

**REFORMED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY (Atlanta)**

**4ST601 Covenant Theology**

Fall Semester, 2011

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**Course Description**

This course is a study of Covenant Theology from exegetical, theological and historical perspectives. Covenant theology is the Bible's way of explaining and deepening our understanding of (1) the atonement; (2) our assurance; (3) the sacraments; and (4) the continuity of redemptive history. The doctrine of the covenants is thus important for both Reformed systematic and biblical theology (the study of special revelation from the standpoint of redemptive history).

The course will survey the successive biblical covenants from a redemptive historical perspective as well as examine the bi-covenantal structure of creation and redemption. Consideration will be given to issues such as the relation of the Old and New Testaments, the significance of the covenants for the doctrine of the atonement, for understanding sacramental theology, the implications of Covenant Theology for Reformed hermeneutics and more. Emphasis will be placed on the role of the Biblical doctrine of the covenants for preaching and pastoral ministry.

**Course Objectives**

To assist the student in mastering an outline of the covenantal structure of redemptive history and to help him/her begin to grasp the manifold implications of the Biblical doctrine of the covenants (for soteriology and especially the atonement, sacraments, evangelism, family life, ecclesiology, and more). The course will also aim to equip the student with a working knowledge of the history of Covenant Theology and some of the more important objections to Covenant Theology from its theological critics.

**Course Requirements**

Required Texts:

Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* [211-218; 262-301]; 978-0802838209

Vern Poythress, *Understanding Dispensionalists*; 978-0875523743

O. Palmer Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*; 978-0875524184

Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* [3-182, 185-342] 978-0851514581

Rowland Ward, *God and Adam: Reformed Theology and the Creation Covenant* 978-0958624169

Syllabus Articles (*these will be made available on the Self-service Course Homepage for this section of Covenant Theology*):

Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 281-319, 371-409

Donald Macleod, *Covenant Theology* in *DSCH&T*, 214-218

Donald Macleod, *Covenant: 2* in *Banner of Truth [BoT]* 141:22-28

Donald Macleod, *Federal Theology -- An Oppressive Legalism?* in *BoT* 125:21-28

Donald Macleod, *The Lord's Supper as a Means of Grace* in *BoT* 64:16-22

Donald Macleod, *Qualifications for Communion* in *BoT* 65:14-20

Donald Macleod, *The Real Presence* in *BoT* 66:13-16

*Westminster Confession of Faith* 7: Of God's Covenant with Man

*Larger Catechism* Questions 20-22, and 30-36

*Shorter Catechism* Questions 12,16, and 20

## Course Evaluation

**1. Reading and Course Notebook (30%)** There will be weekly assignments and/or quizzes to test reading comprehension, and to encourage and reward steady reading and digestion of the material across the term. Each student will also keep a course notebook. Approximately 1137 pages of reading are required for this course. The breakdown is as follows: Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* [46]; Vern Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* [137]; O.Palmer Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants* [300]; Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* [336]; Rowland Ward, *God and Adam: Reformed Theology and The Creation Covenant* [202]; Syllabus Articles: Heinrich Heppel, *Reformed Dogmatics* [76]; Donald Macleod, *Covenant Theology* [4]; Donald Macleod, *Covenant: 2* [7]; Donald Macleod, *Federal Theology -- An Oppressive Legalism?* [8]; Donald Macleod, *The Lord's Supper as a Means of Grace* [7]; Donald Macleod, *Qualifications for Communion* [7]; Donald Macleod, *The Real Presence* [4]; *Westminster Confession of Faith* 7: Of God's Covenant with Man [1]; *Larger Catechism* Questions 20-22,30-36 [1]; *Shorter Catechism* Questions 12,16, & 20 [1].

The instructions for the contents for the Course Notebook are as follows. The notebook will be submitted in some form of binder (3-ring, etc), neatly organized and clearly labeled. In it, the student will include: (1) classnotes (*neatly scripted and/or typed*); (2) answers (*typed*) to study guide questions for Robertson; (3) notes taken (*typed or neatly scripted*) on his reading of Berkhof, Poythress, Macleod and Heppel; (4) an Outline (*typed*) of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 7; and (5) a one page synopsis of Ward, *God and Adam* (on disk, in MS Word or WordPerfect). Additionally, there may be occasional quizzes on the various assigned readings.

**2. Final Examination (70%)** The Exam will cover reading and lecture material from the whole of the course. Further details will be given.

