

God's Parallel Covenants

By Dr Peter Masters

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THE BIBLE shows that all God's dealings with men and women are conducted on the basis of two underlying covenants, either that of *works* or that of *grace*. These two covenants run parallel.

From the beginning of the Bible we read of divine covenants, the word covenant being used twenty-five times in the book of *Genesis* alone. A divine covenant is an undertaking, a pledge by God, to relate to mankind on certain conditions. It is a form of compact or agreement.

God does not relate to man in a haphazard, random, disorderly way, but in accordance with clear principles and purposes, reflecting his holy nature and requirements. The divine covenants of the Bible enable us to grasp God's ways much more clearly.

Although the word covenant first appears in *Genesis 6.18*, where God speaks of making his covenant with Noah, the Bible shows that all God's dealings with men and women are conducted on the basis of two underlying covenants, either that of *works** or that of *grace*. These two covenants, in a way, run parallel with each other through history, that of *works* being characterised by the great command and warning of the Garden of Eden, and subsequently in the time of Moses by the law, whereas that of *grace* was administered through promises and prophecies of Christ. This writer was taught this as a very young Christian, learning that it was the firm conviction of the authors of that notable confession of faith, the 1689 *London Baptist Confession of Faith*.

The so-called covenant of works was first presented to mankind in the Garden of Eden, God promising blessing on condition that man obeyed him (*Genesis 2.16-17*). Immediately after his disobedience and Fall, another covenant was revealed, the covenant of grace, coming as a dawn of hope for lost mankind. Adam and Eve would have a special Descendant who at cost to himself would crush the serpent's head. He would be man's representative, who would pay the penalty of disobedience and deserve the blessing of God on their behalf (*Genesis 3.15*).

Readers know well that man fell, and the curse followed – death in every sense, physical, spiritual and the cursing of the environment. But it is important to note that although the first covenant was broken from the beginning by man’s disobedience, it was not actually terminated or abrogated. It could never lead to acceptance with God and eternal life, for man was now depraved, a sinner by nature, but it was never withdrawn. Even today, every human person in the continuing history of the world who will not receive the grace of God is subject to the covenant of works, and its punishments. While the present world continues, the demand of works is (in principle) still in force. It is incorrect to speak of this covenant as having been rescinded.

In the time of Moses, at Sinai, the covenant of works would be reiterated by God, as we shall see, as a warning and as a means of driving people to grace.

The first covenant mentioned in the Bible – that of works – was made by God with man, but the second – that of grace – was made between God the Father and God the Son (as we are told in *John 6.39-40, 17.9* and *17.24*). The first covenant depended on man’s performance, but the second on Christ’s obedience. The first was (and is) unable to save on account of man’s sin, while the second is as secure as the holiness and infallibility of Christ the Lord. These two covenants, as we have mentioned, would run side by side, in parallel, throughout time, the first being unable to save, only to condemn, and the second being the power of God unto salvation. After the first promise of grace in the Garden of Eden, the covenant of grace was revealed by further promises given to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Abraham was shown that the great Descendant would come through his family line, and that by him people of all the nations of the world would be blessed and receive a glorious eternal inheritance, a ‘city’ not made by man (*Hebrews 11.13-16*).

The status of Sinai

Turning the pages of Scripture, the promises of a coming Deliverer continue to be given to the patriarchs, but all too soon we are reading of the Exodus, and of Sinai and the giving of the covenant of Moses and the law. What might this be? Is it a new revelation of the covenant of grace, as many believe? Here is a major question, and one that has been answered differently by those in the ‘reformed’ tradition.

Was the covenant given through Moses an expression or administration of the covenant of grace? On the surface it certainly does not look like it. It looks like an offer of blessing only in return for good performance – ‘Ye shall therefore keep my statutes, and my judgments: which if a man do, he shall live’ (*Leviticus 18.5*).

The law of God is perfect and wonderful, expressing God’s standards and demands, and if any individual or any nation could keep these, they would hold the key to

happiness, bliss, prosperity and life, now and eternally. But because of sin the law condemns, and the law of Moses looks like doomed works rather than grace. It appears to be a developed reiteration of the covenant of works given in the Garden of Eden. Is this so? Or can the Presbyterian school of thought be right which takes the line (enshrined in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*) that the Mosaic covenant is an administration of the covenant of grace?

Without doubt, many great theologians of the Presbyterian viewpoint have said beautiful things about God's covenants and his dealings with men, but Baptists back in the seventeenth century believed they were greatly mistaken in identifying the Mosaic covenant as an administration of the covenant of grace. In due course the Baptists published their own version of the *Westminster Confession* with radically altered statements on divine covenants.

Leading the way in the protest against Sinai being gracious was the towering theologian John Owen (not a Baptist) whose writings were devastating to the Presbyterian view of the covenant, even though he stood with them in so many things.

