

SESSION 9: The Theory of Everything

Readings

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 30-33

WCF	WLC	WSC
7	20, 30-35	12, 20

Introduction

For decades, theoretical physicists have searched for a “theory of everything” –a model for physics which “fully explains and links together all known physical phenomena, and predicts the outcome of *any* experiment that could be carried out *in principle*.”¹⁰⁰ Physicist Steven Weinberg describes a “final theory” as “a common starting point... to which all explanations may be traced.”¹⁰¹

We might ask a similar question of the Scriptures: is there any unifying concept to describe God’s dealings with humanity? Reformed theology points to the biblical concept of *covenant*. We believe that understanding “covenant theology” is one of the keys in connecting the dots in God’s story.

Covenant Defined

The best definition of ‘covenant’ is found in the children’s catechism:

Q. What is a covenant?

A. A relationship that God establishes with us and gaurantees by his word.¹⁰²

Expanding on this, WCF 7.1 states that a covenant is a “voluntary condescension” of God to his creatures in order that they might have “fruition of him as their blessedness and reward.” “Voluntary condescension” means that a covenant is “God sovereignly obligating himself to do certain things for his creatures.”¹⁰³

What is involved in a covenant? “Covenants in Scripture are solemn agreements, negotiated or unilaterally imposed, that bind the parties to each other in permanent defined relationships, with specific promises, claims, and obligations on both sides.”¹⁰⁴ Covenants always involve *parties* (two or more persons), *terms* (promises, curses, stipulations), and *seals* (signs, ceremonies, sacrifices).

Who determines the terms of a covenant? As Packer notes, the answer depends. When a covenant is made between man and man, the terms of the covenant are *negotiated* (Gen 21.22-24). Yet when a covenant is made between God and man, all the terms are *imposed* – by God himself (Gen 15.1-21).

¹⁰⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theory_of_everything (accessed 10/8/2012).

¹⁰¹ Steven Weinberg, *Dreams of a Final Theory: The Search for the Ultimate Laws of Nature* (New York: Vintage Book, 1994), 6.

¹⁰² *First Catechism*, #24.

¹⁰³ Joseph A. Pipa, Jr. “Man in the Covenant of Works, Part 1” in “Man and Sin” (lecture, Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Taylors, SC, Spring 2011).

¹⁰⁴ Packer, *Concise Theology*, 87.

But what is the purpose of covenant? Why does God make them? The answer lies in the word ‘fruition’ in WCF 7.1. The word ‘fruition’ is an old word meaning “pleasurable possession.” This connects the notion of covenant back to the chief end of man: God comes down to man in covenant so that man may glorify and enjoy him forever (WSC 1).

How many covenants has God made with man? The biblical answer is two: the *covenant of works* and the *covenant of grace*. Although neither of these titles is found explicitly in the Bible, both are biblically accurate terms. It is to a consideration of each that we now turn.

The Covenant of Works: God’s Gift for Fruition

The covenant of works (CoW) is described for us in WCF 7.2, WLC 20, and WSC 12. Note how WLC 20 distinguishes between God’s *creation ordinances* (labor, marriage, Sabbath) and his *covenant terms*: “...entering into a covenant of life, upon condition of personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience, of which the tree of life was a pledge; and forbidding to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, upon the pain of death.”

One of the important distinctions made by WLC 20 is that between *moral government* and *covenantal government*.¹⁰⁵ What does this mean?

Moral government refers to man’s relationship to God by nature. “The law of nature – the obligation mankind has to worship and serve the Creator – precedes any covenant, both the covenant of works and the covenant of grace.”¹⁰⁶ God promises man nothing, and man owes God everything. There is no grace in moral government. Man is a *servant*. God was not required to give him anything more.

Yet by condescending love, God added to his moral government his *covenantal government*. Under covenantal government, God held out the possibility that Adam could become a *son*. By his obedience to a specific probationary test, Adam could win justification and confirmation for both himself and his posterity. It is in the CoW, therefore, that God establishes the *principle of representation* and extends the *promise of justification and confirmation*.

We should not miss this. The CoW was not a tripwire intended to ruin mankind. It was a means of bringing mankind to fruition of God. As we have already discussed, the probationary test was essentially a test of trust – a test in which Adam, acting on behalf of us all, failed.¹⁰⁷

The Covenant of Grace: God’s Rescue Plan

The good news of the gospel is that, “God doth not leave all men to perish in the estate of sin and misery, into which they fell by the breach of the first covenant, commonly called the Covenant of Works; but of his mere love and mercy delivereth his elect out of it, and bringeth them into an estate of salvation by the second covenant, commonly called the Covenant of Grace,” (WLC 30).

