

SIGNED
An Introduction to
SEALED
Covenant Theology
DELIVERED

J.V. FESKO

“Having already written four volumes on God’s covenants, J.V. Fesko is fully qualified to address this central biblical theme. In this instance, his target audience is ‘the person in the pew,’ specifically including the church’s young people. The author spares the reader the distraction of trudging through obscure footnotes. In just more than one hundred pages, Fesko ably explains the eternal covenant of redemption among the members of the Trinity, the covenant of works with Adam in the garden, and the covenant of grace by which God saves His people. Especially helpful are treatments of the sacraments and the church in their special relation to God’s covenants. This book successfully provides an inspiring, biblically based treatment of the central scriptural theme of the covenant.”

—DR. O. PALMER ROBERTSON
Founder, Consummation Ministries

“Who would I want to write a brief primer on covenant theology? Answer: either John Fesko or Ligon Duncan (to whom this book is dedicated). Dr. Fesko is a brilliant theologian who knows his church history and how covenant theology developed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, embedding itself centrally in the Reformed confessions. Covenant theology functions the same way as spectacles: both bring into central focus what otherwise remains disparate and unclear. In technical language, covenant theology is a hermeneutic that brings together Genesis and Revelation and everything in between. Without it, the two testaments, Old and New, are not talking to each other. Without it, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper fail to convey their full intent. Without it, our

doctrine of the church is severely hampered. Without it, our understanding of God's desire to save sinners from eternity is obscured. I have been looking for this book for the last half century. Thank you, Dr. Fesko!"

—DR. DEREK W.H. THOMAS
Chancellor's Professor of Systematic and Pastoral Theology,
Reformed Theological Seminary
Teaching Fellow, Ligonier Ministries

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An Introduction to Covenant Theology

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LIGONIER MINISTRIES

Signed, Sealed, Delivered: An Introduction to Covenant Theology

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To J. Ligon Duncan III

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What Is a Covenant?

Covenant is a difficult word to define. The word appears 301 times in the English Standard Version, which means that it is a common word. But what is a covenant? A very simple definition comes to us from the Children’s Catechism, which defines a covenant as “an agreement between two or more persons.” This definition captures the essence of a covenant and rests on solid biblical footing. Isaiah indicts Israel for her sin: “Because you have said, ‘We have made a covenant with death, and with Sheol we have an agreement’” (Isa. 28:15; see also 28:18; 30:1; Dan. 11:6, 17). The prophet employs a common Hebrew poetic literary device by placing two statements in parallel that have the same meaning. He uses a synonymous parallelism to show that “covenant” and “agreement” are interchangeable. At the same time, we can note that there are all sorts of agreements.

So what is the determining factor in understanding the nature of the various covenants, or agreements, that appear in the Scriptures? We do not want to place a straitjacket on Scripture and force a strict definition of “covenant” wherever we see the term appear. In fact, a

general definition of a word never determines the word's full meaning. Rather, the word's context within a sentence or passage always determines its meaning. If, for example, we define *trunk* exclusively as a square box used for storing clothing, we quickly run into trouble when we find that cars, trees, and elephants all have trunks. The context of the word creates a frame of meaning so that when I say, "Get the trunk from the attic," you know that you're not looking for part of an animal, car, or tree. The context of a word determines its meaning. As we apply this principle to covenants, we can observe that there are various types of covenants (or agreements) in Scripture but that the context determines what type of covenant is in view. To understand the nature of biblical covenants, this chapter first delves into their characteristics. Second, the chapter explains the different types of covenants that we find in Scripture. Finally, the chapter concludes with summary observations about biblical covenants.

Characteristics

Several common characteristics appear in the various biblical covenants, such as oaths, laws, animal sacrifices, blessings and curses, love, witnesses, and signs. No covenant bears all of these marks, but each covenant bears one or more of these common characteristics.

Oaths

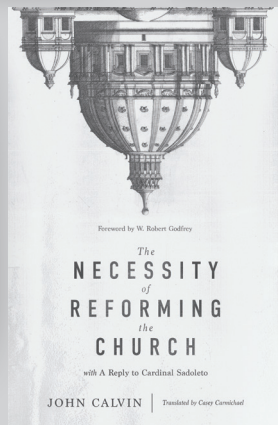
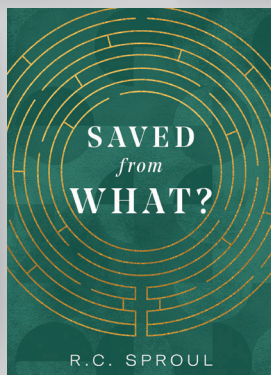
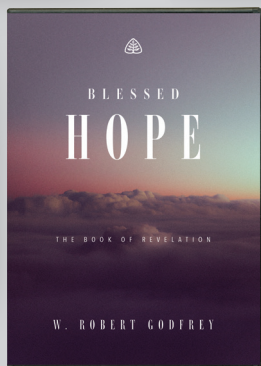
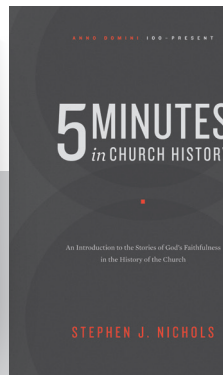
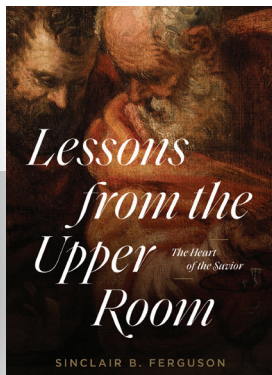
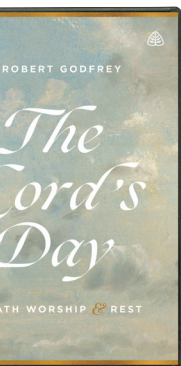
Given that the Bible provides a basic definition of a covenant as an agreement, we can logically take a step back and ask, "How do agreements come about?" One of the most common ways is that two people speak and determine the parameters of the agreement. In the ancient biblical world, people determined and fixed their covenants by swearing an oath. When Abraham and Abimelech disputed over

water wells, Abraham resolved the issue by making a covenant with the gentile king (Gen. 21:27). The narrative then observes: “Therefore that place was called Beersheba, because there both of them swore an oath. So they made a covenant at Beersheba” (vv. 31–32). Swearing an oath is how a covenant, or agreement, is made. This same oath-making pattern appears with God’s dealings with Israel. God spoke through the prophet Ezekiel and impeached His people: “I will deal with you as you have done, you who have despised the oath in breaking the covenant” (Ezek. 16:59; see also 2 Kings 11:4; Ezek. 17:13, 16, 18–19). The prophet Hosea similarly charged the people of Israel: “They utter mere words; with empty oaths they make covenants” (Hos. 10:4). Oath and covenant also converge in Zechariah’s prophecy about God’s faithfulness, that He would “show the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham” (Luke 1:72–73).

Laws

A second characteristic that marks covenants is that God administers His laws by them: “He remembers his covenant forever, the word that he commanded, for a thousand generations, the covenant that he made with Abraham, his sworn promise to Isaac, which he confirmed to Jacob as a statute, to Israel as an everlasting covenant” (Ps. 105:8–10). The psalmist reveals a number of parallel legal terms that overlap with the covenant concept. God’s covenant is “the word that he commanded,” but at the same time God’s commands intersect with His “sworn promise to Isaac,” His oath. But this same covenant with Abraham, the sworn oath to Isaac, is also a statute to Jacob. When God makes His covenants (or agreements) with human beings, they can have a promissory character (that is, they rest on

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