COVENANT THEOLOGY

HaDavar Messianic Ministries
WHAT WE HOPE TO COVER

- Brief description of covenant theology
- History of Satan attacking Israel
- History of the allegorical methodology
- Origins of covenant theology
- Features of and problems with covenant theology
- Contrast with Dispensationalism
BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF COVENANT THEOLOGY

So, let’s start with a definition of covenant theology. According to Paul Enns: Covenant theology is a system of interpreting the Scriptures on the basis of two covenants: the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. Some covenant theologians specify three covenants: works, redemption, and grace. Covenant theology teaches that God initially made a covenant of works with Adam, promising eternal life for obedience and death for disobedience. Adam failed, and death entered the human race. God, however, moved to resolve man’s dilemma by entering into a covenant of grace through which the problem of sin and death would be overcome. Christ is the ultimate mediator of God’s covenant of grace.

Covenant theology is a theological system founded on Replacement Theology, which maintains that God has replaced the Jewish people with the church and that Christians are now God’s only chosen people. The contrast to this would be Dispensational theology. Dispensationalism is the framework for interpreting scripture that lays out successive periods of redemptive history in which God progressively revealed more and more about His plan of redemption. Hallmarks of Dispensationalism would include a commitment to a literal hermeneutic (in other words a way of understanding and interpreting Scripture), and also a view of Israel as the special people of God to whom He will keep His promises.

So Dispensationalism focuses primarily on the redemptive covenants we have been covering—the ones referred to in scripture as “covenants.” Whereas Covenant theology essentially makes up covenants—covenants that are not discussed in Scripture, but rather, they say, are implied by scripture. We will go into the details of this coming up. But first let’s discuss a little background and set some context for the development of Covenant theology.

HISTORY OF SATAN ATTACKING ISRAEL

Satan views his mission as thwarting the plan of God. In his mind, if He can nullify even one promise of God, then he can show that God is not trustworthy and thus Satan will be victorious.

So following the Garden of Eden, how much revelation about the plan of God would Satan have had? What had God revealed so far? Basically all he knew was that the seed of the woman would defeat the seed of Satan. So where did he attack first? He influenced Eve’s offspring Cain to commit murder. That way,
one of the sons was dead and the other was a murderer. How could God accomplish salvation now? Satan is attacking what he knows about the plan of God.

Later, as the world became more and more wicked, Satan attempts to infiltrate and corrupt as many of the genealogical lines of descent from Adam that he could—by having the sons of God in Genesis 6 (the fallen angels) interbreed with the daughters of men. He was trying to wipe out the possibility of there being a clean line from Adam from which God could bring Messiah. The flood was basically all about wiping away these corrupt genealogies and starting fresh with a clean undefiled line of descent.

In Genesis 6:9 it says that Noah was blameless in his time. Another way to translate that would be, “without blemish in his generations.” Noah may have been the only line that had not been corrupted by these fallen angels intermarrying with women. Again, Satan is attacking what he knows about the plan of God.

As we move forward through history, God reveals more and more of His plans—thus Satan has more clarity as to where to focus his attacks. God chooses Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to be the progenitors of a race of people through whom God would bring the savior. Now Satan didn’t have to attack every line from Adam, he knew where to focus his attacks—on the people of Israel. If he could wipe out this people group, then God could not accomplish His purpose.

So from then on, you see Satan attacking the people of Israel. Sometimes you will hear questions about why this little tiny nation of people has been so abused and under assault at every step of the way throughout history. Satan is the god of this world, and he influences people and events and powers to accomplish what he wants. He has been at war with this revealed plan of God from the beginning.

So when we get to the time of Moses, Pharaoh tries to drown a whole generation of Jews in the Nile, hoping to wipe them out. Fast forward to the time of Esther, where Haman gets very close to completely destroying the Jews using the king’s authority to do so. But God thwarts his plan again. We then come to the time of Christ’s birth. Herod orders all the babies killed in the region. Satan knew Messiah was coming.

All throughout history Satan has attacked the people of God—first, trying to prevent the coming of Messiah. And after he failed with that attempt, he is trying to prevent the return of Messiah.

What does he know about the return of Christ? He knows that it must happen in conjunction with Israel. So in 70 AD, under the command of Titus Vespasian, the 5th, 10th, 12th, and 15th legions of the Roman army surrounded Jerusalem and after a long siege, completely leveled the city of Jerusalem, scattering the Jews to the 4 corners of the known world. This started the diaspora where there would not be
a nation of Israel for some 2,000 years. Then at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, in response to a major work of God in regathering the Jews from all over the world into their land once again, Satan displays his fury in sponsoring the holocaust and wiping out over 6 million Jews.

Why would Satan care about the Jews after already being defeated in his plan to foil the coming of Messiah? Because he knows that according to Romans 11:25-26 that a partial hardening will happen to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in, and then God will pour out His Spirit upon them (Zech 12:10), so that they will look on Him whom they have pierced, and mourn for Him as for an only Son. And in Hosea 5:15 it says that He will go away and return to His place, until Israel acknowledges their sin, their sin of rejecting Him as Messiah, and they seek His face. In their tribulation they will seek Him. They will say, “come, let us return to the Lord. For He has torn us, but He will heal us. He has wounded us, but He will bandage us. He will revive us after two days. He will raise us up on the third day.” When they acknowledge their sin of rejecting Messiah and petition His return, that will usher in the second coming.

It is the petition of the Spirit-indwelt revived nation of Israel that will trigger Christ’s return. So if Satan can wipe them out prior to this, in his mind, he can prevent Christ from returning. That is the reason for the anti-Semitism and all the attacks on the Jews over the centuries. Satan is real. He is alive and well. And he is about the business of attempting to thwart the plan of God.

Now this background is crucial to understand if we are to truly grasp the origins of replacement theology and then the origins and purpose of Covenant theology. We need to recognize that Satan is working behind the scenes. His job is to thwart the plan of God; to inject error and false teaching into the church, to confuse and distract people from the truth and from growing closer to God.

