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1. WHAT IS A COVENANT?

If you have read the Bible, you have undoubtedly come across the word *covenant*. You would not read very far in the Old Testament before coming to the words of God to Noah: “I, behold, I establish my covenant with you, and with your seed after you” (Gen. 9:9). In the same book, God says to Abraham: “I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee” (Gen. 17:7). Likewise, in Deuteronomy, the last book of the Pentateuch, God says to Israel through Moses, “Know therefore that the LORD thy God, he is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations” (Deut. 7:9). Again he says in the Psalms, “The secret of the LORD is with them that fear him; and he will shew them his covenant” (Ps. 25:14).

The New Testament is also replete with references to the covenant. The Lord Jesus in establishing the Lord’s Supper says, “This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you” (Luke 22:20). The Greek word translated “testament” (*διαθήκη*, *diathēkē*) can also be rendered “covenant.” The Lord Jesus is clearly referring to the “New Covenant” spoken of by the prophet in Jeremiah 31:31. So the apostle to the Hebrews tells us that “Jesus [is] the mediator of the new covenant” (Heb. 12:24) and that His blood which is shed for us is “the blood of the everlasting covenant” (Heb. 13:20).

It is clear then, that whatever a covenant may be, it is an important biblical concept and has implications not only for the saints in Old Testament times but also for us who are New Testament believers.

What is a covenant? Many theologians think of covenants in terms of contracts or agreements, and they have good justification for that; for do we not read in the Scriptures of covenants between man and man, which are clearly some kinds of agreement or contract? Consider for examples, the covenant between Abraham and Abimelech, made at Beersheba (Gen. 21:32); the covenant between Isaac and the later Abimelech (Gen. 26:

28); and the covenant between Jacob and Laban (Gen. 31:44). These are clearly bilateral agreements or contracts between two parties, stating the conditions, benefits, and penalties of each. Usually, these covenants required a pledge or sign and seal. In the covenant between Abraham and Abimelech, the pledge was “seven ewe lambs” (Gen. 21:30) whereas in the covenant between Jacob and Laban, it was a heap of stone (Gen. 31:48). The condition was really the promise of each party. If the participants kept their promise, they would reap the benefit of the covenant, or, at least not incur the penalty for failing to honour it. In the covenant between Jacob and Laban, Laban promised to let Jacob keep his wives, children, and livestock (31:43), and not to cross the boundary stone that Jacob set up. On the other hand, Jacob promised to treat his wives well (v. 50) and not to cross the boundary line (v. 52). Each party of this covenant called upon God to exact punishment if either of them broke his promise (v. 53).

The covenants in these cases appear to be no more than contracts or agreements. The parties have no real friendship with one another, but they enter into a contract to define how they should relate to one another rather than fight with one another. Such covenants may be termed ‘business covenants’ as depicted in Figure 1.



Figure 1: *A Business Covenant: Partnership or agreement sealed by a contract, in which the covenant is no more than a contract*

Some covenants, however, are more than a contract. Consider the *league* or *covenant* (same word, בְּרִית, *berith* in Hebrew) of peace made between Israel and the Gibeonites (Josh. 9:15); or the one between King Solomon and King Hiram of Tyre (1 Kings 5:12). Israel was tricked into a covenant with Gibeon, but once the agreement was made Israel was obligated to defend her covenant partner. That was why the Gibeonites appealed to Joshua to rescue them from the five kings led by Adonizedek (cf. Josh. 10:6), even though Israel’s only promise was to let the Gibeonites live and dwell in peace (Josh. 9:15). Conversely, the covenant between Solomon and Hiram was based on friendship between David, the father of Solomon, and Hiram (1 Kings 5:1). That existing relationship became covenantal when Solomon and Hiram entered into an agreement. This was more than a contract, for at the heart of it was friendship between the two nations. Such is generally the case in covenants of peace between nations. See Figure 2.



Figure 2: *A Covenant of Peace between Nations:* in which friendship is sealed by mutual agreement

But what about God’s covenant with man? It cannot be that God has made an agreement with man as if God and man were equal parties in the covenant; for God is sovereign and in control of all things whereas man is a finite creature. Indeed, the Scriptures affirm that God’s covenant with man is unilateral. Genesis 15 explains how God cut a covenant

with Abraham (v. 18). This was validated according to the ancient Near-Eastern customs of covenant-making, in which several animals were cut in half and laid out so both parties of the covenant could walk between the pieces while calling a curse upon themselves if they failed to keep their promise (cf. Jer. 34:18). Abraham did not pass through the pieces; he was fast asleep though he was made aware of what was going on (v. 12). What passed through the pieces was clearly a theophany (v. 17).

