

THE BIBLE'S STORYLINE

HOW IT AFFECTS THE DOCTRINE OF SALVATION



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Why is it so difficult for evangelical Christians to agree on the biblical storyline? Scripture is no different from other stories. It must have a beginning, middle, and end, determined by its author. Readers must not try to write God's story for him. As Baptists we should willingly accept the Bible's storyline. Consequently, why are there conflicting views among Baptists?

Evangelicals teach three different storylines: Covenant Theology, Dispensational Theology, and New Covenant Theology. Covenant theologians and Dispensationalists have argued with each other for years; neither considered whether both could be wrong. They believe New Covenant Theology to be a modern error.

For many years I thought underlying assumptions were the primary cause of theological disputes. But I now realize how much history has influenced the assumptions of modern day theologians. Those assumptions in turn affect the doctrine of salvation.

Therefore I shall compare the history, beliefs, and underlying assumptions of Covenant Theology and New Covenant Theology. I shall also discuss the implications of their assumptions on the doctrine of salvation. Specifically, how does their message of salvation affect the eternal destiny of non-believers? Afterward I shall conclude with the New Testament interpretation of God's covenants with Abraham, Moses and the New Covenant promised in Jeremiah 31.

Covenant Theology

The roots of Covenant Theology go back to the beginning of time. Since the formation of city-states, government and religion have joined together. Christian Roman emperors continued the practice. Having been raised a devout Catholic, Martin Luther firmly believed in the union of church and state. When he nailed his Ninety-five Theses to the Wittenberg Church door on October 31, 1517, he changed the world forever. It was the birth of Protestantism. Although Luther preached salvation by faith alone, he never changed his attitude toward the union of church and state. Other Reformers maintained the same position. Thus the coalition of government and religion continued in Protestant countries as well as in Catholic ones.

The Puritans were second generation Reformers in England. At first they attempted to reform the church from within, but eventually they separated from the state church. Yet they still believed in the union of church and state. As soon as possible, they united their churches to friendly secular governments. Hence in 1648 the English Parliament and Scottish General Assembly approved The Westminster Confession. Except for some minor changes this document is still the model for Covenant Theology in the English speaking world.

Like the Puritans modern covenant churches practice infant baptism and a church government where the local congregation is subordinate to the presbytery. Some of these churches wish civil authorities had the right to enforce church laws or discipline on the entire population. The recent Christian Reconstructionist movement in the United States demonstrates this.

Covenant theologians believe in the Doctrines of Grace, espoused by Calvin, and the unity of the biblical storyline. They teach that biblical history is the unfolding story of God's plan of salvation and they trace this story by means of three covenants. The covenant of redemption "stresses the total agreement between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the plan of salvation."¹ Before creation each person in the Trinity agreed what part each would have in the redemption story. The Father purposed salvation, the Son purchased salvation, and the Spirit applies salvation.

At creation God gave a covenant of works to Adam and Eve. They must obey God in order to live in sweet fellowship and innocence with their Creator forever. If they broke God's one and only rule, they would suffer the consequences of spiritual and physical death.

The covenant of grace is a covenant between God and sinners. These theologians divide history into two administrations or dispensations: the time of the Law and the Gospel age. Since this covenant embraces all of history, every biblical covenant is under its umbrella and is a covenant of grace. By considering the Mosaic covenant to be one of grace, covenant theologians flat line the biblical storyline, in effect making Moses equal to Christ. This means they feel at liberty to transfer certain principles from Moses to their churches. Since the Mosaic covenant united religion and politics under God's authority, they are justified in continuing the union of church and state. Infant baptism replaces circumcision. Moreover the state has the duty to punish anyone not conforming to the state religion because the Mosaic Law inflicted harsh punishments on lawbreakers.