The covenant of grace (CoG) is God’s plan to fulfill the CoW himself. Just as the CoW was made with Adam and all natural mankind in him, so the CoG “was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in him with all the elect as his seed,” (WLC 31). This means that:

¹⁰⁵ The discussion in the next two paragraphs follows Pipa’s discussion in “Man and Sin,” *ibid.* Pipa’s discussion follows the discussion of J.H. Thornwell and R.L. Dabney.

¹⁰⁶ Paul Helm, “Introduction” in *Reformed Thought: Selected Writings of William Young*, ed. Joel R. Beeke and Ray B. Lanning (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011), 5-6.

¹⁰⁷ See the discussion of “Autonomy & Its Fruits” (WCF 6) in Session 4.

Union between Christ and his people, established in the eternal counsels of God, underlies the atonement and gives it meaning... when Christ died on the cross and rose from the dead, we are really and truly the ones who died and rose with him... when he died, our sin was utterly and definitively dealt with, since Christ died in union with us and we with him. Sin can no longer have dominion over us!¹⁰⁸

The crucial point that must be underlined in all this is that *there is only one plan of salvation – only one way after the Fall for sinners to be right with God*. The CoG began with Adam and Eve immediately after the fall. Its first promise is revealed in Genesis 3.15, when God says to Satan: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” From this starting point, the rest of the Old Testament reveals the unfolding of the CoG through various stages. The final stage of the CoG comes in the New Testament – in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

This does not mean there are no differences in *administration*. WCF 7.5 speaks specifically of the *discontinuity* between OT and NT administrations of the CoG: “under the law it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all foreshadowing Christ to come...” What is a ‘type’?

A *type* is a “representative relations which certain persons, events, and institutions of the Old Testament bear to corresponding persons, events, and institutions in the New Testament.”¹⁰⁹ Three rules apply in identifying types. Firstly, there must be a notable, real point of resemblance between the type (OT) and antitype (NT). Secondly, there must be biblical evidence that the type was divinely preordained to resemble the antitype – not an accidental similarity. Thirdly, it must be remembered that a type always prefigures something future.

A.A. Hodge lists the major points of discontinuity between the CoG in the OT versus the NT:¹¹⁰

Difference	OT	NT
Administrator	Moses the Servant	Christ the Son
Boundaries	National Israel	International Church
Ceremonies	Elaborate & External	Simple & Spiritual
Clarity	Types & Symbols	Clear History & Teaching
Revelation	Partial & Preparatory	Complete & Final

Yet for all the real discontinuity, we should not miss how WCF 7.5 concludes: “...which were for that time sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation.” Despite that believers in the OT had but pictures, promises, and prophecies, God’s Spirit made these things “for that time sufficient and efficacious” so that they really trusted in Jesus Christ – though he had not yet come.

For this reason, WCF 7.6 states, “There are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations.” While covenant theology sees different *administrations* of the CoG (WLC 33-35), it insists upon their *essential unity*. Apart from the CoW, all the ‘covenants’ of Scripture are successive chapters unfolding one single CoG.

¹⁰⁸ Robert Letham, *Union with Christ: in Scripture, History, and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2011), 64-65.

¹⁰⁹ Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 144-145.

¹¹⁰ Hodge, *Confession of Faith*, 130.

Pipa compares the successive administrations of the CoG to the various aspects of a theatre production.¹¹¹ The following chart outlines this comparison:

