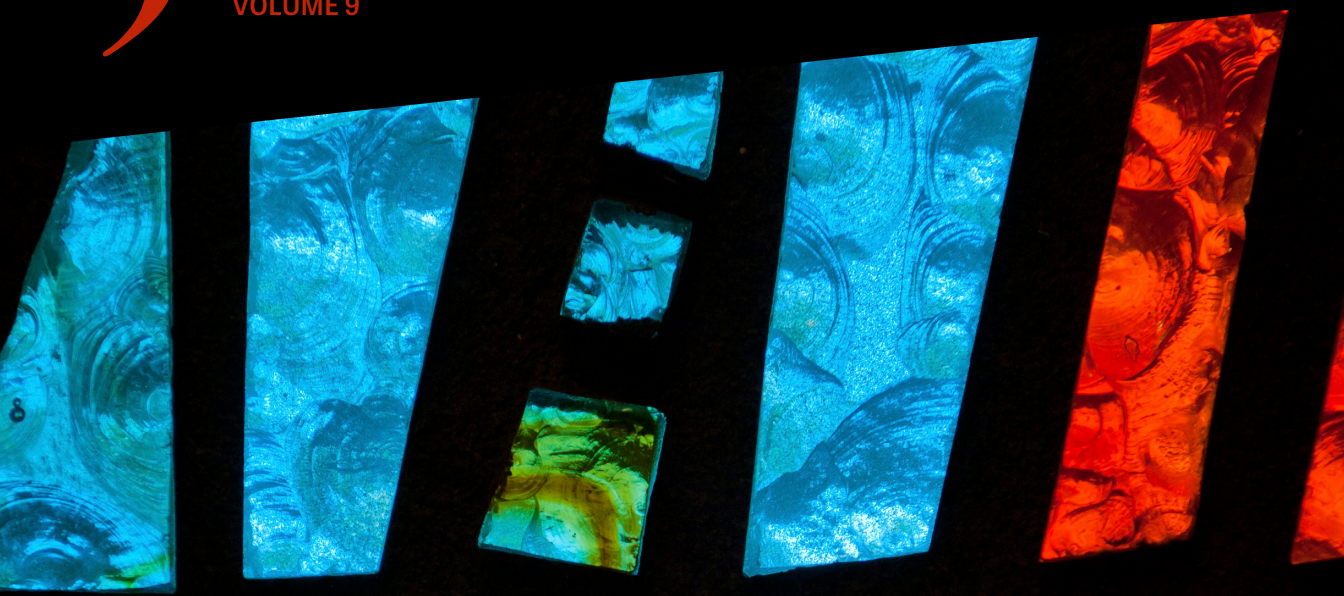
JBTS

Journal of Biblical and Theological Studies

VOLUME 9



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The *Journal of Biblical and Theological Studies (JBTS)* is a peer reviewed academic journal focused on the fields of Bible and Theology from an inter-denominational point of view. The journal is comprised of an editorial board of scholars that represent several academic institutions throughout the world. *JBTS* is concerned with presenting high level original scholarship in an approachable way.

Academic journals are often written by scholars for other scholars. They are technical in nature, assuming a robust knowledge of the field. There are fewer journals that seek to introduce biblical and theological scholarship that is also accessible to students. *JBTS* seeks to provide high-level scholarship and research to both scholars and students, which results in original scholarship that is readable and accessible.

As an inter-denominational journal, *JBTS* is broadly evangelical. We accept contributions in all theological disciplines from any evangelical perspective. In particular, we encourage articles and book reviews within the fields of Old Testament, New Testament, Biblical Theology, Church History, Systematic Theology, Practical Theology, Philosophical Theology, Philosophy, and Ethics. Please see the guidelines for submission at jbtsonline.org.

Since *JBTS* is a broadly evangelical journal there will often be a variety of views that are represented that align with the evangelical Christian faith within each journal issue. The views expressed by contributors are not necessarily the views of the editors or the institutions that they represent.

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Editorial Farewell

I have had the privilege of serving as the General Editor of JBTS for 10 years. I am thankful to God for my time editing this journal, but over the past two years I have been hard pressed to give this journal the time that it needs and deserves from a General Editor. When I began as an editor of this journal alongside Ryan Brandt and Justin McLendon, I was told that editing a journal was a hard task. A colleague serving at another journal warned me about the time consuming nature of editing and serving in this capacity. Those words were more true than I would have thought or imagined. I am thankful for the opportunity that I have had to serve in this capacity, but after ten years I am stepping down as the General Editor and will serve as an Advising Editor. The journal is in excellent hands with Ryan and Justin, who will continue to serve as Managing Editors. They will be joined by Brian Koning who will serve as the new General Editor. I am thankful for each of these colleagues.

This journal was started to present high level scholarship in an accessible manner for students. I began teaching in an academic setting more than fifteen years ago and I have taught at every level of higher education (undergraduate, graduate/seminary, and doctoral/PhD) and in the church (where I have been teaching for almost 25 years as a Sunday school teacher, small group leader, pastor, etc.). The more I have been in the classroom, and have read students' papers the more I have come under the conviction most academic journals overshoot the good student, let alone the average student, at the undergraduate and even graduate levels. I hope that this journal has been, and continues to be, a place for students who are entering and continuing their theological education to encounter high level biblical and theological ideas from world class scholars.

To God be all the Glory!

Daniel S. Diffey

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PART 1:

An Introduction to the Major Biblical-Theological Systems

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An Introduction to the Major Biblical-Theological Systems

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Introduction

The goal of JBTS is to provide the highest level of scholarship in a manner that is accessible to students and learned lay people. In the last couple of decades there has been significant academic work done in the area of what is called theological systems or biblical-theological systems. Here we have opted for the latter because each system is seeking to be both biblical and theological, and the most recent articulations of each system have been impacted by growth in the field of biblical theology. Because of the proliferation of scholarship in this area we thought that it was important to offer a more accessible work, that answers some basic questions, but that also highlights the best scholarship in each of the major biblical-theological systems. There have been several works advocating for or arguing against a particular theological system.[1] Other works have focused on a particular biblical or theological theme like Israel and the church, the Promised Land, or temple from the perspective of a theological system.[2] There have been yet other works that have surveyed a spectrum of systems. Two significant contributions in the latter category are *Discontinuity to Continuity: A Survey of*

1. A few recent edited works advocating for a certain theological system are Cory M. Marsh and James I. Fazio, eds., *Discovering Dispensationalism: Tracing the Development of Dispensational Thought From the First to Twenty-First Century* (El Cajon, CA: SCS Press, 2023); Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, eds., *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000); Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E. Parker, *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course between Dispensational and Covenantal Theologies* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016); Guy Prentiss Waters, J. Nicholas Reid and John R. Muether, eds., *Covenant Theology: Biblical, Theological, and Historical Perspectives* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).

2. There are too many individual volumes published on themes to survey here, but there have also been edited volumes with contributors on each side of a particular issue or theme like Andrew Naselli and Jared Compton, eds., *Three Views on Israel and the Church: Perspectives on Romans 9-11* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2019); Chad Brand, ed., *Perspectives on Israel and the Church: 4 Views* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2015).

Dispensational & Covenantal Systems by Benjamin L. Merkle and *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture* edited by Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas.[3] Merkle surveys six theological systems whereas Parker and Lucas edit contributions from four different views. Both of these provide helpful surveys of different theological systems that would serve almost any reader well. Our hope is that this volume of JBTS will provide an entry point into this discussion. Students can then move from this volume to these other works to gain even more understanding of the intricate issues involved in each biblical-theological system. No single volume could cover all of the complex biblical, theological, and hermeneutical issues involved in a study of biblical-theological systems completely. Our hope is that this volume both summarizes and complements the already existing scholarship in this field.

This journal issue is comprised of three sections. The first section provides articles from four points along the spectrum of biblical-theological systems: Traditional Dispensationalism (TD), Progressive Dispensationalism (PD), Progressive Covenantalism (PC), and Covenant Theology (CT). Each article is authored by adherent of the biblical-theological that he is defending. Each contributor was asked to address four primary issues by answering the following question:

1. Distinctives and Assumptions: What is distinct about your system? What are the assumptions of your theological system?

2. Hermeneutics: What is the hermeneutical/interpretive methodology of your system? Does your system employ a particular hermeneutic?

3. Continuity and Discontinuity: What are the areas of continuity and discontinuity that your system sees between the Old Testament and the New Testament?

4. Theological Commitments and Themes: What are the important theological themes or theological commitments in your system?

The second part of this issue provides biblical-theological soundings from the perspective of some of these systems. Here the student is introduced to work being done within a system rather than a discussion about that system. The third section of this issue contains the edited proceedings of a session at the 2022 Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Denver, Colorado. This session was moderated by Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas and was a follow up discussion between the contributors of their earlier published edited work.[4]

3. Benjamin L. Merkle, *Discontinuity to Continuity: A Survey of Dispensational and Covenantal Theologies* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020); Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas, eds., *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture* (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022).

4. Parker and Lucas, *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies.*

Dispensationalism

Once a dominating force in academic evangelical theology, dispensationalism is now viewed as a relic by some and a pariah by others. Sill holding a strong foothold in local church life, it seems that gone are the days of mainline dispensationalists being published in academic venues that introduced the world to scholars like John Walvoord, Charles Ryrie, Alva McClain, and J. Dwight Pentecost. Today, arguments for a distinction between Israel and the church or a pretribulational position are often mocked and mischaracterizations of dispensationalism envelope academic conversations. It is almost always older forms of dispensational thought that bear the brunt of the mockery (and fringe voices at that), while current developments made by dispensational thinkers tend to get overlooked. The scholarship of PD is an example of the latter set of voices that are often forgotten in discussions critical of dispensationalism. It is not uncommon for dispensational theology to be reduced as merely an eschatological doctrine, promulgated by an ongoing stream of critics always sure to include some variation of "end of the world" in their published titles.[5]

Choosing to focus on dispelling dispensational *eschatology* is often the default method of critics who rarely interact with the system as a whole. Doing so overlooks sophisticated dispensational positions on bibliology, Israelology, ecclesiology, hermeneutics, and other subjects. The reduction gets boiled down further by offering critiques of a *popularized form* of dispensational eschatology along with the tired mantra "Left Behind" rather than engaging arguments offered by the best or most recent first-hand scholarship. Many are surprised to learn that dispensational scholars have published tomes on all doctrines customary to systematic theology or on the advancements dispensational thought has made on all five *solas* of the Reformation.[6] However, these works continue to be overlooked, dismissed, or ignored by academics more interested in blaming dispensationalism for a burned-over evangelicalism.

Scholastic irony resonates from C. S. Lewis's unforgettable descriptor "chronological snobbery" when applied to academic conversations about the recency of dispensationalism, often traced to the mid 19th c. Anglican, John Nelson Darby.[7] While it is common for academics to label dispensationalism as novel, even a

5. Most recently, Matthew L. Halstead, *The End of the World as You Know It: What the Bible Really Says about the End Times (And Why It's Good News)* (Bellingham: Lexham, 2024); Brian P. Irwin with Tim Perry, *After Dispensationalism: Reading the Bible for the End of the World* (Bellingham: Lexham, 2023); Daniel G. Hummel, *The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism: How the Evangelical Battle Over End Times Shaped a Nation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023).

6. Noteworthy examples include, Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity*, vols.1–3 (Allen Park: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2009–2010); and, Christopher Cone and James I. Fazio, eds. *Forged from Reformation: How Dispensational Thought Advances the Reformed Legacy* (El Cajon: SCS Press, 2017).

7. Contra William C. Watson, *Dispensationalism Before Darby: Seventeenth Century and Eighteenth-Century English Apocalypticism* (Silverton: Lampion, 2015). The most recent scholarly argument demonstrating the ancient historicity of dispensational ideas can be found in Marsh and Fazio, eds., *Discovering Dispensationalism*.

"theological latecomer" and "outsider,"[8] similar sentiments are never given to much newer theological systems and approaches hardly decades old, such as PC or the TIS movement. Indeed, the negative charge of recency seems only to be pinned on dispensationalism all the while overlooking the historical fact that CT did not exist before the 17th century nor even Protestantism until the 16th century.

Traditional and Progressive Dispensationalism

All these sentiments raise several questions. Why all the fuss—what exactly is dispensationalism? How did it begin? Is there one form of it or multiple variations? What can be learned from this theological system that has clearly been so influential within modern Christianity, especially American evangelicalism?

Rather than consulting critics for the answers, it is more helpful to go directly to the horse's mouth, as it were, and glean from first-hand dispensational thinkers themselves. Doing so helps ensure an accurate representation without any fabrications that always seem to vie for more attention. The following articles on dispensationalism are aimed at just that. They are each written by first-rate dispensational scholars and should serve the reader well for introductions into some of the more significant expressions of dispensational thought. Though various traditions of dispensationalism do exist, the most enduring in both the church and the academy are two: Traditional Dispensationalism (TD) and Progressive Dispensationalism (PD).

The first, TD, goes by a constellation of nomenclature, including "revised," "normative," and by some accounts, "classic[al] dispensationalism." While no label will ever encapsulate every nuance of a theological tradition, in this *JBTS* issue the term Traditional Dispensationalism is preferred for the expression of dispensational thought usually associated with the mid- to late-twentieth century giants of Dallas Theological Seminary and Grace Theological Seminary. Doing so places earlier "classical" thinkers such as C. I. Scofield and Lewis Sperry Chafer outside the "traditional" circle as they promoted ideas refined by later dispensationalists, which included corrections of less dogmatic typological readings and a promotion of two "new covenants," one for Israel and one for the church.[9] Representing the continuing TD tradition is Dr. James I. Fazio, Academic Dean and Professor of Biblical Studies at Southern California Seminary, who is also a contributor to and co-editor of *Discovering Dispensationalism: Tracing the Development of Dispensational Thought from the First to the Twenty-First Century* (SCS Press, 2023) and *Forged*

8. Irwin, *After Dispensationalism*, 35.

9. Scofield applied typology in multiple places unwarranted by the text, though he held to one New Covenant with dual fulfillments both for Israel and the church. Conversely, Walvoord and Ryrie restricted typology to texts explicitly revealed as such and originally held to a two New Covenant theory in their early years based on what they felt was a consistent literal hermeneutic. However, they each refined their positions and became strong advocates of a single New Covenant for Israel, with the church adopting some of its spiritual benefits.

from Reformation: How Dispensational Thought Advances the Reformed Legacy (SCS Press, 2017).

Fazio argues that contrary to systems formed by theological abstractions, inherent to TD is a biblical-theological framework derived from the pages of Scripture itself. Emphasizing an inductive flow to biblical history, TD maintains that God has governed humanity on the basis of differing divinely expressed stewardships or administrations, also called "dispensations." With this comes an understanding that sees more "discontinuity" between the Old and New Testaments. Essential to TD is a consistent literal interpretive approach to Scripture which yields a view of Israel and the church as being two distinct households. Also customary to TD is the eschatological expectation that that the church will be translated to Jesus's presence *prior* to a future seven-year tribulation period, followed by a national restoration of repentant Israel at Christ's second coming and thousand-year reign in Jerusalem. Thus, TD is not merely premillennial vis-à-vis Christ's return but also pretribulational vis-à-vis to the appearance of a future anti-Christ.

The second, PD, was birthed in academic discussions during the last few decades of the twentieth century. Scholarly strides were made by a new class of dispensational thinkers, which included refinements to the traditional appropriation of literal hermeneutics, the church's relationship to the covenants, and Jesus's kingdom reign.[10] There are, however, differing views on each of these matters by those who identify as progressive dispensationalists, further demonstrating that dispensational thought is anything but monolithic. Representing PD is Dr. Michael J. Vlach, Professor of Theology at Shepherds Theological Seminary and author of *Has the Church Replaced Israel* (B&H Academic, 2010) and *He Will Reign Forever: A Biblical Theology of the Kingdom of God* (Lampion, 2017).