Classnotes Assignment: Inclusion of the student's classnotes in the course notebook will enable the instructor to gauge the quality of classroom listening and comprehension, and notetaking (and make adjustments in delivery or content beneficial for students).  
Robertson Study Guide Question Assignment: Study questions for Robertson's *Christ of the Covenants* are included in this syllabus. Students will answer all questions, accurately and succinctly. Questions and answers must be typed. Include Scripture references in your answers, where applicable. Include references to the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, where applicable. Include the page number(s) on which you find the answers to the questions. References to other sources (e.g., other Reformed Systematic Theologies and Confessions, recommended books, etc.) will get you extra credit. Complete your

answers according to the schedule of weekly reading found in the syllabus.

Reading Notes Assignment: Each student will take notes on Berkhof, Poythress, Macleod and Heppe. Take your notes in whatever manner is most helpful to you. I will be looking for: (1) indication of points in the reading which you deem particularly important; (2) your reflection on the reading (what did you learn or re-learn, ways that it impacts your life and ministry, etc.); (3) quotations that you found particularly helpful; (4) if you do an outline of the material [note: this is *optional*] you will receive extra credit.

Westminster Confession of Faith (*WCF*) Outline Assignment: This project calls for the student to develop a concise, typed, outline of the assigned chapter of the *WCF*.

Ward Synopsis The student will produce a one page synopsis of Rowland Ward's *God and Adam*. The synopsis should be in outline form or in abbreviated narrative, should aim to enumerate the key points in each section, and should be as compact and lucid as possible. The goal of the synopsis is for the student to accurately reproduce the flow of the book's argument and its main thrust and points. The synopsis should begin with a paragraph-length statement of the book's thesis and conclusion. Then, an outline of the assigned contents should follow. The student may also want to create a list of the best quotes, and points of weakness or disagreement.

### **Note on Timeliness**

All due dates and times will be strictly observed. This is not only necessary for your professor's administrative survival, but also the only way to reward appropriately those who complete their work in a timely fashion. Late work will be accepted, but will also be penalized in accordance with its degree of tardiness. Students are thus encouraged to work ahead on assignments in order that they might not find themselves in an academic bind in the event of unforeseen providences.

### **Extension Policy**

All assignments and exams are to be completed by the deadlines announced in this syllabus or in class.

Extensions for assignments and exams due within the normal duration of the course must be approved beforehand by the Professor. Extensions of two weeks or less beyond the date of the last deadline for the course must be approved beforehand by the Professor. A grade penalty may be assessed.

Extensions of greater than two weeks but not more than six weeks beyond the last deadline for the course may be granted in extenuating circumstances (i.e. illness, family emergency). For an extension of more than two weeks the student must request an Extension Request Form from the Student Services Office. The request must be approved by the Professor and the Academic Dean. A grade penalty may be assessed. (RTS Catalog p. 42 and RTS Atlanta Student Handbook p. 14)

Any incompletes not cleared six weeks after the last published due date for course work will be converted to a failing grade. Professors may have the failing grade changed to a passing grade by request. (RTS Catalog p. 42)

## **Course Outline and Assignment Schedule**

**Aug 29**

**Sept 12**

### **Introduction to Covenant Theology**

Covenant Theology (History and Objections); Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 211-218; Donald Macleod, *Covenant Theology*; O.Palmer Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*, 3-63. *WCF* 7; *LC* Questions 20-22, 30-36; and *SC* Questions 12,16,& 20.

**Sept 26**

### **Covenant of Works (or Creation)**

O.Palmer Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*, 67-87; Donald Macleod, *Covenant: 2 & Federal Theology-An Oppressive Legalism?* Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 281-319. Ward, *God and Adam*, 1-27.

**Oct 3**

### **Covenant of Grace (Adam)**

O.Palmer Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*, 91-107. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* [262-301]. Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics* [371-409] Ward, *God and Adam*, 28-76.

### **Covenant of Grace (Noah)**

O.Palmer Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*, 109-125. Ward, *God and Adam*, 77-125.

**Oct 10**

### **Covenant of Grace (Abraham)**

O.Palmer Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*, 127-166; Ward, *God and Adam*, 126-197. Donald Macleod, *The Lord's Supper as a Means of Grace* (all), *Qualifications for Communion* (all), and *The Real Presence* (all).

**Oct 24**

### **Covenant of Grace (Moses)**

O.Palmer Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*, 167-199.

**Nov 7**

### **Dispensationalism**

Vern Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (all). O.Palmer Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*, 201-227.

**Nov 14**

**Covenant of Grace (David)**

O. Palmer Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*, 229-269.

**Covenant of Grace (Jeremiah-New)**

O. Palmer Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*, 271-300.

**Nov 28**

**Covenant of Grace (New)**

Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 3-182.

**Dec 5**

**Covenant of Grace (New) [Last Day of Class]**

Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 185-342.

**Recommended Audio**

Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Marrow Controversy* Three lectures, originally given in 1980, that cover the famous “Marrow Controversy” in Scotland in the early eighteenth century. Ferguson’s treatment addresses matters pertaining to covenant theology, the covenant of works, legalism and antinomianism.