**History of the Allegorical Methodology**

As we start to examine the roots of both replacement theology and of covenant theology, it is important to understand that there are basically two major issues which divide Christendom today. The first is that of free will and election—how you understand this issue puts you basically in one of two different camps. The other issue is the future and fate of national Israel—how you understand this question basically also puts you into two different camps. And what that comes down to is really an issue of hermeneutics—how you approach the interpretation of the Bible. Do you use a more literal method, or do you rely on allegory to explain various parts of Scripture? The primary place this shows up in theology is in relation to one’s views on the Millennium.
It is the opinion about whether or not there is to be a literal thousand-year reign of Christ as the last era of this age, and as the foretaste of and transition to the eternal state that serves as the benchmark or cornerstone upon which rests many of the various understandings of theology today--because it is this touchstone issue of the millennium that most clearly reveals how one understands the manner in which large portions of Scripture are to be interpreted--whether in a plain, literal sense, or in an allegorical, figurative sense. Intimately connected with this millennial issue is the question of whether or not there is to be a literal future for Israel. Because it is in the millennium that the kingdom glory for that restored Israel is to be unveiled.

From the time of the Apostle John and the writing of the book of Revelation, the view of the early church was strongly, if not almost unanimously, millennial in understanding. In other words, the early church absolutely believed that there would be a literal 1,000 year reign of Christ.

According to H. Wayne House:

“The teaching of John in Revelation was generally consistent with Jewish thought during the first century, especially before A.D. 70, and was the basis of the chiliasm (the belief in a thousand-year reign of Christ prior to the final judgment) found in the earliest Christian writings of the second century. Post apostolic fathers who were acquainted with the apostle John or his disciples shared a similar view of the end-times events.”

Based on the teachings of the Apostles and their disciples, the early church strongly supported and defended the literalness of the millennium with no thought that the church had somehow replaced Israel. According to Kaiser, “Most readers of the first four centuries of the Christian church realize that almost without exception, the church espoused and vigorously taught that Christ would return to earth in the Millennium to rule and reign over all the nations of the earth from Jerusalem.”

But then a remarkable change began to happen. Stemming from several developments within and surrounding the early church, an ugly anti-Semitism began to grow and take root. Some of these developments include:

1) the blame for the crucifixion of Jesus being laid at the feet of the Jews
2) the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70 A.D. being seen as God’s punishment and rejection of the Jews
3) a misunderstanding of the context of the ‘in-house’ debate within Christianity over the co-existence of Jews and Gentiles within the body
4) the persecution and rejection of those early Christians by the surviving Jewish community

So, first, the Jews were seen as “Christ killers”—and this led to the early spark of anti-Semitism inside the church.
Secondly, the fall of Jerusalem in 70AD, was indeed God’s punishment of the Jews, but it was not their rejection. Romans 11:25 is clear that it is a partial hardening that has happened to Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And then God will restore national Israel. The thought that God will ever reject Israel completely is totally foreign to scripture.

Thirdly, the in-house debate within Christianity over the co-existence of Jews and Gentiles within the body, is an issue about which there is much confusion even today. What Paul was attempting to clarify; what the early church was actually dealing with was not the question of Jewish exclusion, it was the question of Gentile inclusion. The question at hand, and one which Paul deals extensively with, was not whether Jews were members of the family of God any longer, it was how the Gentiles now fit in to that family.

The predominantly Jewish church was having difficulty seeing how Gentiles could be seen as part of the family of God, when in the past the identity marker of that family was the Law and specifically, circumcision. This post-Pentecost time was a time of traumatic clarification and even re-definition, of the identity of the people of God. The predominance of the initially Jewish population of the church was being superseded by the growing number of Gentiles entering in, and this caused theological turmoil when it was finally made clear that Jewish identity markers were no longer the identity markers delineating the people of God. The indwelling Spirit was now to serve as the identity marker. This crisis forced the apostle Paul to clarify an accurate understanding of the makeup of the people of God under the New covenant.

Then fourthly, there was persecution of the early church by the Jews, as evidenced by Paul’s pre-conversion attacks and arrests of Christians. This did not foster a favorable view of Jews by those early Christians.

So, for these and other reasons, this early anti-Semitism and move towards Jewish exclusion within the church laid the groundwork for the church’s acceptance of this new ideological framework of the church being the “new Israel,” but it is not until the fourth century do we see the formal expression of this replacement theology exert official influence within the church.

All of these factors set the stage for the eventual rejection of any kind of premillennial ideas. In the early days of his Christian faith Augustine (354-430) was premillennial. However, through time, and because of various personal struggles he had, he abandoned the idea of a literal return of Christ to establish a physical kingdom on earth. He used this new allegorical method of interpretation to explain away the literal return of Christ and thus Amillennialism was born. In his book, The City of God, Augustine taught that the Universal Church is the Messianic Kingdom and that the millennium began with Christ’s first coming.
Prior to this time the apostolic teaching held the most authority. Walt Kaiser says:

"The major break with this [apostolic] theology came in the fourth century A.D. during the reign of Emperor Constantine and in the work Ecclesiastical History by Eusebius Pamphili. Eusebius did not believe that there was a distinct future for the Jews; rather, the church was God's new Israel. Any proposal about a millennium was thought by Eusebius to be heretical."

What was happening was that you had Christians teaching that Christ would return and overthrow the reigning powers and set up His own kingdom. If you were Constantine and you were the Emperor of the known world, how would you receive that news? Constantine reportedly converted to Christianity—the validity of that conversion has always been in question—but regardless, if you had one group telling you that Christ was going to return and overthrow your government, and you had another group telling you that this was just an allegory of Christ ruling spiritually in our hearts, which would you believe—and which would you want your people to believe? Well Constantine made his choice to side with the allegorists, and supported Eusebius.

