

McGraw, Ryan M. *What Is Covenant Theology? Tracing God's Promises Through the Son, the Seed, and the Sacraments*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2024. 129pp. + 14pp. (back matter).

McGraw's volume on Covenant Theology (CT) is an "accessible guide" presenting the basics of CT and seeking to demonstrate the blessings that flow from it. In the introduction McGraw summarizes his personal journey toward CT out of his upbringing in a dispensational church, and he describes the blessings of CT in his life. He asserts that CT emphasizes the unity of Scripture and the glory of the triune God; that CT is "the vehicle through which God reveals himself and his saving message" (5); and that CT "helps us learn to live the Christian life" (7). Rather than answering every question about CT, McGraw's goal is "to show you why this teaching is a God-given blessing to believers" (8). This book devotes three chapters to the unity of Scripture, one to the Trinity, and one to the Christian life, and it concludes with a chapter of questions and answers about CT.

Chapter 1 shows how CT "helps us see the breathtaking unity of Scripture, making all the parts begin to fall into place over time" (11). McGraw defines covenants as "agreements or contracts that bind two or more parties together by promises, conditions, or sanctions" (12). He opts for this more general definition because it encompasses all the uses of "covenant" in the Bible. The covenant of redemption was made within the Trinity in eternity, and the covenant of works was made between God and Adam in Eden. McGraw acknowledges that "God did not use the word *covenant* in Genesis 2 or 3," but he points out specific *covenant* terminology in the chapters and asks, "What more details could we need to find a covenant here?" (18–19). McGraw believes that "without the covenant of works, we cannot adequately understand the covenant of grace in Christ, which we need so desperately" (21). McGraw looks to Luke 22:20 and Romans 5:12–21 to connect the covenant of works and covenant of grace. When discussing the covenant of grace, McGraw cites Genesis 3:15 as "the most basic and most blessed verse on covenant theology in the Bible" (23). McGraw argues that Christ crushed the serpent on the cross, and the serpent's ongoing activity is limited because he is bound "that he might not deceive the nations any longer" (Rev 20:3) (25–26).

In chapter 2, McGraw shows how "the son, the seed, and the sacraments" serve as "guideposts" pointing out the stages of the covenant of grace in the Bible. The unity of the covenant of grace is developed through six stages: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Christ. To show this continuity, McGraw refers to OT believers as the *church*: "The godly line of the church continued with Shem" (33). McGraw grounds the baptism of households (including infants) in the Abrahamic Covenant's use of circumcision. While it may seem difficult to understand how the Mosaic Covenant fits as a stage in the covenant of grace, McGraw insists that the central promises of this covenant "greatly expanded the blessings of the covenant of grace" (37). McGraw asserts that "the law refers to the Mosaic covenant as the legal administration of the covenant of grace," citing 2 Corinthians 3:7–18 (48). It is difficult, though, to see how "the ministry of death" (3:7) that placed a veil over hearts (3:14–15) is referring to "the covenant of grace." For Paul, the Mosaic Covenant is one of punishment, bondage, and death (2 Cor 3:7; Gal 4:1–31). McGraw points out, though, that the Mosaic Covenant explicitly teaches about circumcised hearts, but the Abrahamic Covenant does not. Also, the Mosaic Covenant demonstrates the penalty of sin, and the threats of the law "bless us by driving us to Christ"

(40). The chapter concludes with an overview of the Davidic Covenant and the introduction of the New Covenant in Christ.

Chapter 3 describes how CT highlights the storyline of the Bible. In contrast to those who see an absolute distinction between Old and New Covenants, McGraw argues that the contrast between these covenants “is relative in some respects, and absolute in others” (54). God’s people in the Old Covenant could experience forgiveness of sins and the impact of God’s word on their hearts (Ps 119:10–11). The New Covenant, therefore, “is not substantially different from the old.” Rather, there is “a stark contrast between the efficacy and power of the new covenant and the old” (54). Therefore, the division in our Bibles between the OT and NT primarily demonstrates a division “between the covenant of grace in its old and new covenant administrations” (56). Finally, CT’s emphasis on the unity of God’s plan in the Bible “helps us grasp the Bible’s central message” and “produces spiritual joy by helping us understand the parts of Scripture” (58–59).

In chapter 4, McGraw argues that God is the subject of the gospel (not we), and the gospel is focused on our relationship with the persons of the Trinity. This chapter provides McGraw’s lengthiest discussion of baptism. Baptism is the sign of the New Covenant in Christ, and “baptized people belong to the triune God” (66). The remainder of chapter 4 does well in emphasizing the role of the Trinity in the covenants and the stages through which the covenants are developed. Our prayers, the church, and the sacraments are all rooted in the Trinity.