Vlach, who identifies more as a hybrid dispensationalist ("revised-progressive") argues for a PD that has much in common with Fazio's TD. This includes a grammatical-historical hermeneutic that emphasizes passage priority for contextual meaning, a distinction between Israel and the church, and a future restoration for national Israel. Yet, a difference can be detected in how the two models view the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. Whereas TD views the relationship in terms of "discontinuity," PD stresses "continuity" arguing for direct correspondence between Old Testament expectations and New Testament fulfillments. Moreover, PD understands biblical history less from the tracing of various dispensations (as in TD), and more from the unfolding of the biblical covenants in history. Primarily, "kingdom" is PD's most prominent theme and central to its model, even over individual redemption from sin. With this, PD's view on the relationship between kingdom and covenant finds more affinity with PC than does TD. Vlach argues that a kingdom of God *over creation* is the overarching theme that ties the Bible's storyline

10. See Darrell L. Bock, "Progressive Movement (1980–Present)," *Discovering Dispensationalism*, 333–351.

together, the means of which are the biblical covenants unfolding kingdom purposes and are progressively fulfilled throughout history. Ultimately, Vlach contends that PD is a comprehensive theology that harmonizes God's aim for creation, kingdom, and covenant in all their magnitude from Genesis through Revelation.

Our final article representing dispensationalism is a special offering by Dr. Kyle Dunham, Associate Professor of Old Testament at Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary and author of *The Pious Sage in Job: Eliphaz in the Context of Wisdom Theodicy* (Wipf & Stock, 2016) and contributor to the *Lexham Context Commentary*: *Old Testament* (Lexham Press, 2020). Grappling with the relationship between the church and the kingdom, Dunham argues for a unique TD position that views the kingdom of God theme developing in the New Testament as a two-stage eschatological kingdom. The current kingship of Christ consists of Melchizedekian kingship, in which Christ reigns over the church as a *royal priest*, while His *Davidic kingly rule* still awaits a future fulfillment. By recognizing these distinct stages, TD offers an alternative to Covenant Theology, Progressive Covenantalism, and Progressive Dispensationalism, not only in its view of the nature of the kingdom of God, but also in its efforts to correlate New Testament teaching concerning Christ's present rule over the church.

Progressive Covenantalism

PC seeks to be a mediating position between the discontinuity of the dispensational systems and the strong continuity of CT. Wellum and Parker note that the name progressive covenantalism is used "to distinguish it from various alternatives. *Progressive* seeks to underscore the unfolding nature of God's revelation over time, while *covenantalism* emphasizes that God's plan unfolds *through* the covenants and that *all* of the covenants find their fulfillment, *telos*, and terminus in Christ."[11] With this description Wellum and Parker succinctly lay out the foundational ideas of the PC system. It seeks to mediate between the dispensational systems and CT. PC also traces the storyline of the Bible and God's one plan of redemption through the biblical covenants and to their fulfillment in Christ. While there are a lot of important themes they all find their yes in Christ (2 Cor. 1:30).

In this issue Stephen J. Wellum advocates for the PC system. Wellum is professor of Christian theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY. Wellum is one of the, if not the, most notable spokespersons for PC in scholarship today. He co-authored a massive defense of this view with Peter J.

11. Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E. Parker, "Introduction," in *Progressive Covenantalism*, 2, emphasis original.

Gentry, titled *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, which is now in its second edition.[12] He also co-edited and contributed to *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course between Dispensational and Covenant Theologies*.[13] He has written numerous other books and articles that directly and indirectly relate to PC.

Wellum starts his article noting the common ground that Christians have in their understanding that covenants are fundamental to the biblical storyline, but he notes that Christians disagree as to how the covenants fit together. Wellum argues that the Bible presents multiple covenants that progressively reveal God's one redemptive plan for his one people. The focus is on God's unified plan that is fulfilled in Christ. He argues that the covenants are not simply a unifying theme, but serve as the backbone of the biblical storyline. He specifically discusses how the covenants address the topic of the one people of God. When discussing hermeneutics Wellum establishes three basic points. First, that Scripture is to be interpreted by its own claim to be the Word of God that is written by human authors carried by the Holy Spirit. Second, Scripture should be interpreted according to its textual, epochal, and canonical contexts. He elaborates on each of these while also describing the importance of typology within PC. Then, Wellum devotes the most space in his article to a positive articulation of how God's unified plan unfolds through the covenants from the beginning of the Bible to the end. Like the title of his book, he describes this a kingdom through covenant. Here Wellum discusses issues of continuity and discontinuity. His article ends by showing how all of the Old Testament covenants find their fulfillment in Christ and insists that the center of God's plan is Christ Jesus.

Also representing a PC model are the articles in the second section of the journal by Joshua M. Greever and Matthew H. Emadi. Greever's article examines the text of Revelation 11:3-13 and its connection to the prophesies in Zechariah 4. Greever focuses on the identity of the two witnesses and how this text shows the regenerate nature of the new covenant community (in distinction to the mixed new covenant community of CT). Emadi's article focuses on the theme of land in the book of Hebrews and provides a critique of the understanding of land present in dispensational theologies. He argues that a typological understanding of land is present in Hebrews. Both of these articles display the features of the hermeneutical principles that Wellum outlines in his article in the first section of the journal.

12. Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants,* 2nd edition (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018). The first edition was published in 2012.

13. Wellum and Parker, *Progressive Covenantalism*.

Covenant Theology

CT has a rich history within Protestant and Evangelical Theology and has seen several recent scholarly contributions. Harrison Perkins introduces Reformed CT in the first section. Perkins is pastor at Oakland Hills Community Church and is Senior Research Fellow at the Craig Center for Study of the Westminster Standards and an online faculty member at Westminster Theological Seminary. Perkins has authored multiple recent books espousing the views of CT including, *Reformed Covenant Theology: A Systematic Introduction*.[14]

Perkins introduces the main themes and core principles of what he refers to as traditional Reformed covenant theology. CT prioritizes the authority of God's written Word, which explains the full scope of salvation that is accomplished by the Triune God by grace alone, through faith alone, and in Christ alone. He begins his article with a discussion of locating covenants and situates this task within the realm of systematic theology rather than the focus on biblical theology in PC. He identifies three theological covenants: the covenant of redemption, the covenant of works, and the covenant of grace. Perkins spends significant time explaining each of these theological covenants and provides the reader ample footnotes for further reading on each. Next, Perkins advocates an eclectic appropriation of hermeneutical methods. He argues that the Bible should be read from the posture of someone in covenant with God, as God's revelatory discourse, and as though it were written to his covenantal people. He argues that CT balances continuity within some spiritual realities and tempers this with the discontinuity found in redemptive history. In the areas of continuity and discontinuity Perkins focuses on the themes of law and gospel and substance and administration. CT focuses on the gospel as the central message of the Bible and argues for the preeminence of Christ throughout the whole Bible.

Conclusion

As you read, compare, and evaluate each of these biblical-theological systems our hope is that you will grow in your love of God, the gospel, and the Word. While each of these biblical-theological systems contain distinct perspectives on hermeneutics, themes, and many other issues, each system also holds to the centrality of the gospel of Jesus Christ. While there may be differences on some things, we have the core of the gospel in common. May God be glorified.

14. Harrison Perkins, *Reformed Covenant Theology: A Systematic Introduction* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2024).

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Traditional Dispensationalism

James I. Fazio

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Introduction

Dispensationalism is a biblical-theological framework for understanding God's various dealings with mankind throughout history. Sometimes referred to as a philosophy of history,[1] dispensationalism maintains that God has dealt with humanity on the basis of differing divinely expressed stewardships or administrations also called dispensations. As such, dispensationalists are known for framing their understanding of Scripture around those identifiable elements which serve to distinguish one dispensation from another. In particular, Traditional Dispensationalism (TD), perhaps more than other forms, maintains an emphasis on the distinctions expressed in the biblical text. While Christians throughout the history of the church have recognized each of the distinctions that characterize dispensational theology, the dispensational framework is nevertheless frequently traced back to John Nelson Darby (1800–1882), who has been widely touted as the founder of dispensationalism.[2]

However, dispensationalism is not the product of one man, such as is typical of many theological systems and (or) denominations, like Calvinism, Arminianism, Lutheranism, Wesleyanism, and so on.[3] Because of this, dispensationalism is not singularly defined. As one dispensational writer has put it, "Dispensationalism is not monolithic but it is a diverse and developing tradition."[4] Like other theological systems, there is a spectrum of dispensational thought. Therefore, due to the range of

1. Renald E. Showers, *There Really is a Difference: A Comparison of Covenant and Dispensational Theology* (Bellmawr: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, 1990), 1–6.

2. This attribution is grossly overstated as numerous theologians viewed biblical history on the basis of successive dispensations, usually numbering seven, for at least two centuries before Darby; William Watson, *Dispensationalism Before Darby: Seventeenth-Century and Eighteenth Century English Apocalypticism* (Silverton: Lampion Press, 2015). Moreover, proponents of the Millennial Day Theory correlated the days of creation week to the millennia that span human history, since the Apostolic Era, as evidenced in the pseudepigraphal *Epistle of Barnabas* (c. AD 100). This subject is addressed extensively in Cory M. Marsh and James I. Fazio, eds., *Discovering Dispensationalism: Tracing the Development of Dispensational Thought from the First through the Twenty-first Century* (El Cajon: SCS Press, 2023).

3. Glenn R. Kreider, "What is Dispensationalism?" in *Dispensationalism and the History of Redemption*, ed. D. Jeffrey Bingham and Glenn R. Kreider (Chicago: Moody, 2015), 17, 37.

4. Kreider, "What is Dispensationalism," 18.

variations that exist within the dispensational tradition, the designation "traditional dispensationalism" is being used here to describe the particular expression that spread across North America in the twentieth century.

Some have referred to this same tradition as "classical dispensationalism,"[5] while others have preferred a more nuanced distinction, referring to earlier iterations prevalent around the turn of the century as "classical," and labeling the midtwentieth century variation common to Charles C. Ryrie, John F. Walvoord, and J. Dwight Pentecost, as "revised."[6] At times, some of these latter scholars favored the term "normative" to describe this traditional or revised form of dispensationalism.[7] However, one difference that all theologians have recognized is between TD and the variation that arose in the late 1980s, popularized by Darrell Bock, Craig Blaising, and Robert Saucy, known as "progressive dispensationalism."[8] This essential distinction is maintained due to the fact that progressive dispensationalism blurs some of the cardinal tenets of traditional dispensational theology, including the differentiation between the Davidic Kingdom and the Kingdom of Heaven.[9] Moreover, progressive dispensationalism has exchanged the traditional hallmarks of the dispensational arrangement of history around the themes of responsibility, testing, failure, and judgment, with a reductionistic schema consisting of three to four successive epochs.[10]

Nevertheless, across today's evangelical landscape—to say nothing of the broader Christian spectrum—dispensationalism, of any variety, has become an object of derision, or as one scholar has put it, a theological bogeyman.[11] This is no recent turn of events. Over the past several decades the winds of change have shifted and dispensationalism has been overtly scorned by the academy.[12] At the end of the last century, Ryrie opened his classic book *Dispensationalism* with a chapter titled "Dispensationalism —Help or Heresy?"[13] More than a sensationalized title or click-

5. Arnold D. Ehlert pointed to 1825 as the dividing year between what he termed "the old and the new dispensationalism," in his *A Bibliographic History of Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1960); Norman C. Kraus similarly recognized the continuity of dispensational thought from the early nineteenth through the mid-twentieth century as "contemporary dispensationalism" in *Dispensationalism in America: Its Rise and Development* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1958), 24–25. Compare with Michael Williams, *This World is Not My Home: The Origins and Development of Dispensationalism* (Geanies House Fearn: Christian Focus, 2003), 12.

6. Craig A. Blaising, "God's Plan for History: The Consummation" in *Dispensationalism and the History of Redemption*, 202–9.

7. Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism, Revised and Expanded* (Chicago: Moody, 2007), 243.

8. The classic work representing this position is Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton: BridgePoint, 1993).

9. Blaising and Bock, 232–83.

10. Blaising and Bock, 48–56.

11. Cory M. Marsh, "Correcting Age-Old Misconceptions" in *Discovering Dispensationalism*, 1.

12. Mark A. Noll's influential work *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 117–43, dedicated the better part of a chapter incriminating dispensationalism for the deterioration of the evangelical mind through its promotion of anti-intellectualism.

13. This title was first published by Ryrie in 1965 under the title *Dispensationalism Today*. The

bait headline, the title reflects a real concern with which well-meaning theologians have genuinely grappled.[14] Though it is worth noting, several of the criticisms that have been leveled against dispensationalism have arisen from distortions perpetuated by its detractors. A prime example of this can be found in the oft-repeated error that dispensationalism teaches differing modes of salvation across the dispensations.[15] Nevertheless, such mischaracterizations persist, not because critics have intentionally endeavored to misrepresent this theological perspective but because of a tendency within the academy to marginalize the traditional dispensational voice and avoid giving its adherents a "seat at the table." In light of this tendency, I am especially grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this discussion and will endeavor, by God's grace, to offer a succinct, yet comprehensive representation of the Protestant evangelical theological framework known as traditional dispensationalism.

Distinctives and Assumptions

The foremost assumption of TD relates to its hermeneutical method. Dispensationalists are committed to a consistent application of the normal grammatical-historical interpretation of Scripture. It is from this principal conviction that all other distinctives of dispensationalism are derived. Included among these distinctives are (1) the arrangement of biblical history according to divinely arranged stewardships or "dispensations," (2) a clear distinction between the peoples of God (particularly, Israel and the Church), and (3) a robust pretribulation eschatological expectation that anticipates the restoration of Israel to God and the establishment of a literal earthly millennial kingdom. Consequently, traditional dispensationalism can be understood as a form of Christian fundamentalism, inasmuch as each of its convictions result from a *prima facie*, or "literal" interpretation of Scripture. Below, I will address the distinct convictions enumerated above, which result from a natural reading of Scripture. Afterwards, I will circle back to the hermeneutical method from which these three distinctives are derived.

work was revised and expanded in 1995 and the formatting was updated again in 2007. All the page numbers in this article refer to the 2007 edition. Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism,* 11.

14. Compare with Philip A. F. Church, "Dispensational Christian Zionism: A Strange but Acceptable Aberration or a Deviant Heresy?" *Westminster Theological Journal* 71, no. 2 (2009): 375–98.

15. This criticism has persisted, despite that every generation of dispensationalist has refuted this claim since it was first leveled against Darby, who unequivocally asserted "that a sinner, at all times since the fall, is saved in the same way, no Christian can doubt for a moment," and "for every sinner in all ages, is saved as such, individually, by grace" *Collected Writings*, 10:12; 11:47. Compare with Lewis Sperry Chafer, "Editorial: Inventing Heretics through Misunderstanding," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 102, no. 405 (January 1945): 1–2; Ryrie, *Dispensationalism,* 123; Glenn R. Kreider, "*Sola Fide:* Salvation is by Grace Through Faith Alone in Every Dispensation" in *Forged from Reformation: How Dispensational Thought Advances the Reformed Legacy*, ed. Christopher Cone and James I. Fazio (El Cajon: SCS Press, 2017), 423–61.

Divinely Arranged Dispensations

First off, dispensationalism is characterized for its understanding of biblical history around the motif of divinely arranged dispensations. This element of TD too often gets overlooked, but it is an important feature of the system. These dispensations, for which the system is named, serve to delineate man's various responsibilities toward God. Typically, TD has enumerated seven such arrangements. The most broadly recognized dispensational scheme includes: (1) Innocence—from creation week to the fall, (2) Conscience—from the fall to the flood, (3) Human Government—from the flood to the call of Abraham, (4) Promise—from the call of Abraham to Mt. Sinai, (5) Law—from Mt. Sinai through Christ, (6) Grace—from Pentecost to the rapture, and (7) Kingdom—from Christ's Return through the Millennium.[16] However, traditional dispensationalists have been quick to point out that the number of dispensations one perceives in the biblical text is not what defines a dispensationalist.[17] Nevertheless, the number seven does tend to carry significance for many dispensationalists.