Covenant theologians disagree on eschatology—the end of God's story. Some are postmillennial while others are amillennial. Concerning postmillennialism, Loraine Boettner explains:

Thus Postmillennialism holds that Christianity is to become the controlling and transforming influence not only in the moral and spiritual life of some individuals, but also in the entire social, economic and cultural life of the nations. There is no reason why this change should not take place

¹R. C. Sproul, *What is Reformed Theology?: Understanding the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 108.

over the entire earth, with pagan religions and false philosophies giving place to the true, and the earth being restored in considerable measure to that high purpose of righteousness and holiness for which it was created.²

Other postmillennialists of the modern Christian Reconstructionist movement believe in Christianizing the world by force. Dennis M. Swanson comments:

For the Theonomist the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18–20) is interpreted to mean not just the salvation of individuals, but also the salvation of the social structures of society. One Theonomist writes:

Personal redemption is not the do-all and end-all of the Great Commission. Thus, our evangelism must include sociology as well as salvation; it must include reform and redemption, culture and conversion, a new social order as well as new birth, a revolution as well as regeneration. Any other kind of evangelism is short-sighted and woefully impotent. Any other kind of evangelism fails to live up to the high call of the Great Commission.³

Thus Swanson concludes, “Theonomists clearly have an activist approach to the Great Commission bordering on militancy.”⁴

Unlike postmillennialism, amillennialism does not guarantee that the whole world will eventually be Christianized. During the gospel age God is continually enlarging his kingdom, but Satan is also building his kingdom. Some postmillennialists agree with amillennialists that there will be a time of worldwide apostasy and tribulation just before Jesus’ second coming. Others do not. Nevertheless all covenant theologians believe in the occurrence of the same events when Jesus returns: the general resurrection of the dead, the end of the world by fire, the general judgment, the consignment of the lost to hell, and the inauguration of the new heaven and new earth for the redeemed.

Covenant theologians assume the only way to correctly understand Scripture is through the concept of covenant, particularly the covenants initiated by God and confirmed by an oath. R. C. Sproul states, “Every written document has a structure or format by which it is organized. Paragraphs have subjects and chapters have focal points. Reformed theology sees the primary structure of biblical revelation that of covenant. This is the structure by which the entire history

²Lorraine Boettner, *The Millennium*, rev. ed. (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1984), 53.

³Dennis M. Swanson, “*Theonomic Postmillennialism*: A Continuation of the Princeton Tradition?”, a paper presented at the Far-West Region of the Evangelical Theological Society annual meeting, April 22, 1994, [Online], The Master’s College; available at <http://www.mastersem.edu/~swanson/Theopostmil.html>; accessed on 19 April 2000.

⁴Ibid.

of redemption is worked out.”⁵ He goes on to say, “Scripture takes the swearing of vows so seriously because it takes covenants so seriously. The very basis of our relationship with God is a covenant.”⁶

Agreeing with this common structure, Craig C. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen write, “The kingdom of God, as we explain below, is all about the reign of God over his people and eventually over all of creation. Covenant is particularly about the special relationship that God makes with his people as he works out his plans in history.” They elaborate, “After all our study, we find covenant and kingdom to be the double door of the same main entrance.”⁷

Because of their underlying assumption of covenant’s importance, covenant theologians equate the concepts of covenant and kingdom. The result of this teaching is that God’s kingdom in this world is political and consists of regenerate and unregenerate people. This is contrary to Scripture. Jesus teaches, “The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:20, 21, NIV). Since God’s kingdom is spiritual and not physical, no one will ever be able to look at a geographical area and say, “There it is!” Furthermore, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 7:21, NIV). This means that only regenerate people belong to God’s kingdom.

When churches apply the principle of equating covenant with kingdom, some members may be unsaved. How can believers allow unregenerate hearts to think they are right with God? I wondered about this one time when I was visiting a covenant church. The pastor announced an important business meeting in which he expected anyone twelve and over to attend. I thought, “Are they all saved?” Thus Covenant Theology fosters a false security of salvation for non-believers.

New Covenant Theology

Now let us consider New Covenant Theology. As mentioned previously, dispensationalists and covenant theologians consider New Covenant Theology to be a modern error. The name may be new, but it is distinctly Baptist with roots in the Reformation.

Since New Covenant Theology is Christ-centered, we must begin a discussion of its history with the Anabaptists. This movement began in Switzerland on January 21, 1525, when approximately

⁵Sproul, 99.

⁶Ibid., 105.

