

Covenant

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Meet the Writer

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Introduction to *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding*

Reformed and Presbyterian Christians are people of faith who are seeking understanding. From the beginnings of our Reformed tradition, Presbyterians have realized God calls us to explore ways the Christian faith can be more fully known and expressed. This vision has driven concerns for the education of people of all ages. Presbyterians have been big on providing resources to help us delve more deeply into Christian faith and the theology that gives our living tradition its distinctive heritage.

This *Being Reformed* curriculum for adults is one expression of the desire to open up what it means to be Presbyterian Christians in the world today. Our purpose is to enhance, enrich, and expand our insights. We want Presbyterians to grow in understandings of elements that are foundational and significant for their faith. Encounters with theology, church, worship, spirituality/discipleship, and social righteousness will guide our ways.

These studies engage our whole selves. We will find our minds moved by new ideas, our emotions stirred with responses of gratitude, and calls for action that can lead us in different life directions. Heads, hearts, and hands will be drawn into the joys of discovering what new things God is calling us toward.

We invite you to join this journey of faith seeking understanding. Celebrate the blessings of our Reformed and Presbyterian tradition of faith. Be stimulated and challenged by fresh insights that will deepen your understandings. Find a stronger commitment to the God who has loved us in Jesus Christ.

To the Leader

The authors of *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding* emphasize essential Reformed theological principles that relate to our lives of faith. These sessions will help you lead a group into the theology and thoughts inspired by the challenging and interesting articles in the participant's book.

You might choose simply to begin the session with the prayer that precedes each session in the participant's book, then reading through the articles together, stopping when you or a student wishes to comment or raise a question. You could then close the session by discussing the questions at the end of the session and encouraging the group members to do the spiritual practice.

Unfortunately, that style of leading does not meet the needs of every kind of learner. The session plans encourage group leaders to try some new things to light up the hearts and minds of more people. Most teachers teach the way they like to learn. Choosing one new activity during each session will stretch you and open a door to someone who learns differently than you. Over the weeks, you will notice what your group enjoys and what they are unwilling to do. Let that, rather than your preferences, be your guide as you prepare to lead.

These session plans are designed to encourage group participation. Discussion and sharing create community and provide practice that all of us need in expressing our faith and wrestling with our questions. When asking questions, get comfortable with some silence while group members contemplate a response. Resist the urge to fill up the silence with your words.

If your group members like to talk, you might not be able to ask every suggested question. Also it will make a difference in your group session if group members have read the articles prior to the session. If you find it necessary to read from the participant's book during the group session, choose the passages that convey the core ideas.

You are more than a dispenser of information. In your role as group leader, you cooperate with God in the formation of faith and in the transformation of lives. You are the lead learner, modeling a way that faith seeks understanding. You are not trying to cover a lesson, but to uncover truth. Pray for yourself and your group members, prepare your session, relax, and enjoy!

May God bless your faithfulness!

God's Covenant with Noah and Creation

Scripture

Genesis 1:1—2:3; Genesis 8:20—9:17

Main Idea

God's covenant with Noah is a cosmic covenant with all creation, involving humans in restoring creation's goodness and sustainability.

Teaching Points

The session invites participants to consider:

1. That the covenants in the Old Testament are initiated by God, who desires to be in a relationship of intimacy and love with human beings.
2. The nature of God as revealed in the Noah story: an emotional God who gets angry, shows regret, and finds resolution in forbearance toward humanity.
3. The rainbow as a sign that God has forever set aside the option of destruction and is freely bound and committed to the welfare of creation.

Resources Needed

Bibles

Participant's books

Christ candle and lighter

Newsprint and markers

Bare wall or bulletin board and tape or pushpins for a "Covenant Display"

White 8" x 11" paper, tissue paper in various colors

Scissors and tape or glue sticks

Leader Prep

Prepare to lead the session by reading the participant's book and highlighting important points. Write the word "Covenant" on newsprint and post it in the middle of a bare wall or bulletin board to begin your "Covenant Display," a visual summary of key findings from each session.

For Gather, set the Christ candle (a white pillar candle) on a table in the center of your meeting space. Enlist participants to take turns lighting the candle and reading the opening Scripture.

For Head, familiarize yourself with the introductions to this study and to Session 1 and the sections "Creation" and "Noah" (participant's book, pp. 6–8). Spend some time reading and reflecting on the Scripture passages for this session.

For Heart, familiarize yourself with the section "The Cosmic Covenant" (participant's book, pp. 8–10). Have Bibles, newsprint, and markers available for the small groups. Consider how you would answer the first Question for Reflection (participant's book, p. 10) so you will be prepared to help participants engage with what might be a new way of thinking about God. Have available materials for creating rainbow images. Be prepared with suggestions for anyone who prefers expression through writing rather than artwork (for example, composing a prayer or dialogue with God prompted by the sight of a rainbow). Have ready newsprint to add to the "Covenant Display."

