

## Review

### *God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology*

Michael Horton

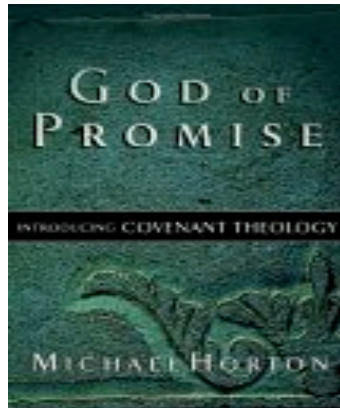
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Why would I review this volume that is so theological in an online journal emphasizing missiology and the task of taking the Good News to all clans, peoples, and languages? It is because the Gospel of our Lord Jesus is so intertwined with the message of the biblical covenants that to attempt to separate and isolate the pure Gospel from either the legal covenant in the Garden or the covenant word promised to Abraham will destroy both Gospel and covenant. The Good News that missiology is about is a covenant bound word. The more we understand the biblical theology of the covenant the more we can both understand and apply its covenant Gospel and its ethic to every ethno-culture on earth.

There is very much good in this volume. Professor Michael Horton (Westminster Theological Seminary in California) is excellent on the covenant of creation (works) and covenant of grace distinction that underlies the Pauline doctrine of justification.

Justification is not mere forgiveness of past sins with a future justification being left up to us to persevere by faith in Spirit-wrought good works, as N. T. Wright, for example, teaches. Horton carefully explains that the future justification, which the Jews expected when Messiah and the resurrection of the dead came, has now broken into the present age. The ground of our justification then is the legal righteousness of King Jesus, which he earned through faith-filled and Spirit inwrought good works while fulfilling the demands of the covenant/contract God made between Adam and his seed [descendants] and himself. This section, chapter 5 (“From Scripture to System”) is extremely valuable.

Second, I believe his emphasis that Adam was created within a covenant relationship with God because God created him in his image is a much-needed balance today. God is a covenant-making and covenant-keeping God within himself—witness the covenant of redemption. God, consequently, created Man-as-his-image in order to reflect his glory. Just as God is faithful, just, and loyal in his dealings within the Trinity, so man is to be in such a relationship to God and to his fellows. To love God and one’s neighbor is covenantal language in the ANE context as several scholars have demonstrated. Horton admirably demonstrates that the covenant of redemption, a much-disputed doctrine, is indeed part and parcel of the inter-Trinitarian interaction before the creation of the universe. The Father chose a people with the Son, who agreed to lay his life down Shepherd-king for the people-flock. The Father and Son sent the willing Spirit to call, seal, indwell, and apply a fully accomplished redemption to those sheep alone (see Horton 2006, 78-82). Horton also demonstrates admirably that the covenant in the Garden (covenant of creation) was a contract, which brings a promised wage/reward if Adam was faithful to the terms. When Adam fell, Horton writes, God makes another

covenant with man based upon the agreement between the Father, Son, and Spirit, in which Christ, the Mediator, fulfills “the covenant of works, [yet] even the meeting of these conditions is graciously given and not simply required” (Horton 2006, 105).

Third, I strongly commend Dr. Horton for his rejection of platonic amillennialism’s teaching of “‘replacement theology’ or ‘supercessionism’ (i.e., the church’s having superseded or replaced the nation of Israel in God’s plan)” (Horton 2006, 130). He develops his perspective as a mediating position between “the extremes of both replacement theology [Platonic amillennialism] and the notion of two peoples with two distinct plans of salvation [classic dispensationalism]” (Horton 2006, 130). He believes that God still has a future for ethnic Israel. (I don’t agree with how he develops it using a distinction between “two distinct covenants. The Sinai covenant . . . [and] a covenant of pure promise, a unilateral covenant of peace that God had sworn to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” [Horton 2006, 130]). However, still he believes that “a large-scale conversion of . . . [the] the Jews will occur at the end of the age. Gentile believers are not to become haughty in their covenantal identity (as supercessionism encourages). . . . After bringing in the full number of elect Gentiles, God will pour out his Spirit on the Jewish people en masse (Rom. 11:25-32)” (Horton 2006, 131-132). The great majority of commentators both covenantal and dispensational believe this view is correct. It correctly humbles us because we are sharing in the root and stem as wild olives branches into the native branches own root.