With this in mind, many theologians insist that we should not speak of divine covenants as contracts or agreements, and that we should not speak of God's covenant with man as having any conditions at all. They prefer to speak of such covenants as bonds of love or friendship. There is good biblical basis for saying that, for the covenant that God made with Abraham is clearly a demonstration of unconditional love.

The problem, though, is that in the Bible the same word is used to describe the covenant between man and man as well as a covenant between God and man. God wants us to understand that the concept of a divine covenant cannot be distinguished entirely from covenants between men. More specifically, it appears that the conditions and agreement cannot be eviscerated from biblical covenants. Indeed, even the covenant that God made with Abraham suggests conditions and agreement, at least on God's part.

This biblical data teaches that God's covenant with us is conditional from one perspective and unconditional from another. It also leads us to the idea that God's covenant relationship with His children is one of unconditional love, although the relationship is undergirded by a covenantal agreement. This concept is all very vague, but I believe it will become clearer as we look at the specifics of God's covenantal relationship with us. In the meantime, we may define God's covenant with us as a bond of friendship sealed by an oath. That should serve our purpose for now.

Bearing this in mind, it may help to think of covenants in terms of marriage (cf. Mal. 2:14) rather than a business contract. Marriage is a bond of love rather than a mere contract; yet it differs from courtship because it is sealed by mutual vows. In marriage, there are two parties.

There is a condition, namely the total giving of one to the other. There are blessings for fulfilling the condition, such as marital bliss and children. There are also curses or penalties associated with breaking the condition, such as the pain of separation and loss of privileges¹. See Figure 3.

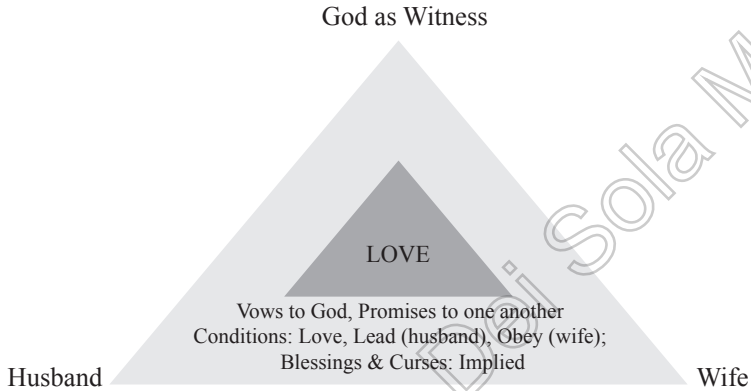


Figure 3: *A Marriage Covenant:*
In which love is sealed by solemn vows

¹ Take note that breaking of the condition or covenant-breaking is different from annulment of the covenant. When the condition is broken, the curses of the covenant fall upon the covenant (or promise) breakers. When the covenant is annulled, the parties cease to be obligated to each other. The curses or threats of the covenant, then, may be viewed as a privilege and provision of the covenant to provoke observance of the covenant-conditions to the end that the blessings of the covenant may be enjoyed.

God's covenant with man is like that: it is a bond of friendship or love sealed by promissory oaths. See Figure 4.

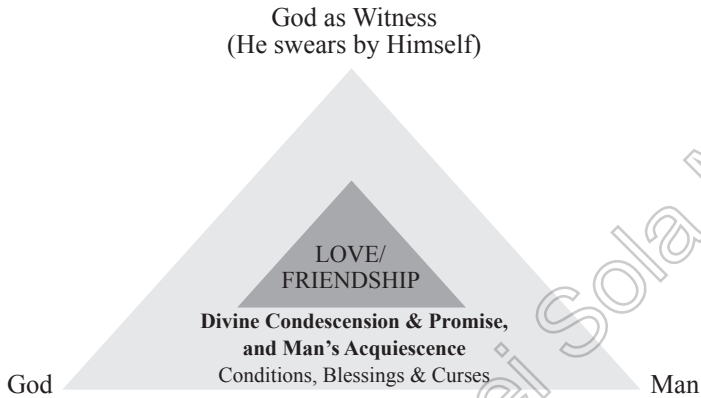


Figure 4: *Divine Covenant*:
A bond of love or friendship sealed by promissory oaths