The first and chief problem with the idea that Sinai was gracious is that the New Testament identifies it as a covenant of works. We have only to read *Galatians* and *Hebrews* to find an unbridgeable chasm placed between the covenant under Moses and the covenant of grace gradually unfolded in the promises of the Old Testament and fully revealed in the New. They are described as opposites.

The second problem is a whole group of errors that the wrong view of Sinai brings into churches, because if you make the law covenant a dispensation of the covenant of grace, you make the New Testament church a continuation of the Old Testament church, making the two almost identical. You say that baptism is the equivalent of circumcision, and admit people into Christ's church without professing faith; you make New Testament church government hierarchical in some form, similar to the government of the Old Testament. Also, you set aside the goal of a regenerate church membership, because that was not a feature of the typical church of old.

Early Baptists saw clearly that a mistaken view of the Mosaic covenant carried the Christian church back to the old order in ways that seriously clashed with New Testament teaching.

We shall show in this article that the Mosaic covenant was not essentially about grace but about works, although it has many types and pictures of grace in the ceremonies and in the furniture and decorations of both the Tabernacle and later the Temple. Grace was pictured as the better way, but the covenant itself, through the demands of the law, amounted to works (as we have noted in *Leviticus 18.5*).

Did the Jews, not to mention the rest of the world, have to wait until Christ came before salvation by grace, through faith, became available? Certainly not, because the covenant of grace – free salvation by the mercy of God – operated from the time of the first promise of a great Descendant-deliverer in the Garden of Eden. Grace began to be revealed from that moment, and people were saved by trusting in it. The key to understanding the covenants is to realise that from that moment the covenant of grace ran alongside the covenant of works. The two were distinct, yet in a way they were parallel. The demands of the law stopped the proud human heart in its tracks and, by the work of the Spirit, people were compelled to look to the promise of grace.

Even as the law was proclaimed by Moses (the covenant of works), another, quite distinctive message was preached alongside it – heart salvation by grace (the covenant of grace). This is clearly seen when Moses describes and expounds the parallel covenant of *Deuteronomy 29 – 30*. The biblical narrative says he made this covenant in the land of Moab ‘beside’ the covenant which he made with them in Horeb. The Hebrew means separately, distinctively. It was not a reiteration of Sinai, but something different and very special. It has long been known as the ‘evangelical covenant’, and so it is.

This is the passage referred to by the apostle Paul in *Romans 10*, where he quotes from it and calls it ‘the righteousness which is of faith’, contrasting it with ‘the righteousness which is of the law’. In other words, the Sinaitic law covenant is works, but the covenant presented in *Deuteronomy 29 – 30* (in the plains of Moab) is grace. Paul distinguishes between the two. It is as though God were saying, ‘Here is the holy law which you must do to be accepted by me, but here also is salvation by grace. If you will not have grace, you must be judged by the law. And this law, holy and perfect, but formidable to sinful men, hangs like a great sword over your head.’

All about the heart

When we read *Deuteronomy 29 and 30* it strikes us immediately there is only passing reference to law. It is all about circumcision of the heart. It is all about grace. It is all about evangelical experience, and loving the Lord with all our being. The two covenants ran side by side, on the one hand law, on the other grace. If you thought you could perform God’s will, you would be judged by the law, but if you bowed to grace you would be saved.

No wonder Moses completed his preaching of this covenant of grace with the stirring appeal – ‘See, I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil; in that I command thee this day to love the Lord thy God,’ and in that experience to keep his commandments (*Deuteronomy 30.15-16*).

For generations the Baptists of old saw matters this way, and enshrined it in their Confession of 1689. This was the view of the great names of old, the Bunyans and Spurgeons. This is the contrasting or parallel-covenant view, that works and grace run side by side down through Bible history, with the covenant of grace being increasingly revealed in glorious ways in the promises and prophecies of the Old Testament, approaching a climax in *Isaiah*, *Jeremiah* and *Ezekiel*. Their message to the children of Israel was that they could obtain mercy and forgiveness by trusting in the great Descendant. The law of Sinai, though holding the moral standards that would always be the rule of life for believers, could never save.

As I remarked earlier, this was what I was taught in spiritual infancy. The 1689 covenant view was still alive in the 1950s. I remember as a very young man being surprised on first running into dispensationalism, and then being even more surprised to find that some Calvinistic Baptists had adopted a modified Presbyterian view, accepting the Mosaic order as an administration of the covenant of grace. They took the view that after the Fall there has been only one covenant – that of grace – administered in different ways in the Old and New Testaments. In other words, they took the ‘one-covenant two-administration’ view.