Now, on the other hand, I would insert several cautions to what Horton teaches in this volume. First, in attempting to distinguish between the law and Gospel, Horton appears to adopt the teaching of Meredith Kline that the Mosaic covenant is a mere

ethical intrusion that apart from the Decalogue has not much relevance for contemporary society. What is sad is that the pendulum is swinging back away from the carefully wrought biblical equilibrium that scholars such as Walter Kaiser, Christopher Wright, Vern Poythress, and others have brought the Christian movement to as a result of the Theonomy uproar of the late 1970's and 1980's. Meredith Kline's (and Horton's position) on the law as an "intrusionist ethic" is more akin to Lutheranism and dispensationalism than classic Calvinism. Walter Kaiser actually describes it as a neo-dispensational hermeneutic and ethic. Kline re-introduced this version of the Law-Gospel dichotomy into Reformational circles after a few of decades of quiet since the Southern Presbyterian scholar Lewis Sperry Chafer introduced something similar and caused a major uproar in the 1930's-1960's. Meredith Kline and his several disciples (e.g., Lee Irons, Michael Horton, David VanDrunen, and R. Scott Clark) fall into a subtle error. The judicial laws of the Mosaic covenant are somehow defective instead of being "good, holy, and just" as Paul and the Psalmists claim (Rom 7:12; Heb 2:2-3; 1 Tim 1:8-11; Ps 19, 119). All of Scripture thoroughly equips the man of God in justice and righteousness. Walter Kaiser and the Westminster Confession's view on the "general equity of the law" is much wiser and harmonious with OT and NT revelation, in my opinion.

In this context, Horton speaks of "the original covenant of creation or its republication at Sinai" (Horton 2006, 88) and the Mosaic polity as a "theocracy typological of the eschatological paradise of God" (Horton 2006, 90). Therefore, he sees continuity between the Garden until Moses and then on until Christ. After the crucifixion a huge ethical gap occurs until the consummation. The contemporary gap period has no Scripture norms with which to inform the social and political order except

common grace and natural revelation. Horton attempts to justify this sharp distinction based the analysis of ancient ANE covenant forms derived from G. E. Mendenhall, Meredith Kline, and Delbert Hiller's work on ancient (chapter 1: "The Big Idea?"). Those forms distinguish between a one sided royal grant and a two sided suzerainty form. That distinction, then, Horton attempts to impose, in my opinion, upon Scripture. Hence, he believes that the legal covenant in the Garden is reproduced ("republished") in the Mosaic covenant (though it was given graciously). Moses is law and now we are not under law. (Classically, "under law" means not under the covenant of works. Under grace does not deny the norms of the Mosaic covenant but applies then in universalized and non-parochial form).

After the Fall, God gave the Gospel and its principles of conduct, repeated it in the Abrahamic covenant and then in the new covenant as an application of the one covenant of grace, while skipping over the Mosaic covenant. It is pure law. Because we are no longer under the legal covenant (i.e., Moses), therefore the Spirit will not fulfill in a confessing Christian nation the "righteous requirements of the law" (Rom 8:4). The Spirit fulfilling righteousness, it seems, is only for the individual. There exists then a sharp discontinuity between the Gospel ethic and the Mosaic ethic. The Mosaic in no way informs the social and political arenas today. The only aspect of the law that applies to the state is the enforcement of the so-called "second tablet" of the law written in the human conscience.

For further justification, Horton invokes a more or less Lutheran vision of Two Kingdom doctrine read back into the history of the covenantal movement begun in Switzerland. Reinterpreting Augustine's City of God, Horton writes that the first

kingdom/city is the kingdom of man; the second is the kingdom of God. The first is the earthly city; the second the heavenly city. Our destination is not a renewed earth but heaven. “The earthly city is always Babylon—it is never converted, as are its inhabitants, into the dwelling place of God” (Horton 2006, 123). Besides invoking a Neo-Platonic matter-spirit (earth-heaven) dualism, this is a twisting of the vision of Augustine and of Calvin’s immediate heirs. Both the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms and the Three Forms of unity disagree with his re-reading of reformational history. Horton thus does not “seek to impose . . . distinctively Christian convictions on society through the kingdom of power” like the Roman Catholics and Radical Anabaptists did (Horton 2006, 127). This is to confuse categories. Roman Catholics and the Revolutionary Anabaptists sought to impose their vision of Christianity upon unbelievers through conquering power of the sword. Calvin and his followers wished to reform and Christianize the civil magistrate’s sword with the Gospel and the law that the Gospel establishes. This is a huge difference. The result? Gone then is the wholism, which the evangelical movement has worked so hard to reclaim over the last three decades. Gone is the Reformational doctrine that the Spirit can be transforming whole social systems through Christ—as he certainly has done in the past. Gone is an eschatology that is realistic about suffering yet expecting the complete discipling of the clans, peoples, and languages before the end as does both the OT and NT based on the Abrahamic covenant (see Kreitzer 2009).