It was in the alliance between Eusebius and Constantine that this new theology not only gained acceptance, but also was established as the official position of the church. Together with the anti-Semitic bias clearly present within the church, which was forcefully seen in Eusebius; along with the allegorical interpretive methodology provided by the church father Origen centuries earlier; and then the sanctioning work of Constantine, the new official position of the church became the understanding that the church had replaced Israel and that the blessings originally promised to Israel now devolve to the church. This remained the position of the Roman Catholic Church from then until the present.

H. Wayne House sees the progression of the movement toward this replacement theology as occurring after several key developments:

1) after the Jewish people ceased to be the primary source from which the theology of the New Testament sprang;
2) after those who had learned from the apostles had died and new problems faced the largely Gentile church;
3) after several non-Jewish authors began to adopt the anti-Semitism of their pagan counterparts
4) after the hermeneutic found in the New Testament was replaced by Greek allegorism.

But it is important to see that it is also in the work of the early church father Origen that the hermeneutical foundations were laid for this theology that would be crucial for the later expositors to be able to draw upon for their "spiritualized" interpretations. It was the "allegorical method" of interpreting the Scriptures that Origen championed.
Hermeneutical Factors

Not only in historical and theological categories, but also in hermeneutical considerations did the shift toward replacement theology find its footing.

A new method of Biblical interpretation known as Alexandrian theology greatly changed the early church’s view of scripture. There were two prominent schools of thought in the early church. One was centered in Alexandria, Egypt and the other was in Antioch in Syria.

Origen (185-254) and other scholars in Alexandria developed a system of Biblical interpretation based on allegory. Origen and his contemporaries were greatly influenced by pagan Greek philosophy. They tried to integrate this into their theology. According to one school of Greek philosophy all physical matter was inherently evil. Therefore the idea of a literal earthy, millennium with physical blessings could only be erroneous. This allegorical or spiritualizing method of interpretation allowed these theologians to read almost any meaning they desired into the Bible. Thus they were able to do away with a literal return of Christ to establish a physical earthly millennial kingdom.

The influence of Greek thought and philosophy found its way into the church and its hermeneutic primarily through the Alexandrian school. Dan Gruber says, “The more literal interpretation of the New Testament authors and post-apostolic fathers gave way to the influence of Greek philosophical interpretation found in Philo and later The Shepherd of Hermas and Justin Martyr. By the time of the brilliant Alexandrian theologian Origen, allegory was readily used to move beyond the literal sense of the text.” Gruber says of Origen’s system of interpretation, “he often denied the ordinary sense of the text, and then replaced it with allegories which he made up. These allegories then became the real meaning of the text. There was no way to challenge the allegories on the basis of the text, since what the text actually said was no longer what it meant.”

It was through this allegorical method of interpretation that expositors were enabled to pour into the text of the OT the meaning they preferred. And in this case, the meaning they preferred was to replace ‘Israel’ with ‘Church’ when it suited their purposes. This was not a universal rule though. The method was not used when it did not fit their theological agenda. For then, as today, those who see the promises to Israel not being fulfilled literally for Israel have no problem seeing the punishments for disobedience as literal. But when it comes to the promises of blessing, these are now seen as applying in an allegorical way to the church.

Gruber goes on to say, “Origen’s teachings arise from, and demand, an anti-Judaic outlook. He disinherited the Jews and set the church in their place. Those scriptures that promised judgment on Israel (or the Jews, or Jacob, etc.) were still to be understood in their literal sense. But those scriptures that promised blessing on Israel (or the Jews, or Jacob, etc.) were henceforth only to be
understood as referring to the church.” Despite the glaring inconsistencies, this method of interpretation is what enabled the early church to justify such outlandish interpretations.

So now we have a basic understanding of the roots of anti-Semitism in the church. It is simply another outgrowth of Satanically inspired attacks on the continued existence of Israel. If Satan can convince the Gentiles in the church that they are true “spiritual Israel,” then that will further undermine a proper support for Israel from the church and will create an animosity towards Israel that will eventually see such ramifications in history as deadly Pogroms and the horrors committed in the name of Christ during the Crusades—leading all the way to the attitudes present within the German church which, for the most part, stood by and watched the Holocaust happen.

We also saw how this early anti-Semitism influenced the development of the replacement theology idea and also how this and the allegorical method of interpretation as championed by Eusebius influenced Constantine to make this the official position of the church. What happens later in the Reformation is that only certain doctrines, such as “justification” are “reformed.” Other erroneous doctrines such as replacement theology survive. And this is why the mainline Protestant denominations are still infected with these horrible and destructive ideas.

The Current State of the Question

Thus, throughout the history of the church, the question as to whether or not there was to be a future for the nation of Israel was not, for the most part, even addressed. There did not seem to be a need to. Throughout the history of the church, the traditional answer to the question of whether or not God had a future plan for the literal descendants of Jacob, as an ethnic, cultural, and national entity, was an emphatic, “no.”

One writer says, “If you mean by Israel the actual descendants of Jacob and if you are asking about their ethnic, cultural, and political future, then, no, they do not have a future except to linger on earth like refugees until the end of time as a witness to divine judgment. Why? Because God has disinherited them as a punishment for their rejection of Jesus, and he has replaced them with a new Israel, the Gentile church.” This traditional answer to the question of Israel’s future is what is known as Supersessionism…that the church “supersedes” Israel in the plan of God.

According to Blaising, “Supersessionists believed that the catastrophes of AD 70 and 135 signaled God’s intention to make a complete end of Israel as a political, national entity.” The stark reality of 1900 some odd years since the destruction of that nation lent great credence to this view. Those who believed Israel was a notion of the past had ostensibly won the day. Yet, according to Blaising, “the dramatic establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 under God’s providence has belied that notion.”
In theory, 1948 should have seen the end of the attempts to spiritualize the meaning of Israel in Scripture. But even throughout these nearly two millennia there were still courageous exegetes who held faithfully to the Biblical understanding, despite the seemingly overwhelming reasons not to.