The heyday of dispensationalism almost crowded out the old view, then in the 1950s a renewed enthusiasm for good systematic theology swept in, but being largely from a Presbyterian stable, it led many Baptists to adopt their one-covenant position. The authentic Baptist view was not rendered altogether extinct, however, and it is grand to see it enjoying a considerable revival, several excellent studies having emerged in the USA in recent years**. I used to visit the USA often years ago and it seemed to me that the historic Baptist view of covenants had died out there. It was a kind of side-hobby for me to chat to pastors about the authentic Baptist view of covenants, and I believe they viewed me as an eccentric, speaking of something unknown to mankind. But the revival of the historic view in recent years is immensely valuable, for few things are so scripturally logical, illuminating and practical.

While touching on the past, may I say that in 1983 – over 30 years ago – I contributed an article on divine covenants to the *Sword & Trowel*, accompanying it with an extract of John Owen’s view. During the eighth chapter of Owen’s magnificent commentary on Hebrews there is a dissertation on divine covenants. Most of this sets out his arguments showing that the Presbyterian view is mistaken, and that the Sinaitic covenant amounts to works. His arguments have always seemed to me to be unanswerable.

I did something which was perhaps unwise. I took Owen’s 30 pages and condensed them into two magazine-size pages, just to provide a taste of the case. John Owen never moved to an entirely Baptist position, but made the Mosaic covenant something national, for the Jews, containing both law and grace. (This appears to

give comfort to sound Presbyterian writers, but it shouldn't really, because John Owen's demolition of the 'one-covenant two-administration' view is inescapable.) It is certainly true, as we have noted, that the ceremonial of the Jews was full of pictures of grace, but Baptists of old insisted that the covenant of Sinai was in itself a scheme of law and works.

John Owen was not alone of course in refusing to see Sinai as gracious. Benjamin Keach, pastor of the congregation that later became the Metropolitan Tabernacle (and a compiler of 1689), was very strong on this subject, his sermons on covenants being available today. Even more important was Nehemiah Coxe, who probably led in the drafting of the covenant chapter of the *1689 Baptist Confession*, and who wrote a definitive Baptist treatise on the covenants.

Paul's contrasting covenants

Here is a brief summary of some New Testament passages that differentiate between law and grace. We have seen that in *Romans 10* the apostle Paul shows that Moses preached the Gospel of righteousness by faith, showing that the covenant of grace is the contrasting cure for the condemnation of the law covenant of works. In *Galatians 3* he shows that the Gospel was revealed to Abraham (verse 8) and that New Testament believers are justified in the same way as Abraham (by faith) and become his spiritual children (verses 7 and 9). He then states that all who trust in the works of the law of Moses are under the curse (verses 10-11).

People ask, 'How can this be, that Abraham had the covenant of grace, but then the law came, which could only condemn? Did the law negate the promise of grace?' No, says the apostle, the law 'cannot disannul' grace (verse 17). It cannot 'make the promise of none effect', because grace would still be preached, because the covenant of grace would operate alongside the law.

Then why did God give the law? Paul asks, and answers (verse 19): 'It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come.' God's holy law, written in the heart of man, needed to be defined in words and published. These standards would serve to keep Israel from paganism and gross corruption until the Saviour came. But also they would teach men their sinfulness and need, driving them to Christ and to grace (verse 24).

Throughout *Galatians 3* the law is spoken of as the opposite of grace. It is weak, while grace is strong to save. It condemns, while grace justifies. The inspired apostle will never imply that the law was an administration of grace.

The same ravine between law and grace opens widely in *Hebrews 6 – 8*. In chapter 8 and verses 7-10, for example, we are given a startling view of the gulf between them:–

‘For if that first covenant had been faultless, then should no place have been sought for the second. For finding fault with them, he saith, Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah: not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they continued not in my covenant, and I regarded them not, saith the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith the Lord; I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts: and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people.’

How, in the light of such passages, can the Mosaic law be seen as an administration of grace? The truth is that grace runs at the same time as law, but it is quite distinct. And grace shines with increasing glory as new promises and prophecies add to all that is known of it, until in Christ it is fully revealed. Then the ceremonial shell of the law, having waxed old, is ready to vanish away. Without doubt grace began to be announced and to save in the Garden of Eden. We see it justifying Abraham and the patriarchs, preached by Moses as an alternative covenant (the ‘evangelical covenant’), continuing in David, being reaffirmed in the prophets, and finally taking the supreme place of glory with the work of Christ.

* Many thinkers have preferred not to call the covenant first made by God with man in the Garden of Eden a covenant of works, because everything was freely provided by God, man only having a duty of obedience. But because it has become most generally known as the covenant of works, we will keep to that term in these pages.

** Eg: *The Distinctiveness of Baptist Covenant Theology* by Pascal Denault (Solid Ground); *Recovering a Covenantal Heritage: Essays in Baptist Covenant Theology*, Ed: Richard C Barcellos (RBAP).

The first of two articles by Dr Masters on covenants, drawn from the 2016 Tabernacle School of Theology lecture [The Covenant of Grace](#).