For Hands, familiarize yourself with the section "The Cosmic Covenant" (participant's book, pp. 8–10). Reflect on the second and third Questions for Reflection (participant's book, p. 10) so you will be prepared to help participants make the connection between the Old Testament and today's ecological concerns. Consider what God's covenant with Noah and creation means for us today—for example, in the call to preserve biodiversity. Be prepared to help participants summarize key themes from this session in a list for the "Covenant Display."

Leading the Session

Gather

- Invite participants to introduce themselves and to share a word, phrase, or image that comes to mind when they hear the word *covenant*.
- Light the Christ candle.
- Read Genesis 1:1–5, 26–27; 9:1.

- Pray together the prayer at the beginning of Session 1 (participant’s book, p. 5).

Head

- Explain that over the next six sessions you will explore the theme of covenant, a major emphasis in Reformed and Presbyterian theology and key to understanding the Old and New Testament. You will learn about various covenants described in Scripture to understand what it means to be God’s covenant people today.
- Look together at the Introduction and call attention to the definition of “covenant.” Have someone read aloud the “covenant formula” expressed in Exodus 6:6 and Leviticus 26:11 (participant’s book, p. 5). Ask: *How is a covenant different from a business contract? Why does God establish covenants with human beings?*
- Read aloud the first paragraph of the section “Creation” (participant’s book, pp. 6–7). Have participants look at the creation story in their Bibles (Genesis 1:1–2:3), noting the repetition of the word “good” and the progression from “formless void” to a creation that “teems with life in all its wondrous diversity” (participant’s book, p. 6). Point out the statement, “The God of Genesis 1 proves to be a collaborative God” (participant’s book, p. 7). Ask: *What does this mean? What does it mean that humans are created in “God’s image”?*
- Invite a volunteer to summarize the story of Noah as recalled from Sunday school or Bible storybooks. Review together the section “Noah” (participant’s book, pp. 7–8). Ask: *What new insights do you gain from this section? How is the story of Noah related to the creation story?*

Heart

- Form small groups and distribute Bibles, newsprint, and markers. Have participants review together the section “The Cosmic Covenant” (participant’s book, pp. 8–10) and Genesis 8:20—9:17 and discuss: *What does the Noah story tell us about God? About human beings?* The first Question for Reflection (participant’s book, p. 10) may also stimulate discussion. Have someone in each group record responses on newsprint. Invite the groups to share what they have written.

- Give each participant a sheet of white paper and distribute colored tissue paper, scissors, and tape or glue sticks. Invite them to write their thoughts and/or create rainbow images while reflecting silently on the rainbow as a sign of God’s covenant. Ask: *When you see a rainbow in the sky, what do you imagine God saying? What would you say to God?*
- On newsprint, write “God’s Covenant with Noah and Creation” and post it on your “Covenant Display” wall or bulletin board. Add one or more of the rainbow images created by participants.

Hands

- Ask: *What does it mean that God’s covenant with Noah is a “cosmic covenant” (participant’s book, pp. 8–10)? Who/what are the parties involved in this covenant?*
- Have participants discuss in small groups the second and third Questions for Reflection (participant’s book, p. 10). Invite a representative from each group to summarize responses.
- Ask: *In light of God’s commitment to creation, what is our responsibility? What is the meaning of God’s covenant for us today?*
- Review together ideas listed by the small groups in “Heart” and “Hands,” and select four or five key themes from this session—findings about God, creation, humanity, covenant. List these on newsprint to add to your “Covenant Display.”

Depart

- Light the Christ candle.
- Read aloud together Genesis 8:22.
- Encourage participants to spend time outside with God in nature in the coming week, as suggested in the Spiritual Practice (participant’s book, p. 10).
- Pray a closing prayer. (Invite participants to pray if any are willing.)

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God's Covenant with Noah and Creation

Scripture

Genesis 1:1—2:3 In this first creation account, God brings forth order and living diversity from the “formless void.”

Genesis 8:20—9:17 In this first covenant account, God resolves to “never again” destroy creation.

Prayer

Gracious God, we give you thanks for the beauty of the earth, for the goodness of your creation, for all things bright and beautiful, and even for things not so bright and beautiful in our eyes. How manifold are your works in creation! How diverse are your creatures! You have made them all in your great wisdom. We praise you for the gift of life. Help us to live according to your wisdom and goodness of your creation. In Christ's name we ask this. Amen.

Introduction

The word “covenant” is not widely found in everyday discourse. It is occasionally invoked in wedding ceremonies, mortgage contracts, and homeowners associations. Where it continues to thrive is in faith communities.