But there has started to be a change. According to Soulen, “Under the new conditions created by these events [namely 1948], Christian churches have begun to consider anew their relation to the God of Israel and the Israel of God in the light of the Scriptures and the gospel about Jesus.” Yet, because the church, throughout its history (ever since the time of Constantine) has been primarily, if not singularly, focused on viewing itself as ‘spiritual Israel’, there has come to be deeply ingrained within the Christian psyche an understanding of how the church relates with Israel that is difficult to challenge.

The state of the question currently is that large portions of Christendom believe that the church has replaced Israel as the covenant people of God and that Israel has forfeited all her blessings, which now fall upon the church. In the last century or so it seems a shift has begun to be seen in the way the answer to this question is understood.

According to Blaising, “Supersessionism lives in Christian theology today purely on the momentum of its own tradition. Developments in the twentieth century have undercut its supposed historical and Biblical bases.” Starting in the 17th and 18th centuries the re-emerging views of the millennium as taken literally began to lay the groundwork for premillennialism to spread far and wide the belief that there was indeed to be a future for literal Israel. Then also, as a result of the fallout from the horrific events surrounding the Holocaust and the subsequent re-establishment of the state of Israel, “many Biblical scholars have reassessed the anti-Jewish bias by which Scripture has been read, with the consequences being a major shift of opinion on the NT expectation for a future for Israel.” The pendulum has begun to swing back.

**Highlights and review of the non-literal or allegorical approach:**

- This view originated in the Alexandrian School of Theology with Clement and Origen.
- Pressure from Rome precluded them from taking the overthrow of human government presented in Revelation as literal.
- They took the symbolism far beyond what the text called for and took in a non-literal fashion what others took as literal.
- They were motivated by anti-chiliastic pre-suppositions which colored their interpretations. (Chiliasm is the belief and early Christian teaching of a literal 1000-year millennium.)
- Though later regarded as heretical their influence reached down to Augustine who basically formed the doctrine for the rest of the church and who converted the church from its chiliastic roots.
- This view survives today in a more moderate form of allegorical interpretation.
But again, this is just a brief overview of the history of Replacement theology and the allegorical hermeneutic it is based on. Next we’ll see the roots of Covenant theology and its dependence upon replacement theology.

Discussion Question:

In addition to what we have seen as Satan’s attacks on the nation of Israel throughout history, what are some examples of Satan’s influence and attacks today (i.e. in society, popular culture, education, politics, etc.). Where do you see Satan’s influence having the most effect?

The Origins of Covenant Theology

According to Bob Nyberg:

“…some covenant theologians would have us believe that their belief system was that of the founding fathers of the early church. They try to make a case that Dispensationalism is a mere infant when compared to the grand old scheme of covenant theology. However, the truth of the matter is that systematized covenant theology is actually of recent origin. Cornelius Van Til, a covenant theologian, admits, ‘the idea of covenant theology has only in modern times been broadly conceived.’ Louis Berkhof, another covenant theologian, wrote, ‘In the early Church Fathers the covenant idea is not found at all.’"

Dr. Ryrie points out:

“It [covenant theology] was not the expressed doctrine of the early church. It was never taught by church leaders in the Middle Ages. It was not even mentioned by the primary leaders of the Reformation. Indeed, covenant theology as a system is only a little older than Dispensationalism. That does not mean it is not biblical, but it does dispel the notion that covenant theology has been throughout all church history the ancient guardian of the truth that is only recently being sniped at by Dispensationalism.”

Covenant theology does not appear in the writings of Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, or Melanchthon. There were no references to covenant theology in any of the great confessions of faith until the Westminster Confession in 1647, and even then covenant theology was not as fully developed as it was later by Reformed theologians. The covenant (or federal) theory arose sporadically and apparently independently late in the sixteenth century.
On October 31, 1517 Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-five Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. One of the primary factors that caused him to break away from the Roman Catholic Church was his understanding of Sola Fide—the doctrine that man is justified by faith alone without works. Through Luther and the reformers, God restored the doctrine of salvation by grace back to His true church....but when the reformers broke away from the Roman Catholic church, they carried a lot of baggage with them. Amillennialism was one such fetter that kept the church in bondage.

Dr. William R. Newell pretty well sums it up when he wrote:

“Almost all the theology of the various ‘creeds of Christendom’ date back to the Reformation, which went triumphantly to the end of Romans Five, and, so far as theological development or presentation of truth was concerned, stopped there.”

The reformation brought back the truth of salvation by grace, but reverted to the law for living the Christian life. This law-grace paradox continued to plague the church until John Nelson Darby and his contemporaries came on the scene in the early 1800’s. Darby adopted the literal, historical-grammatical method of Bible interpretation. As Darby studied God’s Word in this light, the distinction between Israel and the church seemed to leap off the pages of Scripture before his eyes. He and his contemporaries took the truths of Dispensationalism and put them into a more systematized form. God used this to restore to the church not only the imminent, premillennial return of Christ, but also the teachings of grace for living the Christian life.

During the time period between Luther and Darby, covenant theology came into being. Unfortunately, it reflected the "law-based" doctrine of Amillennialism. Covenant theology was introduced to America primarily through the Puritans.

Dispensational theology came to America primarily through Brethren teachers such as Darby and his contemporaries.

A definition of Covenant Theology

Dr. Renald Showers defines covenant theology:

"as a system... which attempts to develop the Bible's philosophy of history on the basis of two or three covenants. It represents the whole of Scripture and history as being covered by two or three covenants."

Dr. Ryrie says, "Formal definitions of covenant theology are not easy to find even in the writings of covenant theologians. Most of the statements that pass for definitions are in fact descriptions or characterizations of the system.” The article in Bakers Dictionary of Theology comes close to a definition when it says that covenant theology is distinguished by "the place it gives to the covenants,"
because it, "represents the whole of Scripture as being covered by covenants: (1) the covenant of works, and (2) the covenant of grace."

This is an accurate description of the covenant system. Covenant theology is a system of theology based on the two covenants of works and grace as governing categories for the understanding of the entire Bible.