Regardless of what variations may exist between dispensational arrangements leading up to the present,[18] there is overwhelming consensus as far as the present and future dispensations are concerned. Traditional dispensationalists maintain that the church era is the penultimate dispensation, and that all previous dispensations will culminate in the future millennial kingdom. While this might suffice to elucidate the dispensationalist's arrangement of history on the basis of successive dispensations, there remains a point that bears clarifying: dispensationalists adhere to the notion that over the span of human history God has operated in a variety of ways with respect to each of his distinct households. The very use of the term "household," as a framework for understanding God's relationship to mankind, begs the question of differing stewardships, administrations, or economies. This is because the Greek word *oikonomia*, from which the English word "dispensation" is derived, conveys the idea of household management.[19] Among its various appearances throughout the New Testament, Jesus used it with the greatest frequency. However, it was the

16. This arrangement was typical of dispensational thinkers, which preceded Darby and was promulgated by both C. I. Scofield and Charles C. Ryrie after Darby, though it was not one which Darby accepted. For more on this distinction, see Larry V. Crutchfield, *The Origins of Dispensationalism: The Darby Factor* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1992), 23–140.

17. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 51–52; Kreider, 27.

18. Besides the traditional arrangement presented above, some dispensationalists have held to as few as one or two dispensations preceding Israel (sometimes summed up in the broad categories of Patriarchical or Antidiluvian–Patriarchical), while others have perceived as many as twelve; Compare with. Christopher Cone, "Dispensational Definition and Division Revisited" in *Dispensationalism Tomorrow and Beyond: A Theological Collection of Essays in Honor of Charles C. Ryrie* (Ft. Worth: Tyndale Seminary Press, 2008), 151–61.

19. This Greek word appears in various forms twenty times in the New Testament. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament,* s.v. "*oikonomia*," 5:149–53. For more on how this term is used throughout the NT, see James I. Fazio, "New Testament Era (AD 30–100)" in *Discovering Dispensationalism*, 29–39.

apostle Paul who first applied it theologically in the sense of "the dispensation of the grace of God" (Eph 3:2) and "the dispensation of the fullness of times" (Eph 1:10).[20] In accordance with the apostle's usage, dispensationalists have framed their understanding of biblical history around these divinely appointed stewardships, rather than around a covenantal motif as conceived by the Protestant Reformers.

This is not to say that dispensationalists do not regard the biblical covenants. In fact, the covenants of Scripture feature more prominently in the dispensationalist's philosophy of history than in the covenantalist's.[21] Nevertheless, dispensationalists perceive biblical history—past and future—according to divinely arranged economies, which are, at least in part, punctuated by the biblical covenants. The emphasis here is on the *explicitly revealed covenants of the Bible*, as opposed to the implied theological covenants that are often considered by the covenant theologian. Nevertheless, the Reformed theological covenants are not necessarily antithetical to a dispensational arrangement of history. In fact, some early dispensationalists made efforts to reconcile the theological covenants with the dispensations.[22] However, the traditional dispensational philosophy of history is one which is characterized by God's management over his various households on the basis of successive stewardships or dispensations. As such, a dispensational philosophy of history precludes the abstraction of a covenantal motif that defines God's dealings with humanity.

Distinction of Households

This leads to the second feature that characterizes traditional dispensationalism: the identification of Israel and the Church as two distinct households. Dispensationalists maintain that God has one program for Israel and another for the Church—in fact, they also perceive a third distinct program for the Gentiles.[23] Moreover, traditional dispensationalists regard the Church as a kind of "parenthesis" in God's program for Israel. Daniel's Seventy Week Prophecy (Dan 9:24–27) bears particular relevance in shaping the dispensationalist's understanding in this regard. The present dispensation of the Church is understood to occur in the interval between the sixty-ninth and

20. Compare with John K. Goodrich, *Paul as an Administrator of God in 1 Corinthians*, Society for the New Testament Studies Monograph Series 152 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

21. J. Dwight Pentecost emphasized the study of the biblical covenants as a matter of primary importance in his definitive work *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1964), 65.

22. C. I. Scofield regarded both an Edenic and Adamic covenant, where covenantalists otherwise perceive a covenant of works and grace. Notes on Hebrews 8:8 in *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1909). Similarly, L. S. Chafer appealed to these same covenants, as well as to the Covenant of Redemption, in his *Systematic Theology* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1967), I:42.

23. Dispensationalists find support for this from Paul's delineation of these three groups in the first Corinthian Epistle when he references "the Jews, the Gentiles, and the Church of God" (1 Cor 10:32).

seventieth week of Daniel's prophetic timetable. This is supported by God's disclosure that seventy periods of seven years were determined for the people of Israel (Dan 9:24), the final seven of which correspond to the tribulation week (Dan 9:27; Rev 6–16). This still-future event is also known to the Old Testament prophets as "the time of Jacob's troubles" (Jer 30:7; Dan 12:1).

Pre-Tribulational Premillennialism

This bleeds into the third distinct feature of traditional dispensationalism, namely the eschatological expectation that that the Church will be raptured *prior* to the seven-year tribulation, after which Israel will be restored to God when Christ returns to Jerusalem with his resurrected saints to establish his Messianic Kingdom. TD is so wedded to pretribulation eschatology, that the view is commonly known as "dispensational-premillennialism," as opposed to other premillennial views with differing expectations regarding the timing of the rapture relative to the tribulation. It is here, with regard to the clear-cut significance of the pretribulational rapture of the Church, where Darby's influence is most prominently realized. Darby's exegetical efforts provided dispensationalists the theological scaffolding upon which a multitude of dispensational convictions converge. Without introducing anything new, Darby codified a distinctly dispensational framework that is known for (1) a philosophy of history that recognizes God's divinely appointed dispensations, (2) a clear recognition of the distinct peoples of God, and (3) a dispensational-premillennial eschatological expectation that anticipates the rapture of the Church prior to the tribulation, the restoration of Israel, and the establishment of a literal earthly millennial kingdom. For these reasons, Darby has been often labeled the father of modern dispensationalism.

Still, it bears repeating that these beliefs have been the subject of much debate and derision, particularly in recent years. Critics argue that TD is too literalistic in its interpretation of the Bible, and that its strict separation between Israel and the Church is not supported by the biblical text. Others have challenged the idea of a pretribulation rapture or a future literal kingdom of God. Nevertheless, dispensationalists firmly cling to these beliefs, being fully convinced of them from a fundamentalist reading of Scripture. An unfortunate result is the derision and marginalization, largely from the academy, that comes from identifying with such convictions. However, a growing number of biblical interpreters who employ the dispensationalist's approach to Scripture will shy away from the label "dispensational" while no less adhering to most of, if not all, of these same principles. Therefore, TD continues to maintain a strong presence in many evangelical circles, even if not overtly named.

Hermeneutics

As mentioned above, the grammatical-historical method of interpretation is the lynchpin for dispensational thought. While this Protestant hermeneutic is in no way exclusive to the traditional dispensationalist, the consistency with which it is applied to all of Scripture remains a hallmark of the dispensationalist's hermeneutic. The idiomatic phrase "if the plain sense makes perfect sense seek no other sense" has been the mantra of many dispensational interpreters. While this colloquialism risks being overly simplistic, it captures the essence of the dispensationalist's hermeneutical approach. Like their evangelical counterparts, dispensationalists look to Scripture to interpret Scripture—or what is sometimes referred to as the analogy of faith—where clear texts and repeated expressions are used to elucidate the more obscure. However, the most nuanced point to make concerning the dispensational approach to hermeneutics is that the dispensationalist pays special heed to the concept of progressive revelation; namely, that God has spoken at different times and in diverse ways (Heb 1:1), and that this speaking has been progressively revealed over time from Genesis through Revelation. It is helpful to unpack this hermeneutical method before proceeding to the implications that arise from this notion of progressive revelation.

Grammatical-Historical Hermeneutic

Traditional dispensationalists adhere to the grammatical-historical method of biblical interpretation which sets out to discover the original meaning and intent of the biblical author. This discovery is done by inductively analyzing the grammatical structure and historical context of a given text. Included in the process is exegesis of the grammar and syntax of the Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic, in order to discern the meaning of individual words and phrases as they were employed at the time the text was written, while taking into account the literary style and structure of the text. Moreover, this approach pays careful attention to the historical milieu at the time the text was written—including the social, cultural, and political context—in addition to the author's intended audience and purpose for writing. All of these factors inform the dispensationalist's pursuit of discovering the original author's intended meaning. The traditional dispensationalist's understanding of Scripture is, therefore, deeply anchored on a Protestant grammatical-historical hermeneutic.

While it may be expedient to label the traditional dispensationalist's interpretative method with the term "literal," it risks leading to mischaracterization of the methodology in question. What traditional dispensationalists do *not* adhere to is a strict wooden literalism that fails to take into account literary genres and figures of speech used throughout the Bible.[24] Rather, they consistently apply the

24. The fact that the greatest work on figures of speech in Scripture was produced by one whom some have pejoratively called an ultradispensationalist, speaks volumes in this regard; E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (London: Messrs. Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1898).

grammatical-historical hermeneutic to all of Scripture's diverse genres—from Genesis through Revelation. Consequently, the dispensationalist will read the creation narrative of Genesis 1–3 and understand Adam and Eve to have been two literal people, created by God on the sixth day of creation week, who fell to the serpent's temptation which brought death upon the human race. However pedantic this reading may seem to more erudite readers, the dispensationalist feels no compulsion to capitulate to an alternative understanding simply because a seminar of learned skeptics may have convened and reached a consensus. This is not to say that dispensationalists cling solely to their KJVs to derive meaning from the biblical text. To the contrary, rigorous exegesis in the original languages of Scripture is what principally informs the dispensationalist's understanding of Scripture. Neither does this mean that dispensationalists are ignorant of current trends in biblical scholarship. Instead, they simply follow a principle of biblical prioritization, where the plain language of Scripture prevails over the consensus of human councils, whether past or present.

Prioritization of the Biblical Text

For dispensationalists, prioritization of the biblical text expresses itself in several different ways. First, the most perspicuous meaning of Scripture should be preferred over church tradition or ecclesiastical commitments. Consequently, dispensationalists tend to be noncreedal, nonconfessional, and nondenominational. Second, the language of Scripture is important and reflects deliberate verbal expressions of the divine mind, to which readers should give the most earnest attention. Therefore, the dispensational tendency is to prefer using actual biblical terms according to how they appear in the biblical text rather than how they are used in liturgical or popular parlance. Because of this, the dispensationalist's notion of covenants will tend to be limited only to those which are expressly identified in Scripture. Similarly, the dispensationalist is prone to consider matters of soteriology from texts such as Romans 3:28 and 8:28–30 directly rather than appealing to the Protestant Reformers, such as Luther and Calvin. In this manner, the dispensationalist principally appeals to Scripture, while ecclesiastical tradition is relegated to a more diminished status than adherents of other Reformed traditions might feel comfortable granting.

Progressive Revelation

Third, while the above two points serve to distinguish the dispensationalist's orientation toward Scripture, the most nuanced feature of the dispensationalist's hermeneutic concerns the way God has gradually disclosed himself to humanity. In keeping with the idea that God has revealed different aspects of his plan for humanity across the various dispensations, progressive revelation maintains that God has incrementally revealed his truth to mankind over time, culminating in the ultimate

revelation of Jesus Christ. Just as each dispensation bears unique characteristics and requirements for how humans are to relate to God and live according to his will, so also has God's revelation of his plan for humanity progressed over time, with each dispensation building on the former. For example, the Law was given to the nation of Israel through Moses in the former dispensation while the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ is the focus of the present dispensation (see Roman 9:4; compare with 3:21–22). Thus, the Mosaic Law served as a preliminary introduction to Christ, similar to how a tutor would use rudimentary principals to guide a juvenile into mature understanding (Gal 3:23–25). While this faith has been preliminarily experienced by the Church—being a unique people, neither Jew nor Gentile, but a new creation (Gal 3:28; Eph 2:11–15)—it will be realized by Israel in the next dispensation, when at last the wild branches that have been grafted into the stock have been broken off and the natural branches that had been removed are grafted back in. According to Paul, this is so that "when the full number of the Gentiles has come in … all of Israel will be saved" (Rom 11:25–26).

On account of this concept of progressive revelation, the traditional dispensationalist will apply the principal of interpreting Scripture based on the essential understanding that the New Testament *builds upon* the foundation laid by the Old Testament. This serves as a critical distinction in the dispensational hermeneutic. Rather than reinterpret the Old Testament based on a developed understanding of the New Testament, the traditional dispensationalist will interpret later revelation on the basis of what was previously disclosed through earlier revelation. In this way, later revelation can offer new insight and deeper understanding of earlier revelation, but it does not overwrite or change the meaning of what God divulged to prior generations. This hermeneutical nuance of reading the New Testament *in light of* the Old Testament stands in stark contrast to the practice of reading the New Testament *into* the Old. In common parlance dispensationalists have expressed this principal by saying "a text can never mean what it never meant." Another way of saying this is that a text cannot violate the meaning it was assigned at its original reception. This does not mean that a text cannot have an expanded or fuller meaning, or what hermeneuticians have referred to as *sensus plenior*. Indeed, a text can have an expanded meaning, but it cannot violate the original meaning. Therefore, the dispensationalist maintains that God's promise of the land to Israel, for instance, cannot be satisfied in any other way than by granting said land, which boundaries God expressly demarked, to those whom he promised would receive it. Thus, knowing that Israel never occupied that land and that it is impossible for God to lie (Heb 6:18), the dispensationalist has every reassurance that God will fulfill his word exactly as he delivered it to Israel.

Summary

From all that has been said, it may be concluded that consistent application of the Protestant grammatical-historical hermeneutic is what anchors dispensational thought. Moreover, the dispensationalist's reliance upon Scripture to interpret Scripture, rather than upon confessions, creeds, or denominational traditions, serves as a distinguishing feature of traditional dispensationalism. However, the most definitive feature of the dispensationalist's understanding of Scripture, stems from the recognition that God has progressively disclosed himself to humanity resulting in the expectation that the New Testament builds upon the foundation laid by the Old Testament, and not vice versa.

Continuity and Discontinuity

The issue of continuity and discontinuity underscores the distinctions between covenantal and dispensational theologians. The traditional dispensational perspective recognizes both continuity and discontinuity in Scripture; however, its emphasis on discontinuity is what sets it apart. The continuity of Scripture is expressed through the following ways: (1) with respect to God's immutable nature, his glory serves as the major overarching theme which spans from Genesis through Revelation; (2) with respect to man's failure, God's grace is revealed as an underlying theme evidenced across all of the dispensations; (3) with respect to the dispensations, God's sovereignty demands that humanity respond in faith and walk in conformity to his righteous requirements. Therefore, the dispensationalist is uniquely suited to adequately address matters of discontinuity that appear throughout Scripture. The traditional dispensationalist understands this discontinuity on the basis of the various expressions of the "rule of life" God has given man to follow in each dispensation. This last point serves as a defining feature of the dispensationalist view of continuity and discontinuity, not because it overrides the continuity otherwise expressed, but because others stop short of adequately acknowledging this.

Continuity: God's Glory

First, as far as God is concerned, Scripture reveals his nature to be immutable throughout all of biblical history. This is important because changes in dispensations do not reflect a change in God, but rather a development in God's relationship with man. The illustration of the changes that occur in a relationship between a father and child, from cradle through adulthood, may be help to clarify this point. Developments in the filial relationship are not because changes have occurred in the father, but rather result from differing stages in the maturation of the child (Gal 3:23–25; 1 Cor 13:11). In addition to God's immutable nature, traditional dispensationalists have emphatically pointed to God's glory as an essential theme or axiom that spans all the

dispensations. Thus, dispensationalists typically view God's doxological purpose as a unifying theme of Scripture rather than regarding mankind's redemption as the center of God's purpose for the ages. This view is not intended to trivialize man's failure and need for salvation, as that is essential to the dispensational understanding of biblical history, but it merely regards the fact that God's glory is no less achieved through the condemnation of the wicked as it is through the redemption of the elect in addition to his relationship to the heavenly hosts.

Continuity: Man's Failure, Judgment, and Need for Deliverance

Second, with respect to mankind, issues such as humanity's failure, judgment, and need for deliverance serve as unifying features across all the dispensations. However, there is more in view here than merely man's need for redemption through Christ's substitutionary death and resurrection, though that is undeniably an overriding theme expressed in various ways throughout the Old and New Testaments. The provision of divine grace, despite humankind's failure to live up to the standard of God's expressed household rule—whether it be Adam's transgression, the wickedness that prevailed on the earth in the days of Noah, Israel's characteristic unfaithfulness, or the church's apostasy—is manifest throughout all dispensations. The message of continuity that runs across all of Scripture is that where humanity's failure abounds, God's grace abounds all the more (Rom 5:20).