The word itself comes from the Latin verb *convenire*, “to meet” or “come together.” “Covenant” is more than a business contract. It establishes community in some form. The richness of the term is indicated in the variety of ways the Bible uses the word. Nevertheless, one can detect a common thread when it comes to covenants made between God and Israel in the Old Testament. Call it the “covenant formula,” and it goes something like this: “I will take you as my people, and I will be your God” (Exodus 6:7). Or in Leviticus 26:12: “And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people.”

In both examples, God is poised to enter into relationship with a people. God claims a people so a people can claim God as their

own. God desires to be in a relationship of intimacy and love. As we shall see, such a “covenant” between God and a people typically involves an expression of God’s commitment and an expectation of responsible human conduct.

There are four major covenants in the Old Testament, each associated with a particular personage: Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David. In common to them all is God’s initiative. God enacts each covenant. There are, to be sure, numerous other covenants in the Bible, including those made by individuals and political entities. (See, for example, Genesis 21:27; 31:43–54; 1 Samuel 18:3; 23:18; 2 Samuel 3:21; 5:3; 1 Kings 5:13; 15:21; Hosea 12:1; Jeremiah 34:8–20.) Our study, however, will focus on those covenants established by God.

Creation

God’s covenant with Noah, described in Genesis 9:8–17, is the first covenant mentioned in the Bible. To understand it fully, one must go back to the very beginning of creation according to Genesis 1. There, God creates the cosmos, a universe replete with structure, order, and life. In a majestic series of commands, God calls creation into being, step by step, day by day, until creation is deemed complete on the seventh day.

Creation begins in a state of primordial soup, as it were (1:2), from which God separates light from darkness and the waters above from the waters below. Creation is deemed “good” throughout and “very good” at the end (1:31). Whereas the first three days establish creation’s domains (light, sky, seas, and land), days 4–6 populate those domains: lights (day 4) and various forms of life (days 5 and 6), all “according to their kinds.” No longer is creation a “formless void” (Hebrew *tohu wabohu*, v. 2). Far from it, creation now teems with life in all its wondrous diversity: aerial, marine, and terrestrial. Creation’s goodness (the term “good” in Genesis 1 is repeated seven times!) not only points to its beauty and structure but also to its sustaining power. Seeds and sex are deemed critical for the continuance of life. The plants of the earth bear seeds, making possible their succession. The command to “be fruitful and multiply” applies not only to humans (v. 28) but also to animals (v. 22). The procreation makes possible the replenishing of the earth, and that is a good thing—a blessing, in fact (vv. 22a, 28a).

Each step in creation, according to Genesis 1, is initiated by God’s command. God’s commands, however, do not simply bring forth

creation out of nothing. God commands the earth to bring forth vegetation (v. 11) and land animals (v. 24). Similarly, God commands the waters to produce “swarms of living creatures” (v. 20). God’s commands, in other words, enlist other agents of creativity, specifically the land and the waters, to produce life. The God of Genesis 1 proves to be a collaborative God.

Divine collaboration is most vividly depicted in the creation of humankind: “Let us make humankind in our image” (v. 26). Within the author’s own ancient context, such language refers to the divine council, populated by lesser divine beings—angels, for example, as depicted elsewhere in Scripture such as in Job 1–2 and 1 Kings 22:19–23. Christian tradition would interpret this passage in reference to the Trinity. In either case, God works in collaboration in Genesis 1. What makes the creation of humanity so special in Genesis is the language of divine “image.”

Humans, both male and female, are created in “God’s image.” As bearers of God’s image, human beings have the privilege and task of exercising “dominion” over all life (vv. 26, 28). Within an agrarian community, such a task involved the difficult work of cultivating the land and domesticating animals (compare Genesis 3:17–19). It involved care and wisdom, much in contrast to the kind of dominion that is harsh and cruel (see Ezekiel 34:4). The God who created the world to be sustained from generation to generation is the God who commissions humans to be responsible for creation’s “goodness,” for its sustainability. Noah, as we shall see, is the one who most fully exercises responsible dominion.

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Noah

By the time the flood is unleashed in Genesis 7, creation has gone awry. By Genesis 6, violence has engulfed the world: “Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence” (v. 11). Genesis 1 held out hope that the world would flourish with life. But now creation is filled with wickedness. The state of the world, including that of the human heart, is in such bad shape that God regrets ever having created humankind (6:6). God

decides to destroy a world that itself is in the throes of self-destruction. (The word “corrupt” in v. 11 is in Hebrew the same word as “destroy” in v. 13.) God resolves to start over, to go back to the “beginning” to recreate the world from its watery, chaotic origins (see 1:2).

