1. Negotiated Agreements

We sometimes hear the word "covenant" defined as an "agreement" —meaning a formal negotiated agreement between two parties. This is correct for some covenants. In Australia, a marriage is such a covenant, so also is the usual solution to an industrial dispute.

Abraham made such a covenant with Abimelech (Gen 21:22-34). Was the new covenant of Jesus Christ an agreement negotiated between man and God? Later we shall see that it is not.

2. Unconditional Promises

Another kind of covenant is a solemn promise or vow by one party to benefit a second party without requiring the other party to fulfill any conditions. Ruth made such a covenant with Naomi (Ruth 1:16-17).

God's rainbow promise is a good example. God made a promise never again to destroy the whole world with a flood, and he set his bow in the sky as a sign of this covenant (Gen 9:8-17). Man was not required to do anything for God to keep this promise. Is the new covenant mediated by Jesus Christ one of unconditional promises? Later we shall see that it is not.

3. Law with Penalty and Promise

A third type of covenant makes promises that are conditional upon the beneficiary doing something. An insurance policy legally binds the insurer to cover the insured against certain losses provided the insured pays premiums and looks after the property.

A person's last will and testament may have certain conditions that the heir must comply with in order to inherit.

The covenant God made with Abraham was of this kind, and depended on Abraham's obedience to God's commands —as shown in the oath God swore to Abraham.

"By myself I have sworn, because you have done this thing, and not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you... and in your seed all the nations of earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice" (Gen 22:16-18 cf Gen 17:1-2).

In some additional notes to this lesson, we will see that Christ's new covenant is not of the first or second kind, but is of this third kind —a law with promise and penalty.

Additional Notes

The old law of Moses was the third kind of covenant. God said, "Now then, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, then you shall be my own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation..." (Exo 19:5-6).

Moses pleaded with the children of Israel to "enter in to the covenant with the Lord your God and into his oath which the Lord your God is making with you today" (Deu 29:9-10, 30:15-20).

This covenant, however, existed whether or not the people entered into it. They had a relationship with God, dictated by that covenant —whether they liked it or not. If they entered into the covenant they were friends with God. If they rebelled against the covenant, they were enemies of God. Either way, they had a "covenant relationship" with God.

The new covenant is also of the third kind.

Jesus "has obtained a more excellent ministry, because he is the mediator of a better covenant, which is based on better promises" (Heb 8:6-8). So the new covenant is vastly different from the old. It is not, however, different as to type. Although a far better covenant, it was still instituted by God unilaterally as a law with promise and penalty. (more over page)