In covenant theology the covenant of works is said to be an agreement between God and Adam promising life to Adam for perfect obedience and including death as the penalty for failure. But Adam sinned and thus mankind failed to meet the requirements of the covenant of works. Therefore, a second covenant, the covenant of grace, was brought into operation. Louis Berkhof defines it as "that gracious agreement between the offended God and the offending but elect sinner, in which God promises salvation through faith in Christ, and the sinner accepts this believably, promising a life of faith and obedience."

Some Reformed theologians have introduced a third covenant, the covenant of redemption--which was made in eternity past and became the basis for the covenant of grace, just described, between God and the elect. This covenant of redemption is supposed to be "the agreement between the Father, giving the Son as Head and Redeemer of the elect, and the Son, voluntarily taking the place of those whom the Father had given him." These two (or three) covenants become the core and bases of operation for covenant theology in its interpretation of the Scriptures.

The foundational flaw of the system is that Covenant theology begins by assuming two (or three) covenants that are never mentioned in Scripture.

Covenant theology tries to unify scripture by saying that Biblical distinctions are merely different phases of the same Covenant of Grace. For example, Berkoff insists that the Mosaic Covenant is essentially the same as the Abrahamic Covenant. Yet, the apostle Paul asserts the distinctiveness of these two covenants in Galatians 3:18. Even a cursory reading of these two covenants reveals that the Abrahamic Covenant was unconditional whereas the Mosaic Covenant had many conditions attached.

Covenant theology:

- denies the distinctiveness of the gospel of grace and the gospel of the kingdom
- denies the distinction between Israel and the Church
- uses a double standard with regard to interpretation of Scripture. Covenant theologians use the historical-grammatical method of interpretation, except for passages concerning future events. When dealing with passages regarding the future of Israel or the kingdom of God they revert to Augustine’s allegorical or spiritualizing method of interpretation
- places the believer under the law
What I would like to do next is go over the basic tenets of Covenant theology and then evaluate it. This comes from work by James Showers.

As was mentioned, Covenant Theology’s basic premise is that, in eternity past, God determined to govern all of history on the basis of three covenants. These are the covenants of works, redemption, and grace.

**The Covenant of Works**

According to Covenant theologians, the covenant of works was established between the creation and Fall of Man. Covenants, as described here, are formal, legally binding agreements in which both parties have obligations.

The covenant of works supposedly was established between the triune God and Adam, in which Adam is God’s representative head of the human race and acts on behalf of all his descendants. Covenant theologians argue that Adam’s obligation was to have perfect obedience to God. God’s obligation was to provide eternal life in exchange for perfect obedience. Adam’s penalty for failing to keep his part of the covenant was death to both Adam and his descendants.

Where do we find this covenant in the Bible? We don’t. It is not in the Bible. Covenant theologians infer these covenants based on certain Scriptures, including the threat of death for eating of the tree of knowledge in Genesis 2. There must be a covenant, they say, because God provided a warning and a penalty. That is the logic they use.

**The Covenant of Redemption**

This covenant supposedly was established before creation in eternity past between God the Father and God the Son, in which the Father made His Son the Head and Redeemer of the elect. The Son volunteered to take the place of those whom God gave to Him—the elect here on Earth. The Son’s obligation was to become human under the Law, live without sin, and willingly take the elect’s punishment on the cross. The Father’s obligation was to resurrect the Son and give Him numerous seed, all power in heaven and earth, and great glory.

Again we ask, “Where is this covenant in Scripture?” And again the answer is that it is not there. It does not exist. Covenant theologians claim it is implied based on God’s promises and the Son’s willingness to go to the cross.
The Covenant of Grace

Some Covenant theologians combine the covenants of redemption and grace. They are uncertain when the covenant of grace was established. Some argue it began with the promise of redemption in Genesis 3:15 when God told the serpent He would bruise the serpent’s head and that the serpent would bruise the Man-Child’s heel. Others argue it began with the covenant God made with Abraham in Genesis 12.

In the covenant of grace, God, the One who was offended, makes a covenant with the elect sinner, who is the offender. The elect sinner’s obligation is to accept the promise of salvation willingly, agree to be a part of God’s people, trust in Christ forever, and commit to a life of obedience and dedication to God. God’s obligation is to provide salvation through faith in Christ and eternal life to all who believe.

Again, there is no reference to this covenant in the Bible. Covenant theologians argue that it is implied in the “I will be Your God” passages throughout the Old and New Testaments.

These three covenants constitute what is known as Covenant Theology. This is their attempt to define history’s ultimate purpose as glorifying God through the redemption of the elect. The shortcoming of this philosophy is that it presents a very man-centered view of history: The glory of God is summed up only through the redemption of man. The covenant of grace becomes the unifying principle for history, in which history is understood in terms of God’s redemption of man.

If you want to understand what happened in the past, you turn to the covenant of grace. If you want to understand what is happening now or in the future, look at the covenants of grace and redemption.

Other Issues and Thoughts to consider:

Covenant Theology is the dominant theological system of most mainline Protestant denominations and maintains that God has replaced the Jewish people with the church.

On the basis of two or three “covenants” that are found nowhere in the Bible, it claims that Christians are now God’s only chosen people and that the Jewish people have no claim to the land of Israel.

What God’s Word Actually Says:

God’s Word says the church began after Christ. Jesus Christ said, “I will build [future tense] My church” (Mt. 16:18). Christ was looking to a future day when the church would begin. Clearly, it had not yet begun or He would not have used
the future tense. So the church must begin after Matthew 16. It began at Pentecost with the baptism of the Holy Spirit whom Christ promised to send after He was gone (Jn 14:16–17; Acts 1:8).

First Corinthians 12:13 says all believers are put into the church through the baptism of the Holy Spirit. When did the baptism of the Holy Spirit happen—it happened at Pentecost. Furthermore, when Peter referred to Pentecost in Acts 11:15, he called it “the beginning.” Here he clearly meant the beginning of the church.

God’s Word distinguishes between Israel and the church.