As a consequence, Horton writes that “as with Adam the Sinaitic covenant made with Moses is conditional [on obedience]” and not conditioned upon faith as Paul indicates in Romans 10:5-12 and Galatians 2:15ff (Horton 2006, 90). In my opinion, the

Kline-ians forget that the Spirit was removed from Israel and given at Pentecost to a people bearing the fruit thereof the body of Messiah—both Jews and gentile peoples. Only now does the law of Moses act as pure law. But it was not originally so. Faith for Paul is always the priority throughout every covenant of history except the original covenant in the Garden. Faith then always works its way out in love, which fulfills the righteous requirements of the law. Faith was Israel's great lack (see e.g., Ps 78, esp. 7-8, 22-32). The fault is not the law. Moses taught faith (Rom 3:21-22). Moses also still shows us social justice and personal righteousness (Rom 3:31). The fault is not the law but human self-righteousness, which refuses to submit itself to the "righteousness of God" in Christ, as Paul argues (see Rom 9:30-10:12). If men won't believe Moses and the prophets, they won't believe if a man comes from the dead (Lk 16:31)!

Moses did not originally bring a pure law covenant and the pure legal principle, as Horton and Kline state. Before the cross, a person was saved through faith in the promise witnessed to "by [both] the [Mosaic] law and prophets" (Rom 3:21-22). Salvation during the Mosaic era was not derived from a retrogression to the Abrahamic covenant of faith (as Horton seems to imply). The Mosaic covenant was also a republication of the faith principle found in the Abrahamic form of the covenant of grace as well as a republication of the legal principle found in the covenant of creation before the Fall. Both are necessary for the Gospel as Paul claims in Romans 2:3-16. O. Palmer Robertson shows that every covenant since Genesis 3:15's announcement of the proto-evangelium was an administration of the one covenant of grace.

Second, Horton wrongly applies his principle of a sharp distinction between the national, purely legal covenant given to Israel through Moses and the universal covenant

given to Abraham. God gave the Jews the land of Canaan in the Mosaic covenant, Horton teaches, on a purely conditional basis. Since the Jews rebelled and crucified their Lord Messiah, they no longer have a right to the land, he states. The sole problem is that God promised Israel the land forever in Abraham's unconditional covenant not merely conditionally in the Mosaic covenant.

It seems then clear to me. All covenants, even so-called royal grant treaties (see Horton 2006, 33) are either implicitly or explicitly conditional. Paul states this with respect to the Abrahamic covenant in Romans 11. The Jews have been temporarily cut off from the blessings of that covenant (nation, land, Messiah, material and spiritual blessings) because they reject faith in the promise's fulfillment, Messiah Jesus, the Seed of Abraham (see Gal 3:14ff). The Gentile ethnies only stand by faith, hence any people stands or falls based on their faith alone working its way out in obedience (see also Jer 18:5-10). Faith in Messiah, then, brings—to any people in their own land—the spiritual and material blessings God promised to Israel (see Kreitzer 2009).<sup>1</sup> Material blessings and curses as expressed by the Mosaic covenant (Dt 27-28; Lev 26), universalized in the Writings (esp. Psalms and Proverbs) and Prophets, established by Jesus (see e.g., Mk 10:29-31) and confirmed by the Apostles (Gal 6:7-9; 2 Cor 9:8-12; Jas 1:22-25). Thus, even today, if any nation refuses to trust and obey, they will lose their land and posterity, the prophets argue. If they trust and obey, they will be blessed, as was Israel in the past.

It is much better then to see the Mosaic covenant as a picture book and immature form of the new covenant. The new covenant itself fulfills the Abrahamic, Noahic, Mosaic, and Davidic Covenants. Gal 3:14 states: “In order that in Messiah Jesus

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<sup>1</sup> Mark R. Kreitzer, *The Concept of Ethnicity in the Bible: A Theological Analysis* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press)



[Davidic] the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles [Abrahamic], so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.” The Abrahamic covenant itself was not a fully mature, majority-age covenant in that it also like the Mosaic covenant possessed sacrifices (Gen 17:8-18), distinction between clean and unclean animals to sacrifice (Gen 7:2, 8; 8:20), and the bloody ceremony of circumcision (Gen 17:10). Only when the mature form of God’s covenant comes (i.e., the new covenant), then all shadows, types, and pictures are fulfilled, abrogated from mandatory use, and brought to maturity in Christ. All covenant promises are “yes,” and “so-be-it [Amen]” “in him” (2 Cor 1:20).