Discontinuity: Man's Rule of Life

Third, with respect to the dispensations, God has disclosed a variety of righteous demands by which man is to walk in conformity to God's expressed will. Both continuity and discontinuity are expressed in this third point. The continuity is expressed in the fact that in each dispensation, God has provided man with a rule of life. However, the manifold expressions of God's demands underscores the discontinuity, which nondispensationalists find themselves ill-suited to address. Examples here include the various dietary restrictions God prescribed to man across the dispensations: (1) To Adam and Eve, God clearly required a strictly vegan diet consisting of no animal products or by-products (Gen 1:29); (2) To Noah, God permitted an omnivorous diet (Gen 9:3); (3) To Israel, God prescribed a restricted diet that prohibited the eating of unclean animals (Lev 11); (4) to Peter, and by extension the Church, God withdrew all dietary restrictions, expressly commanding "What God has cleansed, you must not call common" (Acts 10:15).

The traditional dispensationalist's readiness to engage the areas of discontinuity between God's manifold workings with all of humanity, or a subset thereof, stands out as a unique and defining characteristic. Subsequently, adherents of a covenantal framework, who tend to view all of history under the sweeping arc of a theological covenant of grace will often point out that dispensationalists are fixated on the

discontinuity expressed throughout Scripture. There is admittedly something to this accusation, as this is at least comparatively so. Indeed, some dispensationalists have been guilty of parsing out nuances *ad nauseum*, and finding distinctions where none should properly be found, including dissecting the Kingdom of Heaven from the Kingdom of God or making inferences from whether the name Jesus precedes the title Christ or vice versa.[25] Along this vein, there have been some whose abstractions of biblical distinctions have landed them on the outer fringes of the dispensational umbrella, earning them the pejorative designation "hyper-" or "ultra-" dispensationalist. Such adherents have been known to reject the ordinance of water baptism or the Lord's Table as elements of a former dispensation.[26] However, those who subscribe to such beliefs are outliers and do not properly reflect traditional dispensationalism.

Summary

Dispensationalists are supremely suited to address both the continuity as well as the discontinuity that exists throughout Scripture. While fully embracing the continuity of Scripture, as revealed through the nature of God, the sinfulness of humanity, the need for salvation, and the ultimate goal of God's plan for humanity, the dispensationalist emphasizes that God has dealt with humanity in different ways at different times, across the dispensations. From this perspective, there are noticeable discontinuities between the different dispensations, as God's expressed rule of life governs how humanity is to carry-out their responsibility toward God. Thus, the TD perspective on the continuity and discontinuity of Scripture emphasizes the importance of reading the Bible in light of the different dispensations in order to bring harmony to the diverse ways in which God has revealed himself across the Old and New Testaments.

Theological Commitments and Themes

Since the original release of Ryrie's *Dispensationalism Today* (1965), TD has been largely characterized by the *sine qua non* that he offered therein. The three indispensable points, which he perceived as both fundamental and determinative for dispensationalism, include (1) the distinction between Israel and the church, (2) the consistent application of a literal hermeneutic, and (3) the recognition that God's glory serves as his underlying purpose for history.[27] The widespread acceptance of these three points has been a matter of debate among dispensationalists, with

25. Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, VII:223–225.

26. Cornelius R. Stam, *Things That Differ: The Fundamentals of Dispensationalism* (Germantown: Berean Bible Society, 2008), 221–24; 258–61.

27. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 45–48.

the most ardent opposition coming from progressive dispensationalists who have offered alternative tenets.[28] Their contention over the suitability of Ryrie's *sine qua non* to define dispensationalism's essential theological commitments is not without merit, as such distinctive features as God's governance of humanity on the basis of divinely determined economies are conspicuously absent, as is any clear expression of a futurist expectation of the millennium with the adjoining expectation of the pretribulational rapture of the church. Ryrie was not altogether unaware of these objections, as he included some engagement with these concerns in his revised and expanded edition (1995).[29] As these issues have already been addressed in previous sections, there is no need to revisit them here. Nevertheless, I have determined to address two points besides Ryrie's *sine qua non*, in order to bring attention to contrastive features between traditional and progressive dispensationalism. These two additional theological commitments or themes will engage the traditional dispensationalist's understanding of the Davidic Kingdom and the New Covenant.

Distinction Between Israel and the Church

Perhaps no treatment of TD written in the past half-century can avoid some discussion of Ryrie's *sine qua non*. Although many have questioned the ordering of Ryrie's three points, with some giving logical prioritization of the second point over the first (that is, hermeneutics precedes inductions derived from the biblical text), none have questioned the significance of the distinction between Israel and the church.[30] Concerning this first point of the *sine qua non*, Stanley Toussaint has said, "Of these three, undoubtedly the most important is the distinction between Israel and the church."[31] The reason for this is because, as Ryrie aptly observed, this single point serves as perhaps the most practical and conclusive test of whether one observes dispensational distinctions, "One who fails to distinguish Israel and the church consistently will not hold to dispensational distinctions; and one who does will."[32]

28. Blaising and Bock, 9–56.

29. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 45–46.

30. For a full recent treatment on Ryrie's *sine qua non*, I commend to the reader Mark A. Snoeberger's excellent contribution, "Traditional Dispensationalism," in *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture*, ed. Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas, Spectrum Multiview Books (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2022), 147–82. Incidentally, his arrangement of the three issues prioritizes the hermeneutic over against the other two points.

31. Stanley Toussaint, "Israel and the Church of a Traditional Dispensationalist" in *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 227.

32. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 46.

Consistent Originalist Hermeneutic

The second point in Ryrie's *sine qua non* is the consistent application of the grammatical-historical hermeneutic, or what Snoeberger has termed an *originalist* hermeneutic, which "holds that interpretation of texts be carried out with 'strict intentionalism' that 'accords binding authority' on the 'intentions' of a given document's authors."[33] Snoeberger has preferred this language to describe Ryrie's principle in an effort to sidestep the misunderstanding that has persisted over the use of the terms "literal," "normal," or "plain"[34]—all of which have been susceptible to misconstrual by dispensationalism's critics. The dispensationalist's hermeneutic has already been discussed and does not require restatement. However, for amplification, the point may be reinforced that all authors represented in this journal apply this hermeneutical method to some extent. Nevertheless, the traditional dispensationalist attempts to apply this hermeneutic *consistently* to all of Scripture, rejecting the covenantalist's occasional "typological" or "spiritualizing" method as well as the progressive dispensationalist's "complementary approach."[35] Moreover, the traditional dispensationalist will avoid both the covenantal tendency to give the New Testament prioritization in determining the meaning of the OT, but will also avoid the complementary reading or transactional interchange between the Testaments that characterizes the progressive dispensationalist's reading of Scripture.

The Doxological Principle

The third theme that Ryrie's *sine qua non* engages is the traditional dispensational concept of God's glory as his underlying purpose throughout history. This concept is sometimes referred to as the doxological principle.[36] This theme distinguishes traditional dispensational thought from both covenantal and progressive dispensational theologies, and yet it is at least partly for this very reason that it has stirred up so much controversy from within and without dispensational camps.[37] Although to some extent, virtually all Christians recognize God's glory as a significant theme expressed throughout Scripture, Snoeberger, representing TD, has been careful to point out, "In the main, both covenant theology and progressive covenantalism view

33. Snoeberger, "Traditional Dispensationalism," 153.

34. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 91.

35. For more on this approach I commend to the reader Darrell L. Bock, "Hermeneutics of Progressive Dispensationalism" in *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 85–118.

36. Snoeberger has suggested the label "doxological center," which offers a helpful distinction over it being merely "one among many" scriptural themes. Snoeberger, "Traditional Dispensationalism,"163.

37. For a helpful article that summarizes the controversy, I commend to the reader Douglas Brown, "The Glory of God and Dispensationalism: Revisiting the *Sine Qua Non* of Dispensationalism," *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2018), 26–46.

Scripture as a history of redemption … dispensational theology, on the other hand, views Scripture as a history of the rule of God."[38] In contrast to this, Craig Blaising has stated, "For progressive dispensationalism, the kingdom of God is the unifying theme of the history of divine revelation."[39] However, the traditional dispensationalist is keen to point out that while the Bible shines a spotlight on the redemption theme, as well as on God's eternal Kingdom, the overriding principle under which all others are subsumed—including the suffering of the righteous (1 Pet 4:12–16) and the condemnation of the wicked (Rom 9:22–24)—is that in all things *God would be glorified*. Paul's doxology captures this idea best: "For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. *To Him be the glory forever.* Amen" (Rom 11:36, emphasis added).

The Kingdom of God and the Davidic Kingdom

Besides Ryrie's *sine qua non*, there are several additional themes that serve to set TD apart from both covenantal theologies as well as progressive dispensationalism. Some of TD's most distinctive theological commitments include the relationship between the Davidic Kingdom and the Kingdom of God, the extent to which the Christian participates in the New Covenant, and a view of the Church as a parenthesis in God's dealing with the household of Israel. Concerning the first theme, the traditional dispensational approach is to differentiate between the Davidic Kingdom and the Kingdom of God. The Davidic Kingdom is understood as the promised earthly, political kingdom established by God through King David and his descendants in 2 Samuel 7:12–16 and is anticipated to have a literal, future fulfillment when Christ returns to exercise his dominion over all the kingdoms of this earth from David's throne in Jerusalem (Ps 22:27–29; Rev 19:11–20:6).

Conversely, the Kingdom of God is perceived as a broader concept that encompasses God's eternal rule and reign over all creation, encompassing both earthly and heavenly realms. The general traditional dispensational understanding of the Kingdom of God is one that regards it as a spiritual and universal kingdom without beginning or end (Psa 103:19; Dan 4:3; 2 Pet 1:11). Thus, they regard it as irresponsible to merely gloss over the apparent distinctions between the differences in time and scope between the temporal earthly Davidic Kingdom and the eternal heavenly Kingdom of God. In debates over this point, TDs and their progressive counterparts have spilled much ink.

38. Snoeberger, "Traditional Dispensationalism," 164.

39. Craig A. Blaising, "Contemporary Dispensationalism," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 36, no. 2 (1994): 12.

Relationship of the Church to the New Covenant

The next theological commitment to consider here involves the New Covenant. Recognizing Israel and the Church as two distinct households has direct implications on the extent of the Christian's involvement in the New Covenant. Since Scripture expressly states that the New Covenant is designated for the "house of Israel and the house of Judah" (Jer 31:31–34; Heb 8:8–13), traditional dispensationalists are not comfortable subsuming those promises in the Church. Rather, they deem it necessary to regard this covenant as principally related to Israel's national restoration and future blessing in the Messianic [Davidic] Kingdom. It is important to point out that this is one of those areas where dispensationalists maintain a range of views vis-à-vis the extent to which the Christian participates to some degree—if any—in Israel's covenant. However, they tend to be consistent in their understanding that the promises and covenants expressed throughout the Old Testament should be principally applied to national Israel, not appropriated by the Church (Rom 9:3–5).

Among the range of views related to Christian participation in the New Covenant, some will regard Christians as participating in blessings associated with this covenant, while others will go so far as to see the Church directly participating in this covenant. Still others go the opposite way and view the New Covenant, along with each of its attached blessings, as belonging *solely* to a future, restored national Israel.[40] However, one area of general agreement is that the New Covenant was given to the Household of Israel and will be fully realized by them in the next dispensation. Not only are these concerns peculiar to TD, but they are often a focal point for much in-house discussion within TD.

The Church as a Parenthesis

Finally, it must be understood that according to TD, the Church is regarded as a parenthesis in God's dealing with Israel. This idea has nuances that go beyond simply seeing the Church as the next dispensation in God's sequential dealings with different households. The parenthetical nature of the church speaks to the fact that God "interrupted"—from a human perspective—his program with Israel and inserted an intervening dispensation known as the Church. However, just as he seemingly abruptly paused his dealings with Israel, so will he also resume them, in order to conclude that dispensation. Daniel's "70 Weeks" prophecy is relevant here (Dan 9:24-27), and particularly the perceived interval between the sixty-ninth and seventieth week of Daniel's prophecy.

40. For each of these positions from different traditional dispensationalists, see Michael Stallard, ed., *Dispensational Understanding of the New Covenant*: *Three Views* (Elgin: Regular Baptist Press, 2012); and Cory M. Marsh, "A Dynamic Relationship: Christ, the Covenants, and Israel," *Master's Seminary Journal* 30, no. 2 (Fall 2019): 257–75.

Thus, TD views the Church as a temporary interruption or parenthetical period in God's plan for Israel. It then follows that Christians are not explicitly named as recipients, and therefore, it must be determined to which extent, if any, they participate in the New Covenant. On the whole, traditional dispensationalists agree that the New Covenant will be fulfilled with Israel in the future, during the millennial reign of Christ. Some argue that even the promises of the New Covenant, such as the forgiveness of sins and the internal transformation by the Holy Spirit, are specifically for Israel and not for the Church. It bears repeating that while many traditional dispensationalists hold this perspective, there are variations and differing views within the broader dispensational framework. Some dispensationalists may even have more modified or nuanced positions on the relationship between the Church and the New Covenant that are not described above. Nevertheless, the point of agreement is that the New Covenant is not fulfilled in the Church but will be fulfilled in the coming dispensation.

Conclusion

As noted at the start, TD is a biblical-theological framework for understanding God's various dealings with man throughout biblical history—from Genesis through Revelation. It is a framework derived from the pages of Scripture, as opposed to theological abstractions. It has also been observed that dispensationalism is a diverse and developing tradition. It is not prescripted by any extra-biblical creed or confession, nor is it singularly defined by the ideas of any individual. Perhaps its most defining feature is that TD arises from the recognition of biblical distinctions. It may well be for this very reason that such a strong aversion exists toward dispensationalism in general, and TD in particular.

The modern *zeitgeist* or spirit of the age is one that vigorously detests distinctions of any kind and seeks to eradicate them with extreme prejudice. Distinctions are, by definition, discriminatory. It is preferable to most—and a good deal easier—to lump together like things and treat them as synonymous. However, it is appropriate to ask whether in the case of divine revelation God has afforded the biblical exegete that prerogative. So long as students of Scripture engage the text with an eye to discerning what it declares and to define the boundaries of what it does not, the dispensational framework will persist. Moreover, the biblical-theological landscape will be richer for it.

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Progressive Dispensationalism

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Introduction

Dispensationalism is a comprehensive theological system based upon a consistent grammatical-historical hermeneutic applied to all Scripture. It accounts for God's creation, kingdom, and covenant purposes and how these unfold in history from Genesis 1 through Revelation 22. It also explains how Israel, the nations, and the church relate to God's purposes.

With this essay I explain key historical, hermeneutical, and theological beliefs of dispensationalism from the perspective of progressive dispensationalism (PD). By "progressive dispensationalism" I refer to the dispensational tradition of approximately the last fifty years. I identify as a "revised-progressive dispensationalist" since much of what I hold is similar to both revised and progressive forms of dispensationalism. What is presented here also has much in common with what James Fazio presented as "traditional dispensationalism" in the previous essay, yet with some minor differences. But for simplicity, in this article I will refer specifically to the designation, progressive dispensationalism.

While no system is perfect, throughout the essay I will argue that PD is the most accurate and comprehensive theological view that captures the storyline of Scripture in all its dimensions.

Distinctives and Assumptions

Like other Protestant and Evangelical theologies, dispensationalism, as a system, is a post-Reformation development. William C. Watson's book *Dispensationalism Before Darby* documented theological currents of English theologians in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that led to the rise of dispensationalism in the nineteenth century.[1] These include interest in Bible prophecies, the future of national Israel, and premillennialism. Dispensationalism adopted these contributions and built upon the interest in these areas.

1. William C. Watson, *Dispensationalism Before Darby: Seventeenth-Century and Eighteenth-Century English Apocalypticism* (Silverton: Lampion Press, 2015).

As a system, dispensationalism often is linked with the Anglo-Irish theologian and Plymouth Brethren minister, John Nelson Darby (1800–82). Darby packaged several beliefs now associated with dispensational theology—a coming seventieth week of Daniel, a future restoration for national Israel, the significance of geo-political nations, the distinction between Israel and the church, and a pretribulational rapture of the church. Most of these beliefs existed well before Darby, but Darby combined these ideas in a way that contributed to dispensationalism as a system. Most dispensationalists view Darby as one who systematized dispensational ideas and not as the originator of dispensational beliefs, since they believe these are taught in the Bible.