In the Old Testament, Israel was a nation. In the New Testament, the church is never called a nation but, rather, an assembly or gathering of believers from many nations. Saved Jews in the Old Testament were never called the church, but they are part of the church in the New Testament. For example, Paul said, “Give no offense, either to the Jews or to the Greeks [Gentiles] or to the church of God” (1 Cor. 10:32). The words Jews and Greeks encompass all the unsaved (unredeemed). The words “church of God” refer to the saved, which include both Jews and Greeks.

Scripture calls Israel the wife of God (Isa. 54:5–6) but calls the church the Bride of Christ (Rev. 21:9; 22:17).

These concepts are never interchanged. They refer to two distinctly different relationships.

God’s Word says there will be seven years of tribulation following the Rapture of the church.

Covenant Theology claims there is no need for the Tribulation and no need to restore the nation of Israel and bring it to repentance because God is finished with Israel. According to Covenant Theology, there also is no reason for God to judge the Gentile nations for their treatment of the Jewish people.

Scripture begs to differ. Paul taught that the church will be caught up before the wrath of the Day of the Lord (1 Th. 4:16–17). In 1 Thessalonians 1:10, he spoke of our waiting for God to send His Son from heaven, “even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.” First Thessalonians 5:9 says, “For God did not appoint us to wrath.”

The Tribulation is a literal seven years, according to Daniel 9. The Antichrist will usher in that period by entering into a covenant with Israel. Divine judgment will flood the earth. Revelation 6—18 explains God’s twofold purpose: to pour out His wrath on the usurpers of His realm and bring Israel to reconciling faith in the Messiah.

The prophet Jeremiah referred to the Tribulation as “the time of Jacob’s trouble”
Christ referred to the time as “great tribulation,” the greatest trouble the earth has ever seen (Mt. 24:21). Unless God stopped it, He said, no one would survive. It will culminate at the battle of Armageddon (Joel 3:9–17; Rev. 16:14–16), in which Satan will bring the armies of the world against Israel to destroy the Jewish nation. Then Christ will return to deliver Israel (Zech. 14:1–5; 2 Th. 2:8; Rev. 19:11–21).

This is a time when God will once again be dealing with the world through the nation of Israel. The church is gone. The church age is finished. The fullness of the Gentiles has come in.

**God’s Word promises Christ will rule from His throne for a literal 1,000 years.**

Covenant Theology, of course, sees no reason for this. Covenant theologians have developed two views that spiritualize the texts. The first is Amillennialism. Augustine developed it about 400 years after the church began. It maintains the Church Age merely continues until Christ returns to judge all men and then take believers to the eternal future. The second view is Postmillennialism. It takes what it considers to be a more positive outlook: The church will continue until the entire world becomes Christian, thereby opening the door for Christ to return to take all believers to the new heavens and new earth. Both these views are contrary to the explicit Word of God.

Six times in the first seven verses of Revelation 20 there are references to the 1,000-year reign of Christ here on Earth. God promises to establish His Kingdom on Earth with the Messiah sitting on the throne to rule over Israel (Isa. 9:6–7; 11:1–2; Lk. 1:31–33) and the nations (Ps. 72:8–11; Dan. 7:13–14; Zech. 14:9). The Bible says Messiah will govern as God’s King—God’s representative to do God’s will (Ps. 7:2–8; Zech. 14:9; Rev. 11:15). Since the time Adam fell in sin, there was no qualified human representative to administer His rule until Jesus came. When Jesus returns, His purpose will be to establish the theocratic Kingdom on Earth.

The beginning of the Millennial Kingdom is called a time of restoration of all things, a season of refreshing (Acts 3:18–21). Christ referred to it as the time of regeneration, in which He will restore the environment to its pre-sin condition. He will do away with droughts, wars, pestilence, disease, and illness and bring the world back to the way it existed before man sinned (Isa. 2:2–4; 9:6–7; 11:2–5, 6–9; 33:24; 35:5–6; 55:13; Ezek. 34:25–29; 47:1–12).

Covenant Theology is a fabrication based on supposed covenants found nowhere in Scripture. However, the Bible does have covenants that are clearly defined. They include the Abrahamic Covenant, the Land Covenant, the Mosaic Covenant, the Davidic Covenant, and the New Covenant. We do not have to say that God implied these covenants: they are all recorded—and they are all called covenants. They are clearly defined in Scripture. They were all initiated by God. They were given to the Jewish people, and they see their ultimate fulfillment through Israel. And, as we have seen, they lay out the program of salvation history.
These covenants guarantee that Israel will be restored to the Promised Land as a nation and its place of blessing. Someday all of Israel will be regenerated. The Messiah will return to establish God’s Millennial Kingdom on Earth and will rule from His throne in Jerusalem. And Israel will be the most blessed nation on the earth (Isa. 2:1–4; 60:1–3; 61:4–9; Zeph. 3:20; Zech. 8:23).

**What Replacement Theology Maintains**

Covenant theology is intimately tied together with Replacement theology. Replacement Theology maintains that, because the Jewish people rejected Jesus Christ, God has replaced or superseded ethnic Israel with the church and punished them by rescinding all of the covenant promises He gave them.

It also claims:

1) the church began with Abraham in Genesis 12
2) the church is merely a continuation of Old Testament Israel
3) the church is true or “spiritual Israel”
4) true Israel in the Old Testament was comprised of Abraham’s spiritual, not physical, descendants.

Replacement Theology also conveniently manages to uncouple God’s covenant promises from His covenant curses. The church inherits all of the promises to Israel, but the Jewish people (ethnic Israel) keep all of the covenant curses.

Finally, Replacement Theology teaches there is no future for national Israel: God has thoroughly rejected Israel and no longer has a place for it in His plan for eternity apart from the salvation of individual Jewish people. They are no longer His Chosen People; nor is there a future 70th week of Daniel (see Daniel 9:24–27) or a future, literal, Millennial Kingdom of God on Earth.

Replacement Theology is the historical position of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches and the common position of the Reformed and Covenant churches. Unfortunately, it has fueled anti-Semitism for 1,800 years. It has been said that more anti-Semitic acts have been committed in the name of the church than by all other groups combined.