⁷Craig C. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 24.

twelve men rejected the Reformers' insistence on the union of church and state and belief in infant baptism. They proceeded to baptize each other.⁸

In 1528, Pilgram [sic] Marpeck of Austria joined the Anabaptists. In his writings we discover the first glimpse of a Christocentric storyline. William R. Estep explains:

Marpeck's most creative contribution to Anabaptist thought was his view of the Scriptures. While holding the Scriptures to be the Word of God, he made a distinction between the purpose of the Old Testament and that of the New. As the foundation must be distinguished from the house, the Old Testament must be distinguished from the New. The New Testament was centered in Jesus Christ and alone was authoritative for the Brethren. To hold that the Old Testament was equally authoritative for the Christian was to abolish the distinction between the two.⁹

Furthermore Estep continues:

He [Marpeck] drew some graphic contrasts which emphasize the transitory (*zeitlich*) nature of the Old Testament when compared to the eternal (*ewig*) nature of the New. In the Old Testament there is symbol (*Figur*); in the New the essence (*Wesen*) of that which is symbolized. The Old Testament speaks of Adam, sin, death, and the law; the New Testament centers in the message of redemption through the risen Christ. He alone brings us to the new birth through the power of the Holy Spirit.¹⁰

Over 100 years later some Particular Baptists in England embraced the same storyline. They seceded from a congregational church in England sometime between 1633 and 1638.¹¹ Believing in the Doctrines of Grace, these Baptists remained reformed but rejected the union of church and state. They separated over a belief in believer's baptism and formed churches consisting only of believers. By 1641 these Baptists practiced believer's baptism by immersion.¹²

Since England was embroiled in civil war (1642—1649), Particular Baptists had religious freedom to draft The London Baptist Confession of Faith in 1644. They entitled it, "The Confession of Faith of Those Churches which are commonly (though falsely) called Anabaptist." This document is Calvinistic and affirms believer's baptism by immersion. Estep comments,

⁸William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 10–11.

⁹Ibid., 86.

¹⁰Ibid., 142–143.

¹¹Erroll Hulse, *An Introduction to the Baptists*, 2d ed. (Sussex: Carey, 1976), 25.

¹²Estep, 229.

"For the first time Calvinism and Anabaptism merged to produce a new and different religious configuration in seventeenth-century England."¹³

In 1662, Charles II granted royal assent to an Act of Uniformity. Clergymen had to plead allegiance to the revised Prayer Book of the Church of England or face penalties. By 1664, dissenters suffered much persecution. As Calvinists, the Particular Baptists felt closer to the Presbyterians and Congregationalists than to the General Baptists who taught free will in salvation. In 1677, they drafted The Second London Confession, a revision of the Presbyterians' Westminster Confession, and signed it in 1689. The Baptists copied the language of the covenant theologians almost word for word, but corrected differences on believers' baptism, church government, the role of civil magistrates, and the biblical storyline.

The Baptists retained a belief in the three covenants: those of redemption, works, and grace. Yet there was one important distinction. They deleted two sections, which explained how God worked in two different administrations, effectively denying the storyline of covenant theologians. Instead they wrote, "This covenant is revealed through the Gospel; first of all to Adam in the promise of salvation by the seed of the woman, and afterwards by further steps until the full revelation of it became complete in the New Testament."¹⁴ Thus the words "Covenant Theology" and "covenant of grace" meant one thing to Reformed Baptists but something different to Presbyterians.

In modern times some covenant theologians began to question the accuracy of the covenant of grace. Jon Zens was one such person. He wrote an article, "Is There a 'Covenant of Grace'?" in the Autumn, 1977, Baptist Reformation Review. In the spring of 1978, the same magazine published another article by Zens entitled, "Crucial Thoughts Concerning 'Law' in the New Covenant." Those two articles caused quite a stir. Since he was the first to question the covenant of grace by means of a published article, Zens is called the father of New Covenant Theology.

At first the movement attracted those Presbyterians and Reformed Baptists who questioned the covenant of grace. With the advent of progressive dispensationalism in the 1990s, many dispensational Calvinists also joined this movement. In addition, some historic premillennialists flocked to New Covenant Theology.

New Covenant theologians believe in a Christ-centered storyline and in the unity of the Scriptures. Like covenant theologians, they believe in the doctrines of grace and view biblical history as God's unfolding story of salvation. Unlike covenant theologians, they believe the Bible to be one long upward progressive storyline from the fall of man to the consummation in the

¹³Ibid., 229.