But not entirely. One individual stands out as righteous, the son of Lamech whose birth name holds out hope for “relief” from the hard toil of working the cursed land (5:29). His name is Noah, the one who has “found favor in the sight of the LORD” (6:8), righteous and blameless (v. 9). Noah is deemed the new Adam (5:28; see 2:7); he holds the promise of creation’s restoration.

Accompanying God’s resolve to “destroy *all* flesh,” life that is well on its way to destroying itself, is God’s decision to save Noah and his family in order to save life in *all* its variety. Enter the ark, which will preserve creation’s biodiversity as the floodwaters rise to engulf a world already engulfed by violence. The flood is described in Genesis as creation’s reversion to its watery origins: the separation between the waters above and the waters below collapses (compare 7:11 with 1:2, 6–8). Amid the surge of chaos, Noah, his family, and the animals housed in the ark ride out the storm until the earth is purged, cleansed for a new creation.

Of all the human characters in the book of Genesis, Noah fulfills most fully the divine command to have “dominion” over creation, and he does so by implementing the first endangered species act! In Noah, creation begins again.

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The Cosmic Covenant

The covenant of Genesis 9:8–17 formalizes God’s cosmic restoration. Preceding the covenant formulation in this text is God’s change of heart toward creation, particularly toward humanity. On Noah’s burnt offerings, God solemnly promises to “never again curse the ground because of humankind” (8:21a; cf. 3:17; 4:10–12), despite the fact that the human heart remains “evil” (8:21b). For all its totalizing reach in purging the world of violence, the flood in God’s eyes has not changed this intractable feature of the human condition. Humans remain inescapably caught in their tendency toward evil, God realizes.

Indeed, it is this very realization that prompted the flood in the first place (6:5). In short, the human heart has not changed. What has changed is God's own heart! Noah's pleasing sacrifice prompts a change of heart, a heart bent toward mercy and forbearance. Following God's declaration in 8:21 is a poetic testimony of the movement of the seasons, the alternation of day and night, of planting and harvest, cold and heat. These natural regularities can be counted on to ensure the earth's sustainability. They have become testimony to God's resolve to "never again" destroy creation.

God's promise sets the stage for the covenant that follows in the next chapter, which opens with God's primordial blessing given to Noah and his family to replenish the earth (9:1; see 1:28). But something new is introduced: whereas the world of Genesis 1 assumed a vegetarian diet (see 1:29–30), God now allows for the eating of meat (9:2–3). It is God's concession to humankind's violent nature, its "evil heart." But such an allowance is not without a restriction: meat must be eaten without its blood, for blood indicates life (v. 4). And while animal killing is restrictively allowed, the shedding of human blood is expressly forbidden (v. 6a). The reason behind the prohibition of human-on-human violence is lodged in humanity's primordial genesis: every human being is created in God's image (v. 6b; cf. 1:26–28).

God's concession and accompanying restrictions regarding human life and conduct in this post-flood world leads to God's greatest restriction, a self-restriction. In Genesis 9:8–17, God promises to "never again" destroy "all flesh," indeed the earth itself, by the flood. Different from typical covenants or contractual agreements in the ancient world, the covenant stipulation is an unconditional promise, a unilateral divine decree that serves to limit God's options toward the world. Destruction is now ruled out. God's covenant with Noah amounts to a self-restraining order.

Moreover, this covenant is not limited to Noah and his family but includes all the former occupants of the ark, that is, "all flesh." God's covenant with Noah, the first covenant of the Bible, is a truly cosmic covenant, and the guarantee of its enforcement is signaled by the rainbow, the public—indeed cosmic—"sign" of God's own disarmament for future generations. The "rainbow" is in the eyes of the biblical author associated with the bow, a weapon of war. Now the bow is hung in the clouds, and when God sees it, God will "remember" the covenant made on that primordial day (9:15). For

God, remembrance is not a matter of recollection, as if God could ever forget or grow senile. Here, the Hebrew word for “remember” comes closer to the meaning of “enact” or “fulfill” in this context. The sign of the bow is a testimony that God has forever set aside the option of destruction as a way of dealing with creation. By hanging up the bow, God becomes freely bound and committed to the welfare of creation. And so should we.

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Spiritual Practice

Find a place, perhaps a nearby park or simply a grove of trees, in which you can hear the sounds of birds. Early morning is the best time. Note the different sounds you hear. Silently thank God that nature continues to thrive, even right outside your home.

Questions for Reflection

Has the story of Noah’s flood and its aftermath changed your view of God? What kind of God would have a “change of heart”?

Does God’s covenant with Noah mean that God would never let our planet be destroyed by human hands or that God would not have a hand in our planet’s destruction if it came to that?

What implications does God’s covenant with Noah have in the face of our mounting degradation of the earth? Is there a new “flood” that threatens to damage the earth?