**Christ’s Words:**

Since Israel did not reject Christ until the Gospels, we would expect Replacement Theology to be taught in the New Testament. Using a literal-historical-grammatical method of interpretation, we would expect to find:

- Clear, concise statements that God has rejected Israel.
- Definitive passages that teach that the church has replaced Israel.
- God’s declaration that He has excluded Israel from the Old Testament covenants.
• A total lack of New Testament verses that speak of Israel's future in God's plan.

But, in fact, nowhere does Scripture define the church as a "nation." Rather, it teaches that the church is composed of people from many nations. Christ’s use of nation in Matthew 21:43 refers to the future generation of Jewish people who will accept Him and bear the fruit of the restored Kingdom. Christ chose the word nation rather than generation because He knew the Jewish people would soon be scattered; and He wanted to note a future day when Israel would again be a nation, accept Him as Messiah, and usher in the restored Kingdom of God.

Far from teaching Replacement Theology, Jesus emphasized that, because the Jewish generation alive during His First Coming refused His offer of the restored Kingdom, God would take the Kingdom from them and give it to a future Jewish nation (or generation) that will accept Him.

What does God say about Israel's future? If the New Testament teaches ethnic Israel has a future, then Replacement Theology is untrue.

Jesus' Throne

According to the New Testament, the nation of Israel and the Promised Land are vital to God establishing His restored Kingdom on Earth. The Bible teaches that Jesus fulfills the Davidic Covenant that guarantees a descendant of David will sit on David’s throne in Israel forever. The Hebrew Scriptures teach the Messiah will rule over Israel and the Gentile nations from His throne in Jerusalem ( Isa. 9:6–7; 11:1–12; Jer. 23:5–8; 33:14–16).

To date, these prophecies have not been fulfilled. But Jesus said, “Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Mt. 19:28). Jesus spoke those words in response to the apostle Peter’s concern about the disciples’ future. Jesus told them that someday, they each will sit on a throne ruling the tribes of Israel. Jesus certainly saw a future for ethnic Israel.

But the verse reveals more. The title Son of Man refers to Jesus Christ Himself. Jesus said He will sit on the throne of His glory, a throne that will bring Him honor. Nowhere does Scripture say He sits on a throne in heaven. Rather, it teaches that He is presently seated at the right hand of the Father’s throne. The throne of Christ’s glory is earthly. It will be located in Jerusalem where He will rule over Israel and the world. Jesus did not ascend to that throne at His First Coming. Thus, if He is to be faithful to His words, He must yet sit on His throne in Jerusalem.

When the apostles saw Christ prior to His return to heaven, they asked, “Will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). Obviously, they fully believed Jesus will restore the Kingdom to Earth and that Israel will be central to the process. Jesus did not correct their belief that He will restore the Kingdom to
Israel. He simply replied that it was not for them to know the timing of God’s plan to do so; their concern should be to get busy building His church.

For Replacement Theology to be valid, God must teach it clearly in His Word. However, nowhere does the Bible teach God has rejected Israel or replaced it with the church. Nor does it say the church is the historic continuation of Old Testament Israel or that all of the covenant promises have been taken from Israel and given to the church.

What the New Testament does teach is that Israel has a grand future in God’s plan. And without a future for Israel, there will be no glorious future Kingdom of God on Earth.

Summary and conclusions about Replacement theology (Supersessionism):

♦ One of the major weaknesses of the Supersessionist view is that it fails to see that it is not that the Gentiles now bear exclusive membership to the family of God; it is that this family has been enlarged to let the Gentiles in. This is the major question the church was dealing with in the first century. It was not the question of Jewish exclusion. It was the question of Gentile inclusion.

♦ Another weakness with Supersessionism is that it views Paul as attacking Israel, when what he was primarily attacking was a faulty understanding of identity markers. Just as circumcision and the Law defined and demarcated the boundaries of who comprised the people of God under the Mosaic covenant; it is the gift of the Spirit that serves this purpose under the New covenant. Paul’s railing against the Law and reliance upon ‘the works of the Law’ is not an attack against Israel, or against the fact that the Jews were the chosen people of God, or an argument that the Jews had forfeited anything. It is an attack against the anachronistic thinking that living a Jewish lifestyle is what defined being a member of the family of God.

♦ It seems that a great deal of misunderstanding about the objects of Paul’s attacks, and the ideas he is trying to clarify (specifically that he is focusing his attacks on Israel), come from a misreading of the book and argument of Galatians. The argument of Galatians is normally seen as a plea for the Christians in Galatia not to go back to the Law of Moses to seek justification, as they were being urged to do. But the argument is not that they should not go back, but that they should not go forward without Messiah. The Judaizers were trying to compel them to be circumcised because that was the identity marker of the people of God that they were used to. It was the identity marker of the people of God under the Mosaic covenant. But what Paul argues is that the indwelling Spirit is the identity marker of the people of God under the New covenant. If they now seek to be identified with the Mosaic Law, they are rejecting the fact that Jesus was the Messiah and that His death had changed anything. What Supersessionists see Paul saying is that the Jews had it all wrong and therefore they should be rejected. They thus disenfranchise Israel and replace Israel with the church. But Paul is not saying that Jews prior to His
coming had it all wrong, he is saying that Jews, who are still only Jews after the coming of Messiah have it wrong. Those who are still seeking to be identified as the people of God by the identity badge of Torah have misunderstood that the times have changed. The new age has arrived and the identity marker of this age is the Spirit.

Finally, it is in a total misunderstanding of the arguments Paul is using, and the identity of who Paul is discussing in Rom 9-11 that leads Supersessionists to actually use this passage to support their view—when in reality, if properly understood, the purpose of these few chapters is to argue against the very idea that they are espousing—that God has forsaken Israel.

It is the nature of the redemptive covenants that presents the most formidable objection to Supersessionism. For the manner in which God presents His salvation to mankind reveals the unilateral nature of this work. It is a work of God; and it does not rely upon the faithfulness of man at any level. Participation in the blessings accompanying salvation does involve cooperation, but not the receiving of the promised inheritance.