¹⁴Phillip R. Johnson, "God's Covenant," in *The Baptist Confession of Faith (1689)*, [Online]; available at <http://www.spurgeon.org/~phil/creeds/bcof.htm>; accessed on 23 February 2008.

new heaven and new earth. Since the Bible is divided into the Old Testament and the New Testament, they believe this provides a clue of what a Christ-centered storyline means. The Old Testament relates how God prepared for the coming of his Son while the New Testament tells his story from the birth of Christ to the end of time. Thus Jesus is the central character in God's story.

Before time began, God planned to form a community of redeemed people who would worship and praise him forever. As soon as Adam and Eve rebelled against God and sinned, God promised to send the Savior, the promised Seed. The Old Testament gradually reveals more of Jesus, who is this promised Seed. Since Israel was an important building block in God's plan, he set the Israelites apart to be his special people. Therefore the Mosaic covenant is like the foundation of a house. God gradually revealed more of his plan of salvation to Israel and prepared a family for Jesus to be born into.

The New Testament represents the house built upon the foundation of the Old Testament. It tells God's story during the New Covenant era, this present age in which God is building his eternal kingdom, the church, consisting of Jew and Gentile. The climax of the biblical story occurs at Jesus' death, resurrection and exaltation as king. At Jesus' return, the following events will occur: the general resurrection of the dead, the destruction of this present earth by fire, and the general judgment. God will consign non-believers to hell and gather the redeemed to live forever with him in the new heaven and the new earth. However Progressive Dispensationalists and Historic Premillennialists insert an earthly reign of Christ into history before eternity.

Since the New Testament often fulfills or explains the Old, God refers to the Old Testament in the New. That is why New Covenant theologians allow the New to interpret the Old. After his resurrection, Jesus told two believers on the road to Emmaus, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" (Luke 24:25, 26, NIV). Jesus immediately proceeded to trace his story through Moses and the Prophets. Therefore the underlying assumption of interpreting the Old in light of the New is scriptural since Jesus did it. Moreover in the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit often explained the Old Testament in an unexpected way. Doing this does not in any way diminish how the Israelites first understood God's Word in their own day. The Holy Spirit's interpretation in the New Testament is often a secondary but more important fulfillment.

New Covenant theologians also believe in allowing clear texts to overrule difficult or ambiguous ones. For example, the writer to the Hebrews exhorts the brethren to fix their thoughts on Jesus. He writes, "Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses...Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house, testifying to what would be said in the future. But Christ is faithful as a son over God's house" (Hebrews 3:3, 5, NIV). Since Jesus is God the Son, he is superior to the servant Moses. Therefore we ought to give priority to Jesus' words over Moses'. That is why on the Mount of Transfiguration, God the Father tells Peter, "This is my Son, whom I love; with

him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” (Matt. 17:5, NIV).

Finally, New Covenant theologians employ the “now-not yet” principle in order to distinguish the spiritual nature of Jesus’ kingdom now from the eternal reality of his kingdom in the new heaven and new earth. By the time Peter wrote his second epistle in A.D. 67,¹⁵ he looked forward to a new heaven and new earth, the home of righteousness (2 Pet. 3:13, NIV). Only there will the redeemed live in a world free of sin forever. Then Hab. 2:14 will truly be fulfilled.

The division among New Covenant theologians over whether or not there is a future millennial kingdom affects the doctrine of salvation. Those who are Amillennial believe that now is the day of salvation. There is no other. Paul writes, “I tell you, now is the time of God’s favor, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2, NIV). The writer to the Hebrews confirms this idea: “But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (Heb. 3:13, NIV). This present age is the only time when people may be saved by the preaching of the Gospel. This opportunity will be gone when our bridegroom comes for us. Like the parable in Matthew 25 of the ten virgins, Jesus will tell unrepentant sinners, “I tell you the truth, I don’t know you” (Matt. 25:12, NIV).

Those theologians, who believe in a future millennial kingdom at Christ’s return, teach that people will be born in sin and die during this time. God will save some. Although Carl Hoch, Jr. believes this teaching, he obviously struggles with it:

Just exactly how “all Israel” will be saved is not spelled out by Paul or any other New Testament writer. It has been the contention throughout this discussion that salvation is only in Christ. So this eschatological group must believe the gospel of Jesus Christ. They will also enjoy all the blessings that Christ has secured through his death, burial, and resurrection. And they will receive those promises God made to Israel in the Old Testament that they have not yet enjoyed, such as possession of the land of Palestine. Their position in terms of Jews and Gentiles within the church at present is not clear. . . . What label can a premillennialist give to this group of redeemed? This writer does not believe that biblical revelation to this point offers enough clear information to come to a conclusive decision on the problem.¹⁶

Once I overheard a lady telling a new Christian that people would be saved after Jesus returns. This new believer’s husband was not saved. I speculated, “Is this going to give that woman a false hope that her husband may get saved after Jesus returns? Is she breathing easier, thinking he has a second chance?”