Dispensationalism increased in popularity in the nineteenth century through the Bible conference movement of the 1890s, the rise of dispensational Bible institutes and colleges, the influence of Dallas Theological Seminary (est. 1924), the popularity of dispensational radio and television programs, and many books produced by dispensationalists. Dispensationalism does not have a confession that has frozen its theology. It has revised itself throughout the decades while retaining its core beliefs.

There are four historical stages of dispensationalism.[2] Classical dispensationalism was prominent from the 1830s with Darby through the *Scofield Reference Bible* in 1909. Traditional dispensationalism characterized the era from 1909 to 1949, the latter date coinciding with the release of Lewis Sperry Chafer's *Systematic Theology*. Revised dispensationalism represents the dispensational tradition from 1950 to 1986 and the influence of John Walvoord, Charles Ryrie, J. Dwight Pentecost, and Alva J. McClain. Progressive dispensationalism represents dispensationalism from 1986 to today and highlights the influence of key theologians such as Robert Saucy, Craig Blaising, and Darrell Bock. Dispensationalism today is mostly a mix of traditional or revised and PD. These forms of dispensationalism, especially the last two, share many similarities with minor differences between them.

Dispensationalism's Primary Contributions

Dispensationalism is an heir of the Protestant Reformation.[3] It embraces the five *solas* of the Reformation—grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone, Scripture alone, and to the glory of God alone. While dispensationalism is not a specific soteriological system like Reformed or Covenant Theology, it affirms Reformation and evangelical understandings of salvation in Christ. Many early dispensational theologians were Presbyterians, and dispensationalists often affirmed Calvinistic theology. Historian, George Marsden, noted, "strong Calvinistic ties" in the American origins of

2. Not every dispensationalist would agree with this exact taxonomy. For example, Fazio's article on "traditional dispensationalism" is what I classify here as "revised dispensationalism."

3. See Christopher Cone and James I. Fazio, eds., *Forged from Reformation: How Dispensational Thought Advances the Reformed Legacy* (El Cajon: SCS Press, 2017).

dispensational premillennialism.[4] And "Darby was himself an unrelenting Calvinist."[5] Although variations exist among dispensationalists on the Calvinism–Arminianism scale, dispensationalists affirm traditional evangelical perspectives on salvation.

Dispensationalism's primary emphases and contributions, however, do not occur in the realm of soteriology or individual redemption. *Dispensationalism primarily addresses God's workings throughout history in the realms of creation, kingdom, covenants, law, people of God, and hermeneutics. It also has specific and nuanced views concerning ecclesiology (church), and eschatology (end times).* While covenant theology mostly focuses on the salvation of elect individuals in Jesus, dispensationalism addresses God's broader historical purposes, which include but go beyond individual redemption.

Dispensationalism tracks God's actions in history through various eras or dispensations. And it is often known for affirming seven dispensations: innocence, conscience, government, promise, law, grace, and kingdom. These seven are emphasized within classical and traditional dispensationalism. Most revised and progressive dispensationalists affirm something close to these seven dispensations, but also emphasize God's purposes through the unfolding of the Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and New covenants in history. Dispensationalism also focuses on the people of God in history, namely pre-Israel saints, Israel, Gentile nations, and the church, and how these relate to each other and contribute to God's purposes. Dispensationalism, from its earliest days, is also known for promoting a hermeneutic of consistent literal-grammatical-historical interpretation to all Scripture. This includes Old Testament prophetic sections, which dispensationalists believe should be understood with a consistent, literal hermeneutic.

Though not a particular system of soteriology, dispensationalism does address the scope and reach of salvation. The salvation Jesus accomplishes not only applies to saved individuals; it also extends to corporate ethnic groups and nations, and even the entire creation. For example, Romans 11:26 states, "all Israel will be saved," a reference to corporate national Israel. Isaiah 19:20 reveals that God will send Egypt "a Savior and a Champion," which is a reference to a coming salvation of Egypt. Isaiah 11 says the Messiah will restore the animal realm. Isaiah 35 describes a transformed earth. According to Colossians 1:20 Jesus is reconciling all things through the blood of His cross.

Thus, dispensationalism presents a broad perspective of salvation, one that reaches all creation. Darrell Bock notes, "Salvation is comprehensive, touching all structural spheres."[6] Mark Snoeberger observes, "There is more to the Bible than

4. George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism: 1925-1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 46.

5. Marsden, *Fundamentalism*, 46.

6. Darrell L. Bock, "Progressive Dispensationalism," in *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture*, ed. Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2022), 122.

mere redemptive history. The Bible is a history of the rule of God as much as it is a history of his saving acts."[7]

This comprehensive understanding of salvation is a unique contribution of dispensationalism not often seen with the other theological systems. Craig Blaising notes, "The dispensational tradition has offered a broader concept of redemption than found in some other theologies. Redemption extends to political and national levels as well as to individual and spiritual renewal."[8] This differs particularly from Covenant Theology, which seems most focused on the individual salvation of elect persons, and not on God's broader purposes for creation and nations.

Thus, dispensationalism uniquely contributes to Christian theology by accounting for God's multi-dimensional purposes for all creation and peoples from the garden of Eden in Genesis 1–2 to Jesus's messianic-millennial kingdom in Revelation 20 and the Eternal Kingdom described in Revelation 21–22. *It is a kingdom-reign-over-creation system*. Dispensationalism also addresses all dimensions of the Noahic, Abrahamic, Davidic, and New covenants, including their physical, national, and international blessings. It realizes these covenants include spiritual blessings, but there also is much more. Dispensationalism delves into the roles of Israel, Gentile nations, and the church in history. As such, it offers insights into how God's creation, kingdom, covenant, and people of God purposes unfold in history.

Essentials of Dispensationalism

Dispensational scholars promote certain specific beliefs as essential to its system. Charles Ryrie (1925–2016), for example, presented a *sine qua non* (essential conditions) of dispensationalism involving three areas: (1) a distinction between Israel and the church, (2) a hermeneutic of "literal interpretation" to all areas of scripture, including Old Testament prophecies, and (3) the glory of God as the underlying purpose of God in history.[9]

Extending past Ryrie's list, John Feinberg, offered six "essentials" of dispensationalism: (1) multiple senses of terms like "Jew" and "seed of Abraham", (2) a hermeneutic in which the New Testament reaffirms and does not reinterpret the Old Testament, (3) unconditional promises to national Israel in the Old Testament must be fulfilled with national Israel, (4) a distinctive future for Israel, (5) the church as a distinctive organism, and (6) a philosophy of history in which history is the gradual implementation and outworking of the kingdom of God.[10]

7. Mark A. Snoeberger, "A Traditional Dispensational Response," in *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture*, ed. Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2022), 245.

8. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 18.

9. Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), 43–47.

10. John S. Feinberg, "Systems of Discontinuity," in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives*

These lists show that dispensationalism involves a hermeneutic of consistent literal-grammatical-historical interpretation to all Scripture. Also, this system addresses the important roles of Israel and the church in God's purposes. Finally, it emphasizes God's broader kingdom designs in history. Dispensationalism is a "big-picture," comprehensive perspective.

Progressive Dispensationalism Distinctives

A full discussion of how PD compares with other forms of dispensationalism is beyond our purposes. Progressive dispensationalism holds to the core beliefs of dispensationalism as found in the lists of Ryrie and Feinberg above. But there are certain noteworthy emphases. First, PD traces God's workings in history mostly from the unfolding of the biblical covenants in history, and less on the traditional seven dispensations. Many progressive dispensationalists believe in the traditional dispensations of dispensationalism but choose to focus more on the biblical covenants and the implications of Jesus's two comings for tracking God's workings in history.

Second, PD believes the church of this age experiences partial and realized fulfillments of the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New covenants. These covenants were made with Israel and will be fulfilled in all their dimensions with Israel, but since these covenants were also intended to bless Gentiles someday (see Gen 12:3; 2 Sam 7:19; Isa 52:15), it is accurate to see the church as experiencing spiritual blessings of the covenants of promise. Thus, PD uses the word "fulfill" for what God is doing with the church regarding the covenants. This fulfillment involves the arrival of Jesus and spiritual blessings associated with the covenants. Yet the fulfillment of physical and national promises, including those related to national Israel, awaits Jesus's return.

Hermeneutics of Progressive Dispensationalism

Progressive dispensationalism affirms consistent use of "literal-grammatical-historical" hermeneutics to all Scripture as foundational to interpreting the Bible. As Saucy notes, "Progressive dispensationalism affirms traditional historical-grammatical hermeneutics as its starting point."[11] Using this method properly reveals all God is telling us in His Word. By "literal" is meant the authorial intent of the Bible writer as he was guided by the Holy Spirit. Whether through straightforward language or the use of analogy, figure of speech, or symbol, each Bible author conveyed a specific meaning in each text he wrote. And this meaning, whether in the Old Testament or New Testament, contributes to God's revelation. Literal hermeneutics seeks to decipher the authorial intent in all Bible texts.

on the Relationship between the Old and New Testaments, ed. John S. Feinberg (Wheaton: Crossway, 1988), 67–85.

11. Robert L. Saucy, "The Progressive Dispensational View," in *Perspectives on Israel and the Church: 4 Views*, ed. Chad O. Brand (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015), 156.

Deciphering the literal meaning comes through awareness of the historical and grammatical contexts surrounding the Bible writers. "Historical" refers to the historical context in which the writer wrote. This involves the time, place, audience, and situation facing the writer and his readers. "Grammatical" means studying the words, sentences, paragraphs, syntax and everything associated with words and how language works. This also includes discerning the various genres of the Bible. Additionally, this means awareness of figures of speech and symbols. Ultimately, literal-grammatical-historical interpretation is "interpretation," that discovers what a Bible author meant in his text. When all parts of the Bible are understood accurately, we see a cohesive and harmonious message.

This principle of literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutics also applies to Old Testament prophetic passages, including those about the restoration of Israel. Prophecies of Israel's curses and dispersion literally happened. So, too, will promises concerning Israel's salvation and restoration as found in texts like Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 30, Isaiah 11, Jeremiah 30–33, Ezekiel 36–37, Hosea 2, and Zechariah 14. As Roy Zuck states, "Nowhere does Scripture indicate that when we come to prophetic portions of Scripture we should ignore the normal sense of the words and overlook the meanings of words and sentences. The norms of grammatical interpretation should be applied to prophetic as well as to nonprophetic literature."[12]

Progressive dispensationalism, at times, is linked with the concept of "complementary hermeneutics" in which God may do more than what He promised in a text but He will not do less. Thus, there could be meanings and significances beyond the original meaning of a text. This concept has been debated within dispensationalism, and it is not my view. But it does not change the reality that PD emphasizes grammatical-historical hermeneutics as foundational for understanding all Scripture.

Passage Priority

Non-dispensational systems often assert the concept of New Testament Priority over the Old Testament. Allegedly, the meanings of Old Testament prophetic texts are not found primarily in the Old Testament passages, but in New Testament interpretations or reinterpretations of these passages. As Richard Gaffin puts it, "Hermeneutical priority belongs to New Testament statements."[13]

But PD does not believe later Bible passages interpret or reinterpret earlier Bible passages, if by this meanings are infused into the Old Testament texts that did not originally exist. God inspired all Scripture with no need for the meaning of one

12. Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth* (Colorado Springs: ChariotVictor, 1991), 241–42.

13. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "The Redemptive-Historical View," in *Biblical Hermeneutics: Five Views*, ed., Stanley E. Porter and Beth M. Stovell (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012), 98. Gaffin states this is especially true for "overall generalizations about the Old."

passage to override the meaning of another. Darrell Bock observes that the New Testament priority approach is "subversive retrojection of the NT back to the Old" that negates what God explicitly affirmed:

> [the] claim of New Testament priority is a subversive retrojection of the NT back to the Old that actually loses some of what the inspiring God had committed himself to doing. No amount of pleading on behalf of a certain type of typology can deny this linguistic canceling effect on the text. The result is not a unifying of scriptural teaching but a negating and limiting of what God affirmed, resulting in a reductionist reading of the text.[14]

Dispensationalism, thus, asserts *passage priority. The meaning of any Bible passage is found in that passage*. The meaning of Joel 3 is found in Joel 3. The meaning of Psalm 2 is found in Psalm 2. The meaning of Revelation 20 is found in Revelation 20, and so on. Wherever it is located a Bible passage contributes to God's purposes in its own context. Later revelation might comment on a passage, draw principles or significances from it, or connect a promise in the Old with fulfillment in the New, but later revelation does not reinterpret or change earlier revelation. God got it right the first time.

Dispensationalism also affirms the integrity and authority of both testaments. Scripture is a unified whole. Later revelation harmonizes with earlier revelation. The New builds upon the Old but it does not change the Old. God's character guarantees this. John Feinberg notes how the principle of passage priority, found with dispensationalism, contrasts with nondispensationalism, "Nondispensationalists begin with NT teaching as having priority and then go back to the OT. Dispensationalists often begin with the OT, but wherever they begin they demand that the OT be taken on its own terms rather than reinterpreted in the light of the NT."[15] And when both testaments are taken seriously, we see they harmonize. Paul Feinberg rightly argues, "If both Testaments are granted their integrity, their message will harmonize, since there is the single divine mind behind both."[16] Dispensationalism, thus, affirms great continuity between Old Testament expectations and New Testament fulfillments. What the Old Testament literally promised, will be fulfilled literally through the two comings of Jesus.

Jesus's Role with Fulfillment

Nondispensationalists often assert that Old Testament promises are transformed or fulfilled in a different way because of Jesus. Allegedly, Jesus fulfills the Old

14. Darrell Bock, "A Progressive Dispensational Response," in *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies*, 222. Bock refers to the essay by the Covenantalist, Michael Horton, with this statement.

15. Feinberg, "Systems of Discontinuity," 75.

16. Paul Feinberg, "Hermeneutics of Discontinuity," in Feinberg, ed. *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 127.

Testament in a way that makes prophetic details about Israel, Israel's land, physical blessings, an earthly Davidic Throne, and other things disappear in significance. For example, Kim Riddlebarger said Old Testament prophecies "vanish in Jesus Christ, who has fulfilled them."[17] But is this what fulfillment in Jesus really means?

No, Jesus does not make Old Testament prophecies "vanish." Instead, "fulfillment in Jesus" involves literal fulfillment of all Bible prophecies, covenants, and promises. This has two dimensions.

First, Jesus literally fulfills messianic prophecies about himself. Jesus referred to this in Luke 24:44 concerning His suffering, death, and resurrection: "Now He said to them, 'These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.'" This reveals that "all things which are written about" Jesus in the Old Testament must be fulfilled. Jesus's birth in Bethlehem was predicted in Micah 5:2 and was literally fulfilled. Jesus's entrance into Jerusalem on a donkey literally fulfilled Zechariah 9:9 (see Matt 21:4–5). So one major way Jesus fulfills the Old Testament is that He directly fulfills messianic prophecies about himself.

Second, Jesus is the *means* for the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, promises, and covenants. Jesus is a person, but there are prophecies and predictions about other persons, things, institutions, events, etc. These are important for God's plans to be accomplished. There are predictions about a coming Antichrist, temple, Israel, nations, destruction and rescue of Jerusalem, battles between nations, the Day of the Lord, kingdom, resurrections, judgments, etc. These matters are significant to God's purposes and Jesus is involved with their fulfillment. They do not vanish or dissolve into Jesus in a metaphysical way. As the One who is at the center of all God is doing in the world, Jesus works to bring everything predicted in the Old Testament to literal fulfillment. So Jesus is the *means of fulfillment* of the Old Testament since He makes sure all God's plans are accomplished.

In Matthew 5:17–18, Jesus said He did not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets but to "fulfill" them. "Law" and "Prophets" means the entirety of the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus also explained what "fulfill" means when He declared that everything predicted in the Hebrew Scriptures must be "accomplished" (Matt 5:18). Thus, "fulfill" in this context means "accomplished." And what must be accomplished? Everything stated in the Old Testament! Jesus actively works to make sure everything in the Hebrew Scriptures happens as stated. He is the means for the literal fulfillment of the Old Testament. Blaising notes that fulfillment in Jesus can mean "through Him": "Actually, 'in Him' is a thick concept in Scripture that includes 'through Him.' It includes multiple aspects of the relationship of Christ to

17. Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 70. Emphases mine. His full statement is, "The New Testament writers claimed that Jesus was the true Israel of God and the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. So what remains of the dispensationalists' case that these prophecies will yet be fulfilled in a future millennium? They vanish in Jesus Christ, who has fulfilled them."

the redeemed creation."[18] I would argue this approach is more Christ-honoring than believing details of prophecies "vanish" into Jesus.