For these and many more reasons I believe it is clear that there is no way of conceiving of the God of Israel as no longer ‘the God of Israel’. First and foremost, the nature of the redemptive covenants precludes the possibility that Israel can lose her inheritance and forfeit the blessings God promised to her. The Abrahamic covenant is an unconditional promise to bless. He has not forsaken His people and has not forsaken the covenant He made with them. The blessings He promised to them do not devolve to the church. God never made a covenant with the church. The only reason the church is able to benefit from the Abrahamic blessing and participate in the salvation of God is because she is grafted into the family of which Israel is already the primary member—namely, the people of God.

**CONTRAST WITH DISPENSATIONALISM**

Bottom Line: The basic difference between Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology has to do with how a person interprets the Bible. The foundation for both systems relates to the issue of hermeneutics – that is how the Bible is interpreted.

**Issue #1: Should the Bible be understood in its plain, normal sense of meaning taking into account the historical context in which it was written? Or does the interpreter of scripture have the right to allegorize anything that he does not understand or does not fit into his theological box?**

The Dispensationalist says that we should take scripture at face value. We should understand it in its plain, normal sense of meaning. We should interpret the Bible
according to the rules of grammar and take into consideration the historical context in which it was written.

In contrast, the Covenant Theologian feels the liberty to allegorize those portions of scripture that he finds difficult to understand or which do not fit neatly in his theological system of interpretation.

Dispensationalism is based upon the golden rule of interpretation: “When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise.”

**Issue #2: Are Israel and the Church the same or are they different?**

The dispensationalist says that if you read the Bible in its plain, normal sense then you have to come to the conclusion that Israel and the Church are different.

In contrast, the Covenant Theologian, because he allows allegorical interpretation, says that the Church and Israel are the same. They say that the church began either with Adam and Eve or with Abraham. The Covenant Theologian says that the Church is “the New Israel.” They maintain that when you read the name “Israel” in the New Testament this term is really referring to the Church.

Okay, then let’s see how that works.

In Romans 10:1 Paul wrote, “Brethren, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved.” Okay the Covenant Theologian tells us that Israel = the Church. So according to them that verse should really read: “Brethren, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for the Church is that they may be saved.”

Wait a minute! I thought that the Church was the body of Christ which means that members of the Church are already saved! To make the assumption that Israel and the Church are the same results in all kinds of absurdities!

Romans 11 would make absolutely no sense!

So if a person applies the principle of plain, normal interpretation to scripture, then they will see a difference between Israel and the Church.

Those are the basic questions that separate Covenant Theology from Dispensational Theology. Hermeneutics, or the principles of interpretation, is the key issue that distinguishes these two systems of theology. The Dispensationalist tries to be consistent in applying a plain, normal interpretation to all portions of scripture.
In contrast, the Covenant Theologian uses a dual system of hermeneutics. He applies the plain, normal system of interpretation to historical passages of scripture. But he applies allegorical interpretation to passages of scripture that do not fit into his theological system.

**The Flaws of Covenant Theology**

There are a number of problems with Covenant Theology. First, its ultimate goal for history is flawed because it only explains God’s purpose for elect man. It does not begin to touch on all the other programs God is carrying out in history.

For example, if God is the one true and sovereign God of this universe, He will restore the universe to its pre-fall condition (Mt. 19:28; Acts 3:18–21). Covenant theology provides no explanation for this aspect of history. Nor does it provide reasons for God’s dethroning of Satan as ruler of the earth (Rom. 16:20) or for reestablishing God’s theocratic Kingdom on Earth (Rev. 19—20).

Second, it is a man-centered theological system with an inherent weakness for humanism. Who is the god of humanism? It is man and the belief that, ultimately, all answers lie in man.

A theological system that believes the glory of God is centered in what God is doing with man ultimately focuses on man. Add to that fact a hermeneutic that spiritualizes the words of Scripture, reinterpreting the literal into something figurative, and you have created a platform for humanism.

A further problem is that the unifying principle of Covenant Theology is too narrow. It deals solely with man’s redemption; it does not include God’s plan for the redemption of all creation. Nor does it provide enough answers for what God is doing here on Earth. Furthermore, it diminishes the true covenants recorded in Scripture: the Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic and New Covenants.

Another of Covenant Theology’s serious flaws is that it denies the distinction between Israel and the church. It redefines the church as all covenant people throughout history. Therefore, the church begins with Abraham (Gen. 12), rather than in Acts 2; and Old Testament Israel no longer refers to the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Old Testament Israel is redefined as the covenant people, the people of faith in the Old Testament. No longer is it physical descent that makes one an Israelite; it is faith in God.

Because it is built on Replacement Theology, to remove Replacement Theology from Covenant Theology would collapse the entire system. It would force Covenant theologians to accept that God has worked in the world in different ways—through Israel and through the church. Covenant theologians would have to define the church as beginning in Acts 2, with Israel being a separate entity. Further, they would have to accept a literal, future Tribulation and the Millennium. To accept this would turn them into dispensationalists.
Wrap-up:

What we have tried to do here is give a bit of the history of and the context in which Covenant theology developed. I want to make sure that when you hear the term covenant theology that it is not at all confused with what it is we have been covering, when discussing the plan of God as seen in the covenants.

The covenants really are the backbone of God’s revelation of salvation history. The interpretive framework through which you read Scripture must do justice to the importance of those revealed covenants. Sometimes Systematic Theology can go too far in attempting to make sense of the whole, by creating categories and seeing movements where the Bible does not speak. This is what Covenant theology does. It has a fundamental presupposition that drives the rest of its thinking—unfortunately this presupposition is that God is finished with Israel. This then informs their hermeneutics—which is completely backwards.

I hope you have seen what I think is really the driving force behind replacement theology—namely that Israel is the apple of God’s eye and is the focus of the unveiling of salvation history in scripture. And when Satan can confuse how we view Israel, he can distract us from God is doing in the world.