Name	Emphases ¹¹²	Theatre	Summary
Adamic	Commencement	Plot	God will provide a Redeemer who will crush the serpent and break sin's dark alliance (Gen 3.15). This rescue will require – and is thus to be depicted by – blood sacrifices (Gen 3.21, 4.4).
Noahic	Preservation	Stage	Rescue through the flood in the ark depicts resurrection through judgment in Xp (1Pe 3.18-22). God promises to preserve a stable earth for subsequent covenant history (Gen 8.21-22, 9.1-17).
Abrahamic	Promise	Dynamic	God's rescue plan will involve a nation, a blessing, a land, and a seed (Gen 12.1-3). A right relationship to God comes only through faith (Gen 15.6), yet the sign and seal of this righteousness through faith is given to both the believer and his offspring (Gen 17, cf. Rom 4.11). The ruler of Abraham's offspring will come from the tribe of Judah (Gen 49.10).
Mosaic	Nation	Structure	Israel becomes a kingdom of priests and holy nation – fulfilled in the church (Ex 19.1-6, 1Pet 2.9-10). The promised land pictures a new creation – lost by Israel, won by Christ (Dt 27-28; cf. Mt 28.18).
Davidic	Kingship	Hero	Mediator kingship rests with David's family (2Sam 7.9-17, Ps 2, 72). The Lord's chosen will be more than a man (Ps 110, Is 9.1-7) and will suffer (Ps 22, Is 53).
New	Consummation	Denouement	Jesus is the new Adam (Ro 5, 1Cor 15), new Israel (Mt 2.15), and new David (Jer 23.5-6, Ezk 37). God's Spirit is poured out (Joel 2.28-32; Acts 2), regenerating believers (Ezk 36.25-28, Jer 31.31-34). History in its last days (2Tim 3.1, Heb 1.1); gospel proclamation until the King returns (Rev 21-22).

From the above we see that the relationship of the successive covenants in Scripture is not a relationship of *supplanting* (each covenant *discarding* the former), but rather of *superseding* (each covenant *developing* – embracing and expanding upon – the former). They manifest both a *structural* and a *thematic* unity.¹¹³

¹¹¹ Joseph A. Pipa, Jr. "The Covenant, Part 2" in "Christ and Salvation" (lecture, Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Taylors, SC, September 8, 2010).

¹¹² The terms under this column adapted from O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1980).

¹¹³ The next two paragraphs are the present author's summary of "The Unity of the Covenants," the third chapter in Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*.

Structurally, all the covenant administrations of Scripture are related in their *history, genealogy, and fulfillment*. Historically, the chain of events and persons linking Adam to Noah to Abraham to Moses to David to Christ is continuous, not disjunctive. Genealogically, God deals with family lines. David and Moses were descendants of the patriarchs, grandsons of Abraham, who was himself a descendant of Noah who was a descendant of Adam. God’s covenants with the ancestors extend to their progeny. In terms of fulfillment, the new covenant made with Christ – a descendent of David – as the second Adam fulfills all previous biblical covenants.

Successive biblical covenant administrations also manifest *thematic* unity. At the heart of every covenant is the general *Immanuel principle*: God creates and redeems his people in order to give himself to them. The name ‘Immanuel’ in Hebrew literally means “with us – God.” As the CoG unfolds, God condescends to *actively dwell among his people*. This visible presence began with the tabernacle in the wilderness, and eventually expanded to encompass both the Davidic city and the Solomonic temple. Yet its ultimate fulfillment comes not in impersonal constructions, but in *personal incarnation*. The final and full embodiment of the Immanuel principle comes in the person of Jesus Christ, and in union with him all believers become part of God’s temple – in whom God’s Holy Spirit dwells.

The essence of covenant – divine condescension for human fruition – thus forms both the bookends and the unifying concept of Scripture. The divine presence which brought terror to man after the Fall (Gen 3.8) will sometime eradicate all fear (Rev 21.3-4). Biblical theology is covenant theology.

Important Questions

1. How does the purpose of covenant and the chief end of man correct inaccurate notions of the purpose of the gospel and human life?
2. Skeptics frequently point to the ‘ethnocentrism’ of OT Israel – God-ordained genocide of the Canaanites, condemnation of interracial marriage, etc. – as proof of the claim that the Old and New Testaments represent two different religions. How does knowledge of the historical progression of the CoG help us develop an answer?
3. Racial supremacists in the church may sometimes point to ‘ethnocentrism’ of the OT to ‘prove’ racial supremacy and forbid interracial marriage. Again, how does knowledge of the historical progression of the CoG help us refute these claims?
4. Dispensationalist Christians claim that God has two different peoples (Israel and the church) and two different purposes in history. Though we recognize them as dear brothers and sisters in Christ, how does knowledge of the unfolding of the CoG correct this error? What is the correct understanding of the relationship between Israel and the church?
5. Is Adam a type of Christ (Rom 5.14)? Is Rahab’s cord a type of his blood (Josh 2.18)?

Additional Resources

O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*

For Next Session

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 34-44, which covers:

WCF	WLC	WSC
8	36-57, 68	21-28