Chapter 5 seeks to demonstrate how CT affects the Christian life. McGraw argues that “keeping covenant theology in view all the time serves to reset our lives by keeping God in his place and us in ours” (81). The first point here is that in CT “the church has priority over the individual” (82). Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are more about the work of Christ in the church rather than the individual profession of faith and commitment to God. Furthermore, through the covenant of grace, God “promises to bring his influences into the hearts of family members in a way that no parent or spouse can do or try to do” (86). A husband’s love for his wife should reflect the covenant faithfulness that Christ shows to his church. God’s covenant should also motivate Christians to raise godly children. For McGraw, baptism of children is critical for this: “God puts children in the church through baptism because they are in the covenant of grace through promises” (88). These children still need to be born again and exercise faith in Christ “to take ownership of the covenant with God as their Father” (88). Through baptism, “the covenant of grace brings promises that God will ordinarily circumcise their hearts, putting his word and Spirit in them” (88). In addition to baptism, parents should obey God’s instructions on raising children to be faithful Christians, disciplining them according to biblical principles, and leading them in family worship. Finally, CT influences the way the individual Christian lives.

The final chapter provides questions and answers about CT, such as the distinction between the covenant of redemption and the covenant of grace, the work of the Holy Spirit in the OT, the relationship of covenant and testament, the reality of grace in the covenant of works, the relationship of the covenant of works to the Mosaic Covenant, and the role of baptism and the Lord’s Supper as covenant signs.

McGraw's book is well written and makes several positive contributions. First, McGraw emphasizes the storyline of Scripture, showing how the biblical covenants (Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Christ) serve as the framework for the stages of the development of God's redemptive plan. Second, McGraw correctly understands the foundational nature of Genesis 3:15 as a fountain from which the redemptive story of Scripture flows. Third, McGraw's focus on the role of the Trinity in the development of the redemptive plan and the redemptive covenants is welcome and admirable. Finally, McGraw's emphasis on how theology affects one's life in church, marriage, and family is a helpful and critical reminder for Christians today.

Three key elements of McGraw's book are problematic and present obstacles to accepting his argument. First, the primary problem with this book is that McGraw overstates the exclusivity of CT in providing certain spiritual blessings. The book is structured around the idea that CT (1) demonstrates the unity of Scripture, (2) highlights the glory of the Triune God, and (3) teaches us to live the Christian life. Implicitly, a rejection of CT prevents a person from receiving these blessings to the same extent. One noteworthy question McGraw addresses in chapter 6 is whether a person can still hold to the gospel without CT. McGraw says, "yes, though not as clearly as they could with covenant theology" (97). He explains that without CT, one cannot explain the reasons for the parallels Paul makes between Adam and Christ in Romans 5. His explanation is unconvincing to me. Many who do not adhere to CT would rejoice and agree with much of the content of the book, though they would not follow the system of CT that McGraw presents. The primary differences are (1) defining the covenant of works and grace as covenants, (2) the distinction between Israel and the church, and (3) infant baptism. CT does not have a monopoly on love and reverence for the Trinity, seeing the unity and big picture of Scripture, or prioritizing the church over the individual.

A second major concern from the outset is McGraw's strawman description of dispensationalism. McGraw gives the impression that there is only one form of dispensationalism, "which taught that God had different plans for Jews and for the church, resulting in a disjointed reading of the Old and New Testaments" (2, cf. 100). He later states, "The main feature of all forms of dispensationalism is that proponents view Israel and the church as two peoples of God with two distinct destinies" (103n3). These statements generally represent the traditional view of dispensationalism but not the progressive-dispensational view, which is well-attested in modern scholarship. Also, McGraw asserts that implicit in dispensationalism is a rejection of the Ten Commandments and an espousal of antinomianism (2). Dispensationalists may be a lot of things, but they are not characteristically antinomian.

Third, in almost every chapter, McGraw, who has pastored several Presbyterian churches, mentions household/infant baptism as a key element of CT (36–37, 53, 63, 66–70, 88, 112, 119). I find two primary problems with McGraw's discussion of baptism. (1) His defense of paedobaptism is based partially on an unsubstantiated generalization from church history: "most Christians in history have historically baptized households (including infants)" (36–37). (2) McGraw's explanation of the role of baptism is confusing. In one statement, he says baptized children "are members of the covenant" who "become church members through baptism" (119). In another, he says that "people belong to the covenant before they belong to the church" (112). McGraw's extended discussion of baptism (66–

69) contains numerous statements that seem difficult to reconcile. Some statements seem to indicate that baptized people are regenerate, while in others, baptism happens prior to regeneration.

McGraw writes clearly and engages relatively well with a less academic audience. He provides a helpful overview of CT and enables readers to understand CT at a basic level. Those who espouse or have an affinity toward CT will indeed find it to be an “accessible guide.” Such readers should understand, however, that CT is not the only path to the spiritual blessing and insights McGraw discusses. Such readers should also search the Scriptures to determine the meaning and significance (and subjects!) of baptism, and they should critically evaluate the merits of structuring a system on covenants not explicitly identified in the Bible. For those who are undecided or do not hold to CT, this work will help in understanding CT better, but the presentation of CT will be unconvincing.

**Jonathan M. Cheek**

PhD, Theological Studies | Independent Contributor