John L. Mackay, *Covenant Theology* An introductory lecture given in the early 1980's by the Professor of OT at the Free Church of Scotland College in Edinburgh. Mackay’s lecture at the Banner of Truth Conference on Covenant Theology is probably the best brief introduction, overview and analysis of covenant theology available on tape.

Donald Macleod and Thomas F. Torrance, *Debate and Exchange* These lectures and the Q&A afterwards, held at Rutherford House in Edinburgh, Scotland just a few years ago, were stellar. Macleod shows the vulnerability of the Scoto-Barthian approach to covenant theology, exegetically, historically, theologically, and pastorally.

**Recommended Books**

Every Reformed minister should be a master of the federal theology, historically and theologically. The following books are suggestions for reading to that end.

**Popular Introductions**

If you have never read anything before about Covenant Theology, where should you begin? Here are a few suggestions.

O. Palmer Robertson, *Covenants: God's way with his people* (Great Commission Publications) This is the “Sunday School version” of *Christ of the Covenants*. It has some material not found in *Christ of the Covenants* and is easily understandable.

J.I. Packer’s introduction to Herman Witsius’ *Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man* (P&R) Quintessential Packer. Best brief introduction to full-orbed Covenant Theology available in English. Pure Gold.

David McKay, *The Bond of Love: God’s Covenantal Relationship with His Church*

(Mentor) A popular presentation of covenant theology by an able Reformed Presbyterian theologian and pastor.

Peter Golding, *Covenant Theology: The Key of Theology in Reformed Thought and Tradition* (Mentor) Another recent exposition of classical Covenant Theology that advances it ably and clears it of charges.

D. Patrick Ramsey and Joel R. Beeke, *An Analysis of Herman Witsius's the Economy of the Covenants* (Mentor). These are the "Cliff Notes" to Witsius' large work (which we will recommend later). Good introduction. Well worth reading and pondering.

### **Historical Classics**

The following works are by older divines, and are hence written in a less accessible style, but they are a veritable gold mine for the pastor and Bible student alike. Each will provide interesting historical and theological discussions of covenant theology, and will prove to be rich resources for preaching the covenants.

1. Anonymous (E.F.), **The Marrow of Modern Divinity** [with Thomas Boston's notes] The **Marrow** is a thorough-going expression of federal theology, not only valuable for its historical significance but for its insights for preaching and applying the covenants. Boston's notes make it even more worthwhile.
2. Thomas Boston, **A View of the Covenant of Grace**, Collected Writings, Vol. 8 A representative treatment of the subject by the famous "Marrow Man".
3. Thomas Boston, **A View of the Covenant of Works**, Collected Writings, Vol. 11 Boston's exposition of the pre-fall relations between God and Adam place him squarely in the tradition of Reformed federal theology. His understanding of the theological implications of the covenant of works is evident throughout, and his searching (and moving) pastoral applications are those of both a seasoned shepherd and an astute theologian.
4. James Buchanan, **The Doctrine of Justification** Buchanan's established study of justification reveals the necessity of the covenantal framework for a proper understanding of this cardinal doctrine of the Reformation.
5. Hugh Martin, **The Atonement** Another theological treasure from a Free Church of Scotland minister, this work relates the covenant theology to the Biblical doctrine of the atonement, and (implicitly) responds to various contemporary (nineteenth-century) errors on the subject.
6. Herman Witsius, **An Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man** Recently republished with a lengthy commendation by J.I. Packer mentioned above, this is a exemplary presentation of continental covenant theology.

The following works are by twentieth-century scholars (save for Fairbairn, who is included on merit) who have ably carried the Reformed tradition of covenant theology

into a new era. Some of the volumes and articles are historical in nature. Others are exegetical or theological. They represent a quality sampling of the best Reformed, conservative scholarship on the covenants available today. The pastor and diligent layman will find here treasures both old and new.

1. O. Palmer Robertson, **Christ of the Covenants** The best book-length, conservative, scholarly, exegetical treatment of covenant theology to appear in the past hundred years. Robertson utilizes the insights of G.E. Mendenhall and Meredith Kline, and steers a middle course between John Murray's and Meredith Kline's divergent views on the unilateral/bilateral nature of the divine covenants.

2. Geerhardus Vos, **Biblical Theology** The standard conservative treatment of biblical theology ("the study of special revelation from the standpoint of the history of redemption"). Not easy reading, but rewarding nevertheless.

3. Geerhardus Vos, "The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology" in **Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation** A good historical overview of the history of the doctrine of the covenants in the Reformed tradition (it is nicely complemented by Louis Berkhof's helpful sketch in his *Systematic Theology* 211-213, 265). This article is not the last word on the subject but a good start.