Partial Fulfillments of Covenants and Prophecies

Concerning fulfillments of the biblical covenants and the return of Jesus, Mark Yarbrough rightly states, "While all covenants are completed in Jesus, Jesus has yet to complete all the covenants. That is why we await the second advent of Christ, when he will return and finish what has been started."[19] Though Jesus fulfills the biblical covenants, and many aspects of these covenants have already occurred, not everything has been fulfilled yet.

Progressive dispensationalism views the biblical covenants as having past, present, *and* future fulfillments. The Abrahamic covenant predicted the coming of a "great nation," Israel. That happened. But Israel's full possession of the dimensions of the promised land, as stated in Genesis 15:18–21, awaits future fulfillment. Concerning the Davidic covenant, the promise of kings in the line of David leading to the Messiah have been fulfilled in history. But the promises of perpetual peace for Israel and a reign of the Messiah over the entire earth and all nations (see Psalm 72) has not yet happened. Also, the New covenant promise of the indwelling Holy Spirit and a new heart now occurs for God's people, but the restoration of Jerusalem and physical blessings for Israel associated with the New covenant still await future fulfillment (see Jeremiah 31:38–40; 33). Thus, concerning the covenants of promise—Abrahamic, Davidic, and New—important details have been fulfilled in history, but others await future fulfillment. PD addresses which aspects of the biblical covenants have been fulfilled already and which aspects still need to occur. It also understands that the first coming of Jesus did not bring everything to completion. Jesus's second coming also is involved with fulfillment.

Partial fulfilment also applies to some prophetic passages. In some cases, certain details of a prophetic passage were literally fulfilled with Jesus's first coming, while other details in the passage await future fulfillment with Jesus's second coming. One example is Zechariah 9:9–10. This prophecy describes several events concerning the Messiah. It predicts Jerusalem celebrating her King who comes humbly on a donkey (v. 9). And it predicts this King as One who brings peace to the nations with a kingdom reign over the entire earth (v. 10). The events of 9:9 were fulfilled with Jesus's first coming, while the events of 9:10 await fulfillment with Jesus's second coming. All four Gospel writers quote Zechariah 9:9 as being fulfilled with Jesus's entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Jesus came to Jerusalem on a donkey as Israel's Messiah. But Zechariah 9:10 foretold the Messiah removing war from the earth and ruling the

18. Craig A. Blaising, "A Critique of Gentry and Wellum's, *Kingdom Through Covenant*: A Hermeneutical-Theological Response," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 124.

19. Mark Yarbrough, "Israel and the Story of the Bible," in *Israel the Church and the Middle East*, ed. Darrell L. Bock and Mitch Glaser (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2018), 60–61.

nations from sea to sea. This awaits future fulfillment. Warfare among nations did not cease with Jesus's first coming, and Jesus is not yet reigning over the nations of the earth. Dispensationalists believe 9:10 will be fulfilled with Jesus's second coming to earth (see Matt 25:31 and Rev 19:15).

Just as there is a time gap between the first and second comings of Jesus, there is a time gap concerning the fulfillment of some prophecies. As Saucy observes,

> The possibility of a partial fulfillment of many messianic prophecies should be expected, in that the Old Testament prophecies are generally associated simply with the coming of the Messiah, whereas their fulfillment in the New Testament clearly involves two advents…Progressive dispensationalism thus agrees with many others that a partial fulfillment of the messianic prophecies began with the ministry of Christ at his first coming. But, it insists that the partial fulfillment is a partial fulfillment of the normal meaning of the original prophecy. The future completion of the fulfillment is also understood to be in accord with the original meaning of the prophecy so that ultimately the prophecy is fulfilled according to its original meaning.[20]

In sum, according to PD, a biblical prophecy with several elements may have a partial fulfillment. Some aspects of a prophecy can already be fulfilled while other parts await future fulfillment.

Types

Certain Old Testament entities prefigure greater New Testament realities. This occurs with Adam and Jesus, David and Jesus, the Mosaic covenant and the New covenant, the feasts of Israel and Jesus, and more. Thus, types, and the study of types (that is, typology), are legitimate topics for study. Dispensationalism affirms types and their significances. Sometimes dispensationalism is accused of not understanding types but that is not true. Types reveal God's hand as He providentially moves in history, and with them we see important patterns and connections in the Bible. But we must grasp the proper understanding of types.

Progressive dispensationalism believes the New Testament determines types and their significances. Some types are explicitly identified with "type" wording. Romans 5:14 says Adam was a type (*tupos*) of Jesus. According to Hebrews 10:1 the Mosaic Law was a "shadow" (*skia*) of Jesus and the better New covenant. The use of "shadow" (*skia*) here is explicit typology language.

Some typological connections exist without explicit "type" or "shadow" wording. Paul links the Passover with Jesus's sacrifice in 1 Corinthians 5:7. In Matthew 2:15–18, events in Israel's history, such as Israel being called out of Egypt, and weeping at the time of the Babylonian captivity, are linked with events in Jesus's career. These show Jesus is the corporate Head of Israel who can save and restore

20. Saucy, "The Progressive Dispensational View," 164.

the nation Israel (see Isa 49:1–6). Statements and events in David's life correspond to statements and events in Jesus's life (see John 13:18; Ps 41:9). These show Jesus is the ultimate Son of David and Messiah.

Thus, PD embraces types and their implications when the New Testament reveals them. But a responsible use of types is necessary. Types supplement the story of the Bible revealed in explicit statements of Scripture. Types do not change the Bible's storyline. As Darrell Bock notes, "Yes, we do see much biblical typology connected to Christ, finding realization in him, but not always at the expense of groundwork already laid. It comes alongside in complement, not in removal."[21] Blaising observes that we should be skeptical of claims that types establish God's plan when God's explicit wording states otherwise:

> The critic is right to be suspicious of a claim like this (that types are the means of establishing the divine plan) when the claim is employed to contravene, suppress, or subvert the meaning of explicit covenant promise, and even more so when the NT explicitly repeats and reaffirms the same promise as declared in the covenants of the OT.[22]

Also, contrary to nondispensational systems, the Old Testament is not a vast landscape of types waiting to be transformed. Not everything in the Old Testament is a type. For instance, the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New covenants are eternal, unconditional covenants that contain multiple promises concerning Israel, nations, land, kings, physical blessings, and spiritual blessings. These covenants and their elements are not types that become transformed in New Testament times. Their significances in all their dimensions remain across both the Old and New testaments.

Robert Saucy aptly notes that the Mosaic covenant being a shadow is not a reason for seeing other covenants and eschatological realities in the Old Testament as shadows and types:

> Recognizing that the Old Testament prophecies speak of the eschatological times and events, including the inauguration of the new covenant, precludes our seeing all of the Old Testament as merely shadows and types that become outmoded with the coming of Christ. The fulfilled reality of the coming of Christ transcended many elements contained in the old Mosaic covenant; but this cannot be said of the promises of the new covenant and other eschatological realities.[23]

21. Bock, "A Progressive Dispensational Response," in *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies*, 227.

22. Blaising, "A Critique of Gentry and Wellum's, *Kingdom through Covenant*: A Hermeneutical-Theological Response," 117.

23. Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface Between Dispensational and Non-Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 30.

In short, PD believes that types support and supplement the Bible's storyline and show important patterns in the Bible. But types do not change the Bible's narrative. Also, the covenants of promise and the nation Israel are not types and shadows that are transcended in the New Testament.

Continuity and Discontinuity

On the issue of continuity and discontinuity concerning the relationship between the Old and New testaments, *PD is a continuity system that contains elements of discontinuity.*

Continuities

Progressive dispensationalism primarily is a continuity system since it sees great continuity between Old Testament expectations and New Testament fulfillments. What was promised in the Old will be fulfilled in the New, literally, as a result of Jesus's two comings, which includes

- the biblical covenants in all their dimensions—physical and spiritual; individual, national, and international
- Bible prophecies in all their details
- a coming Day of the Lord and seventieth week of Daniel
- an earthly kingdom of the Messiah
- a reign of the Messiah over geo-political nations
- the transformation of nature and the animal realm
- restoration of national Israel
- fulfillment of land promises to Israel
- all nations blessed in their lands

These items are important parts of the Old Testament expectation. The New Testament continues these expectations and expects their fulfillments through the two comings of Jesus. Belief in this is why PD primarily is a continuity system.

Progressive dispensationalism also notes other areas of continuity. When it comes to salvation, believers in both testaments are saved *by grace alone*. Saints in both the Old and New testaments are saved *through faith alone*. The object of faith in both testaments is *God alone*. The objective basis for the salvation of Old and New testament saints is the *atoning death of Jesus alone*.

Discontinuities

In harmony with these continuities, though, there are significant discontinuities between the Old and New testaments. First, while a specific messianic hope exists in the Old Testament, the arrival of Jesus the Messiah occurs with the New Testament

era bringing full knowledge of the Messiah. Second, the New Testament brings added revelation to God's purposes. We now know exactly who the promised Messiah is. We learn there will be two comings of the Messiah separated by a gap of time. We learn specifics of Jew-Gentile unity because of Jesus (see Eph 2–3). This new revelation harmonizes with Old Testament revelation, but New Testament saints have more revelation than did Old Testament believers.

Third, there is a major epochal transition from the Mosaic covenant era to the New covenant era. From Exodus 20 until the cross, keeping the Mosaic covenant and its Mosaic law was required. From the cross onward, though, God's people are now under the New covenant and its Law of Christ. The transition from the Mosaic covenant era to the New covenant dispensation is a major area of discontinuity that PD acknowledges. Christians no longer are bound to the Mosaic law, including its sacrifices and worship system, but they are bound to the Law of Christ (see 1 Cor 9:20–21).

Fourth, this transition from the Mosaic era to the New covenant era also brings enablement to obey God that did not exist before. The Mosaic law did not enable or help people under it to obey God (see Rom 7:13–25). It told Israel what God expected, but it offered no aid in keeping it. The New covenant, though, brings enablement to obey God through the permanent indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit and a new heart (see Rom 8:1–4).

Fifth, there is discontinuity between Israel and the church. While closely related historically and theologically, each has a unique identity and role. This will be discussed more below.

In sum, PD primarily is a system of continuity with elements of discontinuity.

Theological Commitments and Themes

In addition to its hermeneutical principles, along with its balance of continuity and discontinuity, PD promotes several key theological commitments and themes that are at the heart of this system.

Kingdom as Theme

First, a kingdom of God over creation by man as God's mediator is the theme that ties the Bible's storyline together. This point is foundational to PD and sets it apart from other theological systems that focus mostly on individual redemption from sin. Progressive dispensationalism is a *kingdom-over-creation system*. Progressive dispensationalism includes the importance of individual redemption, but also grasps that kingdom is the overarching theme that ties God's purposes together. God's plans before time are connected with the summing up of all things in Christ—"things in the heavens and things on earth"—which is the kingdom (Eph 1:10). And this plan is

played out in history. Genesis 1 starts with a wonderful creation and a mandate given to man to rule over this creation for God's glory. The story eventually culminates in an earthly kingdom of the Messiah in Revelation 20 and then an Eternal Kingdom on earth in Revelation 21–22.

Thus, a kingdom on earth, with Jesus as King, is the theme of Scripture. This is shown with the Bible's bookends. A reign over creation by God's image bearers is mandated in Genesis 1:26–28. And with Revelation 22:5, the last verse describing human history, the saints of God "will reign forever and ever" over the new earth.

God is pursuing a multiethnic, multinational earthly kingdom characterized by righteousness and justice. Adam, as representative of mankind, was to fill, rule, and subdue the earth as God's mediator. This is a kingdom mandate. This expectation existed before sin and the need for salvation in Genesis 3. So, kingdom is prior to salvation. When man sins the need for salvation will arise and become an important theme. But redemption operates under God's broader kingdom plans. God's ultimate purpose for man is not just to be saved but to be in relationship with God and others, and function as God intended for him. Man was created to love God and love other people, and rule over God's creation. After the Fall, man must be saved to do this, but being saved is not an end in itself. It is a means for further ends.

Progressive dispensationalism also calls for a deeper understanding of what "salvation in Christ" involves. Salvation has three main components. First, there is redemption from sin for the individual. Second, salvation extends to the restoration of ethnicities, nations, and society (see Isaiah 2; 19:16–25; Rev 21:24; 22:2). Third, salvation involves the healing of all creation (see Isaiah 11:6–9; Rom 8:19–22). PD addresses all three.

Thus, a reign over creation by man for the glory of God is at the heart of what God is pursuing according to PD. Jesus, the Last Adam, will succeed from and over the realm—earth—where Adam failed. When Jesus returns He will rule the earth and nations from Jerusalem (Zech 14:9; Rev 20:4). He shares this rule with His saints (see Rev 5:10; 20:4; Matt 19:28–30). There will be a multiethnic, multinational kingdom that brings prosperity and blessings for Israel and all nations. This messianic kingdom of Jesus is the millennium mentioned in Revelation 20. According to 1 Corinthians 15:24, 28, when Jesus has successfully reigned in this kingdom He will hand it over to the Father and the Eternal Kingdom will commence. This Eternal Kingdom takes place on a restored earth and involves the nations serving God and making cultural contributions to the new earth (see Rev 21:3, 24, 26). The Father and Jesus reign from a throne in the New Jerusalem and the saints of God will reign forever on the new earth (see Rev 22:2–5).

Emphasis on Biblical Covenants for Understanding God's Purposes

All Christian theological systems acknowledge the importance of covenants. But not all agree on what the biblical covenants are or which ones should be emphasized. Covenant theology, for example, emphasizes three theological covenants that are not explicitly mentioned in Scripture—Covenant of Redemption, Covenant of Works, and Covenant of Grace. Although the existence of these alleged covenants is highly disputed, for Covenant theology they become the grid through which the explicit biblical covenants—Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and New—are understood.[24] Progressive dispensationalism is suspicious about this approach, asserting that the explicitly mentioned biblical covenants should be the starting points and priority for understanding God's covenant purposes in the Bible. The Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and New covenants are the focus of God's covenantal purposes, and they are the means for the implementation of God's creation and kingdom plans in history. Dispensationalism, thus, wants the focus to remain on these covenants. This then leads to a third and related point.

Fulfillment of All Dimensions of Biblical Covenants

Third, PD believes all dimensions of the biblical covenants—spiritual, material, individual, national, and international elements—must be fulfilled. The biblical covenants include spiritual blessings and physical blessings. They also involve individuals and the entities of national Israel and Gentile people groups and nations. Progressive dispensationalism believes all dimensions of these covenants must come to literal fulfillment. Saucy is right that "the Old Testament prophets saw no problem with the physical and material existing together with the spiritual in eschatological times—analogous to the original creation, which included the material."[25] This differs from other theological systems that often focus exclusively on salvific and spiritual blessings of the covenants.

For example, the Noahic covenant is a creational covenant made by God with "all life on the earth" (see Gen 9:17), showing the inherent value of the earth and all creatures. It is the platform for God's kingdom purposes and other objectives to play out in history.

The Abrahamic covenant involves Abraham's and Israel's role in blessing all people groups and nations (see Gen 12:2–3; 18:18). The Abrahamic covenant also addresses Israel's land (see Gen 12:6–7; 15:18–21). It results in nations and kings (see Gen 17:6) It includes a rule over the peoples of the earth and agricultural prosperity

24. The Abrahamic, Davidic, and New covenants are perceived as extensions of the Covenant of Grace. The Mosaic Covenant is seen as a restatement of the Covenant of Works or Covenant of Grace (or both). As a result, the explicit biblical covenants are viewed as salvation covenants related to the covenants of works and grace.

25. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 31.

(see Gen 49:8–12). The Abrahamic covenant also speaks to perpetual peace for Israel from her enemies (see Gen 22:17).

