnation and death	Is a ministry of grace, justification and life
Is grounded in man's own righteousness and requires perfect obedience (Deut. 27:26) and upon default requires satisfaction and everlasting punishment (Ez 18:14, Gal 3:10-12)	Is grounded on the righteousness of Christ, admitting payment and performance by another on behalf of as many as receive it. (Gal 3:13-14)

From Ussher, Body of Divinitie. In Fesko - 163.

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Questions

1. Why was a new covenant needed?
2. Who instigates the new covenant? What is the human role?
3. How is the new covenant enacted?

The Ongoing Purpose of the Covenant of Works (Moral Law)

XIX – *God gave Adam a law, in the form of a covenant of works ...*

This law, after Adam fell, continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness and, as such, was given by God upon Mount Sinai in ten commandments ...

In addition to this law, commonly called the moral law, God was pleased to give the people of Israel ceremonial laws ... All these ceremonial laws are now abrogated under the new testament.

To the people of Israel, ... he also gave various judicial laws, which expired at the time their state expired...

The moral law binds all people at all times to obedience, both those who are justified and those who are not. The obligation to obey the moral law is not only because of its content but also because of the authority of God the Creator, who gave it. In the gospel, Christ in no way dissolves this obligation, but greatly strengthens it.

Although true believers are not under the law as a covenant of works by which they are justified or condemned, nevertheless the law is of great use to them. ... It directs and binds them to walk accord to the will of God. It reveals to them the sinful pollutions of their nature, hearts and lives. ...

The Christian's Response to the Covenant of Grace (Gratitude & Works)

XVI ¶2-3 – *Good works, done in obedience to God's commandments, are the fruits and evidences of a true and living faith. **By them believers show their thankfulness, strengthen their assurance, build up their fellow believers, adorn the profession of the gospel, shut the mouths of adversaries and glorify God.***

Their ability to do good works is not at all from themselves, but entirely from the Spirit of Christ.

Trivia: The Covenanters

In the early 1600's, Scottish Presbyterians (who were now officially part of England due to the ascension of Scottish King James VI to the English throne (where he became James I)) became increasingly concerned about attempts to impose an episcopal system of church government upon the Scottish church.

In resistance to these efforts, Scottish Presbyterians organized themselves under a "National Covenant" and bound themselves to defend the true (Presbyterian) religion. They called a General Assembly where they proclaimed Christ as head of the church (as opposed to the king), raised an army, threw out the English bishops and invaded England.

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It was the Covenanter army occupying northern England as the Westminster Confession was being written, and the Scottish representatives to the Assembly were Covenanters.

New Dictionary of Theology (Intervarsity Press, 1988) p. 176

The Covenant name lives on in Presbyterian circles, both as a name for congregations, in the Synod of the Covenant (of which we're a member) and in the ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians, a new Presbyterian denomination developed in response to increased acceptance of same sex relationships within the PC(USA).

Resources

For the official Presbyterian version of the Westminster Confession:

Book of Confessions, PC(USA)

For historical & theological background

Fesko, J.V., The Theology of the Westminster Standards (Crossway Books, 2014)

Rogers, Jack, Presbyterian Creeds (Westminster Press, 1985)

For an overview of 16th century England

Ackroyd, Peter, Rebellion (Thomas Dunne Books, 2014)