4. Patrick Fairbairn, **Typology of Scripture** (19th century) Classical covenantal exposition of the subject of biblical typology by a great nineteenth-century Scottish Presbyterian Old Testament scholar.

5. Patrick Fairbairn, **The Interpretation of Prophecy** (19th century) Fairbairn again brings his formidable powers to bear on the subject of the proper method of interpretation of prophecy. This book (along with his other great works **Typology**, **Hermeneutics Manual**, and **The Revelation of Law in Scripture**) are sturdy treatments of themes which have been neglected or mishandled in our own time.

6. Meredith Kline, **By Oath Consigned** In this book, as in his **Treaty of the Great King**, Kline draws on the twentieth-century discoveries regarding Near-Eastern treaty forms to elucidate the biblical doctrine of the sacraments. Kline is helpful and innovative, but sometimes eccentric.

7. John Murray, **The Covenant of Grace** This seminal pamphlet by John Murray provides a good introduction to covenantal thought for the beginner. The more advanced student will pick up quickly on Murray's stress on the unilateral nature of the divine covenants (he is following Vos).

8. John Murray, "Covenant Theology" in **Collected Writings**, vol. 4 Another useful historical introduction to Covenant Theology, though Murray's own reticence about the covenant of works does show through at points.

9. Donald Macleod, "Covenant: 1" in **Banner of Truth** [hereafter **BT**] 139:19-22;

"Covenant: 2" in **BT** 141:22-28; "Federal Theology -- An Oppressive Legalism?" in **BT** 125:21-28; and "Covenant Theology," in **Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology** (Downers Grove:IVP, 1993), 214-218. In these articles, Macleod shows himself to be an able twentieth-century expositor and defender of the traditional federal theology of the Westminster standards. In the later two articles, he specifically responds to the standard "new" (neo-orthodox) criticisms of covenant theology.

10. John von Rohr, **The Covenant of Grace in Puritan Thought** The best available historical-theological survey of the federal theology of the Puritans. It successfully avoids the "Calvin versus the Puritans" mythology and provides a helpful review of current (and errant) theories on the development of covenant theology.

11. Geerhardus Vos, **Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation** A collection of the writings (not all related to the covenant idea) by one of the most distinguished recent proponents of covenant theology. Vos' evident exegetical powers combined with his historical-theological competence (traits not often seen in tandem in Biblical studies specialists today) make his works quite valuable and formidable enough to still demand a reckoning with. He was a major influence on John Murray.

In addition to the above-recommended texts, the following books provide interesting historical and theological discussions of the covenants and covenant theology:

O.T. Allis, ***Prophecy and the Church*** A study of the biblical doctrine of the church in the OT and NT from a covenantal perspective, designed to respond to old-style dispensational errors (especially the "church as the 'great parenthesis'" doctrine).

C. Bass, ***Backgrounds to Dispensationalism*** An informative historical account of the origins of old-style dispensationalism, as well as a critique (especially with regard to John Nelson Darby).

C.A. Blaising & D.L. Bock, ***Progressive Dispensationalism*** [wr. from a Dispensationalist perspective.] A presentation of a new form of dispensationalism, and a comparison of it with what it calls 'classical' and 'revised' forms of dispensationalism. Blaising and Bock define these three forms of dispensationalism with reference to the "two purposes of God/two peoples of God theory." Classical dispensationalism, then, holds to this theory, revised dispensationalism significantly modifies this theory, and progressive dispensationalism jettisons this distinction altogether. An important book for any evangelical who wants to intelligently dialogue with modern day dispensationalists of whatever ilk.

John Gerstner, ***Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth*** A controversial polemical work critiquing dispensationalism. It is a scaled-down version of a massive treatment that Gerstner had been working on for years. It could still use some editing, evidences some theological quirks, and was poorly received in the dispensational community (surprise, surprise!) but nevertheless contains a number of insightful points of critique.

C.C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* [written from a Dispensationalist perspective.] Ryrie's attempt to respond to the criticisms of dispensationalism which have been leveled by evangelical covenant theologians.

Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* Turretin is a fountainhead for 19<sup>th</sup> century Reformed Theology (mediated through Hodge, Dabney and others), and thus all modern, conservative Reformed theology. His treatment of covenant theology should not be overlooked. Among other things, he tells us that Calvin believed in federal immediate imputation and a pre-fall covenant (not insignificant, especially since he elsewhere shows a willingness to criticize Calvin and these are points of dispute in modern Calvinian studies).

David Weir, *The Origins of Federal Theology* A former-ThM thesis (St Andrews) and one of the better historical treatments of the origins of covenant theology. Nevertheless, there are gaps in this treatment and Weir himself is sometimes too reliant on the revisionist Torrance historiography of covenant theology.