The Davidic covenant concerns the kingly seed line from David that eventually culminates in the Messiah (Jesus). It involves national Israel and the land. It includes the blessing of Gentiles (2 Sam 7:19; Amos 9:11–12). It addresses an earthly kingdom reign with agricultural prosperity (see Psalm 72; Amos 9:13–15). It involves the defeat of Israel's enemies (see 2 Sam 7:10). With Luke 1:68–74, Zacharias appealed to the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants concerning Israel's national deliverance from her enemies.

The New covenant promises forgiveness of sin, a new heart, and the indwelling Holy Spirit, along with many physical promises in the land of promise (see Deut 30:1–9; Jeremiah 31–33; Ezekiel 36–37). Jerusalem will be rebuilt (see Jer 31:38–40). People will buy fields, sign deeds and be involved in financial situations (see Jer 32:44). Ezekiel 36:29–30, a New covenant text, combines Israel's forgiveness with agricultural prosperity: "Moreover, I will save you from all your uncleanness; and I will call for the grain and multiply it, and I will not bring a famine on you. I will multiply the fruit of the tree and the produce of the field, so that you will not receive again the disgrace of famine among the nations." These are just a few of the physical promises associated with the covenants of promise. Progressive dispensationalism takes these seriously.

Progressive dispensationalism also sees progressive fulfillment of the covenants throughout history. Some covenant promises were fulfilled in the Old Testament. For instance, Abraham's name became great. Isaac and Jacob arrived as Abraham's descendants. Israel developed into a great nation. Israel conquered the promised land under Joshua. Next, some covenant promises were fulfilled with Jesus's first coming. Jesus the Messiah arrived, messianic salvation for believing Jews and Gentiles began. The Holy Spirit permanently indwells God's people. And New covenant enablement to obey God happened. But fulfillment of other promises awaits Jesus's second coming such as the restoration of national Israel, the renewal of earth and the animal realm, cultural and social transformation, and so on. While certain spiritual blessings are participated in or partially realized with the church, complete fulfillment of all covenant blessings awaits Jesus's return and kingdom. According to Romans 11:12, Israel's coming "fullness" will mean even more blessings for the world. This points to a future age when an abundance of covenant blessings will occur.

With PD, Jesus is the focal point of the biblical covenants. He brings all covenants to fulfillment through His two comings. Jesus is the ultimate Seed of Abraham (see Gal 3:16) who brings salvation to all peoples (see Gal 3:29). He is the ultimate Son of David, the Messiah, who will fulfill the Davidic covenant with an earthly reign from David's throne over nations (see Matt 19:28; 25:31). Jesus inaugurates the New covenant with His blood and brings redemption to His people (see Luke 22:20). He brings both spiritual salvation to individuals and eventually accomplishes tangible

blessings like the new earth, resurrection, homes, and farms to all ethnicities and nations (see Matt 19:28–30; Rev 5:10; 21:24). Jesus fulfilled many promises with His first coming, but will fulfill many others with His second advent.

In sum, PD asserts that all physical, national, and international promises of the covenants matter and must be fulfilled in all their details and dimensions. This makes PD a more detailed and holistic system than either covenant theology or progressive covenantalism.

Israel as Strategic to God's Purposes

Fourth, corporate national Israel remains strategic in God's purposes. Israel is a major player in the Bible's storyline. Unfortunately, the Christian church historically has resisted the continuing theological significance of corporate national Israel. Dispensationalism, though, openly embraces the significance of Israel in God's purposes. Craig Blaising notes that ethnic-national Israel "is not peripheral but central to the story line of the Bible. How one answers this question affects how one understands the story of the Bible from its beginning to its end."[26]

Israel was destined by God to bless the world. Concerning Abraham and Israel, God said, "In you all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Gen 12:2–3). Psalm 67:7 states, "God blesses us [Israel], so that all the ends of the earth may fear Him." God uses Israel to bless the world in three main ways. First, through Israel the Scriptures came to the world (see Rom 3:2). Second, Israel is the vessel for the Messiah (see Rom 9:5), who brings blessings to the Gentiles (see Isa 49:1–6). And third, Israel and Jerusalem will be the geographical center of a worldwide earthly kingdom of the Messiah that blesses all nations on earth (see Isaiah 2; Zechariah 14).

To fully complete its God-given destiny for the world, Israel must be saved. Thus, dispensationalism affirms a coming salvation of "all Israel"—(Rom 11:26). While a present remnant of believing Israel exists (see Rom. 11:1–10), Israel as a whole will be saved (see Rom 11:26; Zech 12:10). This is a corporate salvation and restoration of Israel. To support his statement that "all Israel will be saved" Paul quoted Isaiah 59:20–21 concerning the salvation and restoration of the nation.

In Matthew 19:28–29 Jesus told the apostles that with the coming renewal of the earth they would judge the restored twelve tribes of Israel. After forty days of kingdom instruction from the risen Jesus, the apostles expected the coming restoration of Israel: "Lord, is it at this time that you are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). When Jesus assumes His Davidic throne at His second coming the twelve tribes of Israel will be restored (see Luke 22:30). The nation that received curses for disobedience will receive blessings for belief and obedience (see Deut 30:1–10; Lev 26:40–45). Israel's land, too, is significant (see Matt 24:15–20; Luke

26. Craig A. Blaising, "Israel and Hermeneutics," in *The People, The Land, and The Future of Israel: Israel and the Jewish People in the Plan of God* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2014), 152.

21:24). Progressive dispensationalism, thus, grasps the continuing significance of Israel in God's purposes.

Nations in God's Purposes

Fifth, nations and ethnicities remain part of God's plans according to PD. In addition to the continuing significance for ethnic, national Israel, PD asserts the importance of other geopolitical nations in God's plans. Genesis 10–11 reveals that nations and people groups matter in God's purposes. This is the backdrop for the statements in Genesis 12:3 and 18:18 that the families and nations of the earth will be blessed.

According to Isaiah 19:16–25 the nations Egypt and Assyria will exist alongside Israel as God's people in a future kingdom of God. During this time five cities in Egypt will speak Hebrew (19:18) and Egypt will make a monument to the Lord near its border (19:19). Assyria and Egypt will build a highway together for worshiping the Lord (19:23). Assyria, Egypt, and Israel will all be God's people, yet still retain their distinct national identities. Zechariah 14 mentions nations, including Egypt, during a time when the Lord reigns over the earth. Revelation 19:15 says Jesus will rule the nations with a rod of iron when He returns. Revelation 21:24, 26 mentions nations and their kings bringing cultural contributions ("their glory") to the New Jerusalem. Revelation 22:2 indicates nations will live in perpetual harmony.

Geopolitical nations are significant, even in the future. This means God's purposes include but go beyond individual human salvation. Progressive Dispensationalism detects this truth in a way other theological systems do not.

Church as a New Testament Entity

Sixth, like all forms of dispensationalism, PD asserts that the church is a New Testament entity with New Testament origins. Two key ingredients make the church: (1) the person and work of the Messiah and (2) the New covenant baptizing ministry of the Holy Spirit. These two realities did not exist in the Old Testament and that is why the church did not exist then.

This understanding influences a progressive dispensational definition of the church: the church is the Messianic, New covenant community of believing Jews and Gentiles. The church is Messianic since Jesus the Messiah had to arrive for the church to begin. And it is a New covenant community since members of the church experience the New covenant ministry of the Holy Spirit. These demand a New Testament origin for the church.

In the Gospels, the church is only mentioned in two verses. With Matthew 16:18, Jesus stated He would build His church, thus showing the futurity of it. In Matthew 18:17, Jesus gave directions for discipline in His church when it begins. The Gospels make no references to the church's existence. But in Acts, after Jesus sent the Holy Spirit (see Acts 2), an explosion of references to "church" occurs—nineteen times.

Significantly, Luke, who wrote both the gospel of Luke and Acts, does not refer to the church in his gospel, but he mentions the church many times in Acts. This is further evidence that the church is a New Testament entity.

Distinction between Israel and Church

Seventh, a distinction exists between Israel and the church. Israel is not the church. And the church is not Israel. Israel is an ethnic, national, territorial entity with the task of blessing other nations in a coming earthly kingdom of the Messiah. As an ethnic entity, Israel involves a physical seed line connection back to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the sons of Jacob. Next, as a national entity, Israel has a history, customs, language, tradition, laws, and other areas connected with nationhood. Then, as a territorial entity, Israel is linked with the land of promise as explained in texts like Genesis 12 and 15. While Israel experiences dispersion and persecution in history, she always remains an ethnic, national, territorial entity. And, as mentioned earlier, Israel, along with the city of Jerusalem, will be the geographical headquarters for Messiah's earthly kingdom reign (see Isaiah 2).

The church, on the other hand, is a multiethnic entity founded by Jesus the Messiah and the New covenant ministry of the Holy Spirit. It has New Testament origins. The church is not a geopolitical nation with land dimensions like Israel. Instead, it is a spiritual community of believers in Jesus from various people groups. During this time between Jesus's two comings, when the nations are at hostility with God, the church's mission is to take the Great Commission of salvation in Jesus to the world. The church of this age is a persecuted minority that faces hostility from Satan and the nations (see Revelation 2–3). But when Jesus comes again to establish His kingdom, the church will reign with Jesus on earth over the nations (see Rev 2:26–27; 5:10).

Israel and the church each has its own identity and role in God's purposes. Yet, the church has a close relationship to Israel since the church now partakes in the covenants of promise mediated through Israel. In Romans 11:17–24, believing Gentiles now participate in the place of blessing stemming from the root of the Olive Tree, which is the covenants of promise (Abrahamic, Davidic, New). This participation includes the spiritual blessings of these covenants now and the physical blessings of the covenants in the future when Israel's fullness occurs (see Rom 11:12). Also, the believing remnant of Israel currently is part of the church (see Rom 11:1–6) along with believing Gentiles (see Ephesians 2:11–3:6). Paul calls believing ethnic Israelites the "Israel of God" in Galatians 6:16. Thus, believing Israelites of this age are a subset of the church.

Like all forms of dispensationalism, PD rejects replacement theology or supersessionism in which the church is viewed as replacing, superseding, or fulfilling Israel in a way that makes national Israel nonsignificant in God's purposes. A

redefinition of Israel does not occur in Scripture. Jesus's role as the ultimate Israelite is not to make Israel nonsignificant, but to save and restore Israel (see Isa 49:1–6).

Since the purpose of Israel and Israel's covenants was to bless Gentiles, and Gentiles are now being blessed because of Jesus, there is partial fulfillment of the covenants of promise in this age with the church. This involves spiritual blessings such as messianic salvation, the permanent indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit, the implanting of a new heart, and Jew-Gentile equality in salvation. But the fulfillment of restoration promises to Israel and nations, along with physical blessings and land promises for Israel, awaits the second coming of Jesus and His earthly kingdom.

Futurism

Eighth, future prophetic events are important to God's purposes. Like other systems, PD accounts for the great significance of Jesus's first coming: His great teachings, His perfect life, His atonement and death for sins, and the start of the church. As a comprehensive system, PD also accounts for major events still to come, which include a future Tribulation Period, the Day of the Lord, the Antichrist, cosmic signs, international wars, Israel's restoration, and other events. These events are linked with the seventieth week of Daniel as found in Daniel 9:27 and texts such as Matthew 24–25, Luke 21, Mark 13, 2 Thessalonians 2, and Revelation 6–19. In addition, Jesus will return at His second coming and set up His thousand-year reign upon the earth.

Progressive dispensationalism, thus, affirms "futurism"—the view that the Tribulation Period, Day of the Lord, second coming of Jesus, and Jesus's messianic kingdom await future fulfillment. It offers specific understandings of events still to come and presents a comprehensive understanding of history, including details of things to come. Covenant theology and progressive covenantalism say little about future events because they focus mostly on Jesus's first coming and how this relates to individual redemption. Yet PD embraces the significance of major future events and how they contribute to God's purposes and glory. It affirms specific prophecies important to the Christian worldview and hope. Progressive dispensationalism, therefore, is a comprehensive system that addresses God's glory in His past, present, and future actions in history. Blaising notes why this is an important advantage PD has over other theological systems,

> There are other theological traditions which interpret Bible prophecy almost exclusively in relation to the present ministry of Christ in the church or to a believer's personal experience of salvation. Dispensationalism, however, interpreting these prophecies in a more "literal" manner has always expected God's future blessings to include earthly, national, and political aspects of life. Many of these blessings belong to a future dispensation which will be marked by the return of Christ to earth.[27]

27. Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 18.

Premillennialism as Strategic to God's Plans

Ninth, premillennialism is necessary for the complete fulfillment of all God's kingdom and covenant purposes. All millennial positions believe the millennium is the messianic reign of Jesus the Messiah. Each millennial view also holds that when Jesus completes His messianic-millennial kingdom, He then hands this kingdom over to the Father, as 1 Corinthians 15:24, 28 explicitly teaches. The millennium, therefore, concerns the nature and timing of Jesus's messianic kingdom. These are important issues. To be comprehensive, a theological system should specifically address the nature and timing of Jesus's kingdom. In short, each system should commit to a millennial view.

Progressive dispensationalism, unlike covenant theology and progressive covenantalism, affirms a specific view of Jesus's messianic-millennial kingdom. And it incorporates this view into its system. Progressive dispensationalism affirms premillennialism. Jesus's kingdom will be an earthly reign over nations and all creation as a result of His second coming. Thus, the nature of Jesus's kingdom is earthly, and its timing is future. This coming millennial kingdom brings complete fulfillment to all God's kingdom purposes.[28] With it, Jesus, the Last Adam and Messiah, fulfills the kingdom mandate of Genesis 1:26, 28 for man to successfully rule and subdue the earth as God's mediator. Hebrews 2:5–8 says this kingdom reign over earth has not happened yet. But with His coming messianic-millennial kingdom, Jesus will succeed from and over earth and succeed where Adam failed.

This millennial kingdom also will bring the complete fulfillment of the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New covenants in all their dimensions—spiritual, physical, national, and international. These covenants of promise were inaugurated in Old Testament history and with Jesus's first coming. Israel has become a great nation. Jesus, the ultimate Davidic King and Messiah, has arrived. Jesus brought messianic salvation to believing Israelites and Gentiles. The New covenant ministry of the Holy Spirit is operating. Yet certain physical, national, and international elements of these covenants have not been fulfilled yet. The transformation of nature, the healing of the animal kingdom, the restoration of Israel as a nation, geo-political nations submitting to the Messiah, economic and agricultural prosperity, and other matters await future fulfillment with Jesus's return and kingdom.

Also, the coming millennial kingdom will see Jesus vindicated in the realm (earth) of His rejection at His first coming. Jesus will reign in the realm where He was rejected. It also is the time when the saints are vindicated in the realm of their persecution (see Rev 2:26–27; 5:10; 20:4).

Progressive dispensationalism, thus, affirms premillennialism as important to God's purposes. Unlike other systems, it offers a detailed explanation of the nature

28. These blessings will then carry over into the Eternal Kingdom as the proper aftermath and perhaps reward for Jesus's successful kingdom. We affirm that the Eternal Kingdom is also related to the fulfillment of God's purposes.

and timing of Jesus's messianic kingdom and shows how this kingdom fits into the Bible's storyline.

Conclusion

Progressive Dispensationalism is a theology that addresses and harmonizes God's creation, kingdom, and covenant purposes in all their dimensions from Genesis 1 through Revelation 22. Like other systems it addresses sin and the need for individual redemption in Christ, but, uniquely, it grasps the fullness of the restoration of all things in Jesus through His two comings to earth. Progressive dispensationalism, thus, offers a broad and detailed perspective on all of God's purposes. Compared to other evangelical theological systems, PD offers the most comprehensive and accurate understanding of God's activities in history.

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What is Progressive Covenantalism?

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Introduction

All Christians agree that covenants are fundamental to the Bible's story and that God's eternal plan unfolds over time reaching its fulfillment in Christ. Furthermore, all Christians accept some form of epochs or dispensations across redemptive-history demarcated by the covenants, and that the fulfillment of God's saving purposes in Christ has resulted in change or discontinuity from past eras. However, Christians disagree on the exact relationships between the covenants. This is not a new debate. In the early church, the apostles wrestled with the implications of Christ's new covenant work (see Acts 10-11, 15; Gal 3-4; Eph 2:11-22). Today, Christians still disagree on the *newness* of what Christ has achieved, especially regarding the larger Israel-Church relationship, along with the specific ongoing application of the OT to the church.