New Covenant Theology and the New Testament

I have considered the history, beliefs and assumptions of Covenant Theology and New

¹⁵David Maas, “A Chronology of Bible Events and World Events,” *Life Application Study Bible* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1991) 2266.

¹⁶Carl B. Hoch Jr., *All Things New: The Significance of Newness for Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 317–318.

Covenant Theology. I have also examined how each storyline affects our attitude toward non-believers—if they are saved and when God will save them. Now I shall finish by discussing how the New Testament interprets God’s covenants with Abraham, Moses, and the new covenant prophesied in Jeremiah 31.

First of all, how does the New Testament explain the relationship between God’s covenant with Abraham and the new covenant promised in Jeremiah 31? “The promises were spoken to Abraham and his seed. The Scripture does not say, ‘and to seeds,’ meaning many people, but ‘and to your seed,’ meaning one person, who is Christ” (Gal. 3:16, NIV). Thus only the spiritual blessing of salvation through Jesus alone will last forever. At the last supper Jesus declared, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you” (Luke 22:20, NIV). God fulfilled the eternal blessings promised to Abraham through the new covenant based on Jesus’ blood. Jesus is the sacrifice, ratifying the eternal aspect of the Abrahamic covenant. That is why the Holy Spirit looks forward to the new covenant era in Jeremiah 31:31–34. Then in Hebrews 8:8–12, he declares this present age to be that era.

What does the New Testament teach about the Mosaic covenant? We must not allegorize Scripture, but we must pay attention when God does. In Galatians, God uses Hagar and Sarah as an illustration of the old and New Covenants. “These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants... But what does the Scripture say? ‘Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman’s son’” (Gal. 4:24, 30, NIV). Also in Hebrews 8, God teaches the superiority of Jesus as high priest over the high priest of the Mosaic covenant. “By calling this covenant ‘new’, he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear” (Heb. 8:13, NIV).

God will always have a special place in his heart for individual Jewish believers before and after the cross. However, during the Gospel age the nation of Israel is no longer set apart by God. Therefore the laws and promises given to them are no longer in force. They forfeited those promises of political superiority because of their disobedience. God has chosen the church, consisting of believing Jews and Gentiles, to be his holy nation (1 Pet. 2:9). As such, we are the recipients of eternal promises and must submit to the law of Christ (Matt. 28:18; Gal. 6:2). Since these promises are based on Jesus’ death and resurrection, believers will never lose them.

Covenant theologians understand the Mosaic covenant to be one of grace. It is true that the saints in the Old Testament waited for the Savior’s coming. The blood of the animal sacrifices was God’s promissory note that he would fulfill his promise to accomplish their salvation. In this sense it was quite gracious. Yet the old covenant was only a stepping-stone in God’s plan. The capstone was the blood sacrifice of Jesus, the precious Lamb of the new covenant.

What is the Bible’s storyline? The answer lies in tracing the coming of the promised Seed throughout Scripture. When Jesus died and rose again, he accomplished the salvation of saints past, present, and future. At Jesus’ return, it will be forever too late. The old covenant given to

Moses is not a model for the church; nor is it a hope for a future Jewish political utopia. The old covenant is only a stepping-stone for God to accomplish his marvelous salvation through Jesus.

I know many followers of Covenant Theology are saved. But some children in covenant theology churches think they are saved when they are not. They trust in their heritage and their infant baptism. This is a false security of salvation. Although fervent in preaching the Gospel to the lost, some New Covenant theologians believe God will save non-believers after Jesus' second coming. This is a false hope which encourages a second chance for salvation after Jesus returns.

God warned Ezekiel, “When I say to a wicked man, ‘You will surely die,’ and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood” (Ezek. 3:18, NIV). On judgment day God will hold us accountable for encouraging a false hope or a false security of salvation. That is why teaching the correct biblical storyline is so important. I believe we should reject any storyline which endangers the eternal destination of its listeners.