Paul states this categorically in Gal 3:12-29, 4:1-8. Paul shows that Moses certainly did explain the law and its two principles clearly (“do this [perfectly] and live” and the “soul that sins will die” [Gal 3:9-13]). But its explanation of the legal principle did not take away its faith and grace aspect as Paul also unequivocally states. “What I am saying is this: the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise” (Gal 3:17). Both law and Gospel are needed in the new covenant. In the new covenant (Gal 3:14), consequently, the pictures and symbols are completed in Christ as well as the righteousness and justice of the moral and judicial law (Gal 4:1-7; Col 2:14; Heb 9-10). Therefore, “to fulfill” does not mean “to abolish” as Jesus explicitly stated in Matthew’s Gospel (Mt 5:17ff).

In conclusion, the fathers who developed both the *Three Forms of Unity* (Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession and the Synod of Dort) and the Westminster Standards (Confession of Faith and Catechisms) did not share Horton’s Kline-ian

presuppositions. Instead, they taught that the judicial laws of the Pentateuch, revealed in the Mosaic Covenant, are good, holy, and just. Only the law’s culturally bound forms—bound to Israel as an extinct “body politic”—are now abrogated. Every principle of love, social and personal justice, evenhandedness, and shalom (social harmony) still applies today and are practiced ideally through the presence and power of the Spirit (Rom 7:6, 8:1-4) (see Wright 2004; Kaiser 1983).<sup>2</sup> Our reformational fathers taught that what is still required by a body politic that desires to be Christian is keeping the “general equity” of the judicial law. In other words, a Christianizing state ought to keep the universally valid principles of love, justice, evenhandedness, and goodness that reflect the character of God and his creational design-norms found within every judicial and the ceremonial laws (WCF 19:1-4, BC 25). “The [judicial] case law describes how to apply the Ten Commandments (apodictic law) to particular situations or cases” (Williams 2005, 164;<sup>3</sup> see Kaiser 1983; Poythress 1991;<sup>4</sup> Wright 2004; Rushdoony 1973<sup>5</sup>). Ethically, then, “everything that the NT has not *changed* in principle still remains in force for the Christian” (Kaiser 1987, 147). We have biblical mandate to teach new converts throughout all the ethnies of the world that abortion is evil, that private property and a limited, non-monarchical state is the best, that impartial justice in regular courts of law is

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<sup>2</sup> I say ideally because the civil magistrate as the “servant of God” is still obligated to enforce impartial justice (Ps 72, 81) even if an unbeliever. See, 1) Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004); 2) Walter Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Michael D. Williams, *As Far as the Curse is Found: The Covenant Story of Redemption* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Vern S. Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1995)

<sup>5</sup> The *Institutes of Biblical Law* has many brilliant insights and we ought to read his several works on the application of biblical law. However, I emphatically disagree with his mono-covenantal perspective, his virtual mandate that the OT food laws apply for health reasons today, and his emphasis that all the moral-judicial death penalties are always mandatory. (Actually, the biblical principle is that the only mandatory death penalty in the Mosaic law is for premeditated murder). Rushdoony does not understand enough of the love and compassion of God that is inherent in the Law, prophets, and Christ, and enough of

demanded by the God of justice. Virginity for both men and women before marriage is beautiful, adultery and homosexuality are sin, respect for parents and magistrates are necessary, and so forth. With one arm, this God will bind those calling upon him “in the bundle of the living with the LORD your God” but the wicked “enemies He will sling out as from the hollow of a sling”—over the long run—as Abigail said to David (1 Sam 25:29). We will receive blessing individually and collectively in this age, along with persecution, as well as in the age to come (Mk 10:30).

Last, I want to mention Horton’s implicit platonic dualism in ethics, eschatology, and in social political application of the covenant teaching. However, this volume is certainly contains less dualism than other volumes on eschatology by other platonic amillennialists. In my opinion, Scripture throughout certainly often uses the number 1000 in a metaphorical manner. So I have become persuaded that its use in the very symbolic book of Revelation 20 is metaphorical. I agree with Dr. Horton that it a metaphor for the indeterminately long reign of Christ over “heaven and earth” from the Ascension to the Second Coming (Mt 28:18-19). King Jesus is presently reigning over both heaven and earth. I also agree that there are indeed two kingdoms. However, these two kingdoms are ethical and not ontological: The Kingdom of God in Anointed King Yeshu’-Jesus and the domain of darkness under the Satan. The kingdoms and peoples of this world belong to King Jesus and now are being disciplined by the body of Christ.

In summary, through there are many excellent chapters, sadly because of his view that the covenant given to Noah and Moses as intrusionist and that the whole ethical scheme given to Moses is temporary, I would not recommend this volume to new believers. Walter Kaiser’s perspective on OT ethics remains without peer. The best

introductory volume on the covenant still is O P Robertson's<sup>6</sup> because he is more consistent with Scripture, in my opinion.

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<sup>6</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1981).