Within evangelical theology, people tend to think about these issues within the larger views of covenant or dispensational theology. Progressive covenantalism serves as a mediating view. I will outline the view in four steps: (1) describe some of its distinctive points; (2) sketch some of its hermeneutical assumptions; (3) summarize its view of the progression of the covenants; and (4) encapsulate its view of how the covenants are fulfilled in Christ, thus highlighting how progressive covenantalism thinks of continuity and discontinuity across the biblical covenants.[1]

Distinctive Points

Progressive covenantalism argues that the Bible presents a *plurality* of covenants that *progressively* reveal God's *one* redemptive plan for his *one* people which reaches its fulfillment in Christ and the new covenant. Each biblical covenant contributes to God's unified plan, and to know the entire plan, we must understand each covenant in its own biblical context by locating that covenant in relation to what precedes *and* follows it. By the *progression* of the covenants, we come to know God's plan, how all

1. For a detailed exposition of progressive covenantalism, see Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018).

of God's promises are fulfilled in Christ (Heb 1:1-3; compare Eph 1:9-10), and how we are to live as God's new covenant people.

Progressive covenantalism contends that the *covenants* are more than a unifying theme of Scripture; instead they serve as the backbone to Scripture's story similar to covenant theology. But unlike covenant theology, the covenants are not subsumed under the bicovenantal structure of "the covenant of works" and "the covenant of grace." Rather, God's one plan unfolds through a *plurality* of covenants, first starting with Adam and creation and culminating in Christ. The creation covenant lays the foundation that continues in *all* the covenants and is fulfilled in Christ. God's plan, then, moves from creation in Adam to consummation in Christ.

Concerning the Israel-church relationship, two points are stressed. First, God has *one* people, yet there is an Israel-church distinction due to their respective covenants. The church is *new* in history since she is the *new covenant* community. Second, we must think of the Israel-church relationship *Christologically*. The church is not *directly* the "new Israel" or her replacement. Rather, in Christ, the church is God's new creation, comprised of believing Jews and Gentiles, because *Jesus* is the last Adam and true Israel, the faithful seed of Abraham who inherits the promises by his work. Thus, in union with Christ, the church is God's *new covenant* people in continuity with the elect in all ages, but *different* from Israel in its nature and structure.

This way of viewing Israel-Christ-Church differs from dispensational and covenant theology. First, *pace* dispensationalism, Jesus is the antitypical fulfillment of Israel and Adam and in him, *all* of God's promises are fulfilled for the church, including the land promise realized in the new creation (Rom 4:13; Eph 6:3; Heb 11:10, 16; compare Matt 5:5). Second, *pace* covenant theology, Jesus's *new* covenant people are different from Israel. Under the old covenant, Israel, by its very nature was a mixed community of believers and unbelievers (Rom 9:6). The church, however, is constituted by people who are united to Christ by faith, which minimally includes heart circumcision, the forgiveness of sin, and the gift of the Spirit. In contrast to Israel, the church is constituted as a believing, regenerate people. This is why the sign of the new covenant is only applied to those who profess faith, and why circumcision and baptism do not signify the same realities due to their respective covenantal differences.

Hermeneutical Assumptions

How does progressive covenantalism interpret biblical texts and draw theological conclusions? Questions on hermeneutics are not new or easy to answer. In theological debates, adjudication between views is often complicated since theological positions involve more than appealing to one or two texts, thus, the reason why it is important to state how one interprets and applies Scripture. Three points summarize my overall hermeneutical approach.

1. Scripture is interpreted according to its own claim to be God's Word written through the agency of human authors over time.

My purpose is not to defend this claim. Instead, I simply state two hermeneutical implications that follow. First, since Scripture is *God's* Word, despite its diversity, we expect that Scripture is unified and coherent. As applied to the covenants, this means that the covenants are not isolated from each other; instead, they together unfold God's one plan centered in Christ (Eph 1:9-10).

Second, since Scripture is God's Word through human authors, we discover God's intent through the writing(s) of the human authors by grammatical/literary-historical exegesis. But given the diversity of authors, a canonical reading is necessary to discover God's ultimate intent. This method entails that the NT's interpretation of the OT is definitive because later texts give greater clarity and understanding. The NT shows us how the OT is fulfilled in Christ. NT authors may expand the OT author's meaning in the sense of seeing new implications and applications. But later texts do *not* contravene the meaning of the earlier texts; they only develop them in ways consistent with God's unfolding revelation in the OT.

2. Scripture is interpreted according to three contexts.

Scripture unfolds God's plan over time, so Scripture must tell us how the parts fit with the whole, and what theological conclusions are warranted by the entire canon. This concept entails that we think of biblical interpretation in terms of three contexts: textual, epochal, and canonical.[2]

First, the textual or immediate context starts with any text in its book context, which we interpret by grammatical/literary-historical exegesis. Second, the epochal context is reading the text/book by locating it in God's unfolding plan. Texts are not written in a vacuum; they are embedded in a larger context of what precedes them. As God communicates through authors, there is a unity in his plan but also development. By locating texts in God's unfolding plan, this helps us see intertextual links between earlier and later revelation. As later authors refer to earlier texts they build on them, not only in terms of greater understanding, but also by identifying God-given patterns between earlier and later events, persons, and institutions, that is, typology. In this way God's plan unfolds and reaches its fulfillment in Christ.

How do we determine Scripture's epochal divisions? This is a major debate within the discipline of biblical theology. Scripture divides history in a number of ways (for example, Matthew 1; Rom 5:12-21), but Scripture's epochal divisions are best discerned by the unfolding of the covenants. Does placing texts in their epochal/covenantal context matter? Yes. For proof of this see the arguments made in Galatians 3-4 and Hebrews 2:5-18; 3:7-4:11; 7-8. All of these texts illustrate how important it is to "put together" God's plan in terms of the three contexts.

2. See Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 259-311.

But ultimately our interpretation of Scripture must read texts in terms of what comes after them, that is, the canonical context. Scripture is God's unified speech so texts must be interpreted canonically, which entails a grammatical/literary-historical-canonical method of interpretation.

3. Theological Conclusions are Made from Scripture by Reading the Entire Canon in Context, and Unpacking the Progression of the Covenants.

All of Scripture is for our instruction (2 Tim 3:15-17), yet we must carefully read and apply it. Central to biblical interpretation is unpacking the Bible's covenantal progression. Although Scripture refers to many covenants, my focus is on the six main covenants: Creation, Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and the New. Before I summarize how the Bible's storyline is unfolded through the covenants, *four* hermeneutical points about the covenants will be given.

First, God's one eternal plan is unveiled through a plurality of covenants (e.g., Gal 4:24; Eph 2:12; Heb 8:7-13). Progressive covenantalism rejects covenant theology's subsuming all the post-fall covenants under the theological category of "the covenant of grace." God has one plan, but it is crucial to let each covenant contribute to the unfolding of that one plan. By doing so, we see the continuity of God's plan and avoid minimizing significant covenantal differences.

Second, the progression of the covenants is the primary means by which God's promises and typological patterns unfold and are fulfilled in Christ and the church. The promise-fulfillment motif is central to how Scripture glues the diverse epochs of history together. Yet, it is difficult to think of God's promises apart from the covenants. By covenantal progression, the biblical authors speak of the continuity of God's plan (tied to his promises) and its discontinuity (how fulfillment brings about God-intended changes). Additionally, one way that the promise-fulfillment theme is developed is via typology, which also is unpacked through the covenants. Given disputes over what typology is and how to interpret it, I will briefly describe my view.

A Brief Discussion of Typology

Typology is the study of the OT redemptive historical realities or "types" (persons, events, institutions) which God has specifically designed to correspond to, and predictively prefigure, their intensified antitypical fulfillment aspects (inaugurated, appropriated, and consummated) in NT redemptive history.[3] Two points will develop this definition.

1. Typology is a feature of divine revelation rooted in *history* and most significantly the *text*. It involves an *organic* relation between "persons,

3. See Richard Davidson, *Typology in Scripture: A Study of Hermeneutical TUPOS Structures* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University, 1981), 397-408.

events, and institutions" in one epoch ("type") and their counterparts in later epochs ("antitype").

2. Typology is *prophetic* and *predictive*. It is *not* prophetic as a direct verbal prediction (e.g., Micah 5:2). Instead, it is more *indirect* in the sense of predictions built on models-patterns that God intends but which become unveiled as later texts reinforce those patterns, and which reach their fulfillment in Christ. Given typology's indirectness, it requires careful exegesis in its immediate context, and it may not be fully recognized as a type until later authors pick up the pattern. Yet, typology is *in* the text, exegetically discovered, and we come to know types as God-intended patterns as *later* OT authors repeat the pattern, before it reaches its fulfillment in Christ.

How does typology *work*? Three points will answer this question.

First, typology involves *repetition* of a person, event, or institution so that types are repeated in later persons, events, or institutions. This is how we discover the pattern. Ultimately, however, the types reach their fulfillment first in Christ and then his people, the church.

For example, Adam is a type of Christ (Rom 5:14; 1 Cor 15:21-49), the covenant head of the old creation. In God's plan, Adam anticipates the coming of Jesus, the last Adam, and the head of the new creation. How do we know this? In the immediate context of Genesis 1-3, there are exegetical clues that speak of Adam's significance *and through the covenants* "other Adams" take on Adam's role (e.g., Noah, Abraham, Israel, and David). But none of these "Adams" are the fulfillment although they "predict" the last Adam to come. Also, in Christ, we, as his people, are restored to our Adamic role as image-sons in relation to God and the creation (Heb 2:5-18).

Or, think of the nation of Israel. As God's son (Ex 4:22-23), Israel not only takes on Adam's role in the world, but anticipates the coming of the true Son, the true Israel/servant/vine, that is, Christ (see, for example, Isa 5:1-7; Hos 11:1; Matt 2:15; John 15:1-17). But also, in union with Christ, God's people participate in the typological pattern. Thus, in the case of Israel, Christ is first the "true Israel," and in him, we are the eschatological people of God. The church is not the antitypical fulfillment of Israel in the first sense: Christ is. Yet in Christ, the true Son/Israel, we become adopted sons (Gal 3:26-4:7), the "Israel of God" (Gal 6:16), Abraham's spiritual offspring (Gal 3:29), restored to what God created us to be (Eph 4:20-24). This is how the new covenant promise given to the "house of Israel/Judah" (Jer 31:31) is applied to the church.

Second, typology has a "lesser to greater" character as the type is fulfilled in the antitype. For example, as one moves from Adam or David, through the prophets, priests, and kings, and then to the last Adam, the true Davidic king, the great High Priest, the antitype is always greater than the previous types. Adam is a type of

Christ, and "other Adams" arise, yet these Adams disobey, and thus anticipate the last Adam, who perfectly obeys. What is true of Adam is also true of other typological patterns such as various people (Moses, Israel, David, prophets, priests, kings), events (exodus), or institutions (sacrificial system, tabernacle/temple).

Third, typology is developed through covenantal progression. For example, Adam and "other Adam's" are associated with the covenants of creation, Noah, Abraham, Israel, and David. In these covenant heads, Adam's role continues, and each one anticipates Christ, who by his obedience secures our redemption (see Gen 1-3; 5:1-2; 9:1-17; 12:1-3; Ex 4:22-23; 2 Sam 7:5-16; Ps 8; Rom 5:12-21; Heb 2:5-18). Or, think of the promise to Abraham regarding his seed. As the seed promise unfolds it does so in Isaac, Israel, the Davidic king, and ultimately in Christ, and then to the church as Abraham's spiritual offspring (see Gen 12:1-3; 17:1-22; Ex 1:1-7; 2 Sam 7:5-16; Gal 3:16, 29). More examples could be given: Moses, David and his sons, the entire tabernacle-temple structure, the exodus-event that eventually anticipates a greater exodus to come. All of these types are tied to the covenants; one cannot think of them apart from wrestling with how the covenants relate to each other and how the covenants are fulfilled in Christ and the new covenant. This is how OT history is prophetic and anticipates Christ's coming and work (for example, Matt 5:17-18; 11:11-15; Rom 3:21).

Returning to our discussion of the covenants, there is a third hermeneutical point. To categorize the covenants as either unconditional and unilateral (royal grant) or conditional and bilateral (suzerain-vassal) is inadequate. Each post fall covenant contains both aspects, although some covenants emphasize one aspect more than the other (for example, the old covenant is strongly bilateral but also gracious, while the Abrahamic covenant is strongly unilateral with bilateral demands). In fact, it is due to this blend that there is a deliberate tension within the covenants—a tension that heightens as God's plan unfolds—and is only resolved in Christ. Let me explain.

On the one hand, the post-fall covenants reveal our triune covenant Lord who makes and keeps his promises. As God initiates covenant relationships with his creatures, he is always the faithful partner (Heb 6:17-18). Regardless of our unfaithfulness, commencing in Genesis 3:15, God's promises are certain. On the other hand, God demands from us perfect obedience, thus the bilateral aspect of the covenants. Yet as the covenants progress, a tension grows between God's faithfulness to his promises and our disobedience. Obedience is not an option for us. God is holy and just, but we have sinned against him. And, in light of Genesis 3:15, God's promises are tied to the provision of an obedient son, who will undo Adam's disastrous choice. But where do we find such a son who fully obeys and meets God's moral demands? And how can God remain in relationship with us unless our sin is removed? It is through the covenants that this tension increases, and it is through the covenants that the answer is given: God himself—our covenant-maker and keeper—will unilaterally

act to keep his own promise by the provision of an obedient covenant partner, namely our Lord Jesus Christ.

Fourth, the new covenant is the fulfillment of all of the previous covenants. Since all of the covenants are part of God's one plan, no covenant is unrelated to what preceded it, and no covenant makes sense apart from its fulfillment in Christ. No doubt, new covenant fulfillment involves an "already-not yet" aspect to it. Yet, what the previous covenants revealed, anticipated, and predicted is "already" here. This is why Jesus is the last Adam and head of the new creation; the true seed and offspring of Abraham who brings blessings to the nations; the true Israel fulfilling all that she failed to be; and David's greater son who rules the entire creation as Lord. In fulfilling the previous covenants, the earlier covenants continue to have value for us today since they are forever part of Scripture, which is for our instruction and growth (2 Tim 3:16-17). But now that Christ has come, Christians are no longer directly under the previous covenants as covenants (other than the Noahic until the consummation). As the church, we obey all of Scripture, but now in light of the fulfillment in Christ and the new covenant (1 Cor 9:19-21), which has important implications for how we apply the OT to our lives today.

How God's Plan Unfolds through the Covenants from Creation to Christ

By covenantal progression, the truth of "kingdom through covenant" emerges, which unites the Bible's metanarrative from creation to consummation. Let us unpack this truth a bit more.

Kingdom through Covenant

Graeme Goldsworthy argues that "the idea of the rule of God over creation, over all creatures, over the kingdoms of the world, and in a unique and special way, over his chosen and redeemed people, is the very heart of the message of the Hebrew scriptures."[4] But as Tom Schreiner notes, God's kingdom is not only central to the OT, it is also "of prime importance in New Testament theology."[5] But what exactly do I mean by *kingdom*? I offer three points to explain.

First, Scripture begins with the declaration that God, as Creator and triune Lord, is the King of the universe (Gen 1-2; Ps 103:19; Dan 4:34-35; Acts 17:24-25). God's creation work is the outworking of his eternal plan in time (Eph 1:11; Rev 4:11), which he directs to a specific *telos*. As history unfolds, God's plan is unpacked vis-à-vis specific covenantal relationships, which all lead to a Christological *telos* (Col

4. Graeme Goldsworthy, "Kingdom of God," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Alexander T. Desmond, Brian S. Rosner, D. A. Carson, and Graeme Goldsworthy (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 618.

5. Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 41.

1:15-20). Although the wording, "kingdom of God," comes later in Scripture, the idea is taught in its first chapters.

Second, our triune God is the King, but the fall brings change. Before the fall, everything is "very good" (Gen 1:31), but due to human sin, God's rule over creation is rejected by us. Sin is rebellion against the King, which results in our death (Gen 2:16-17; Rom 3:23; 6:23). Given the fall, the OT distinguishes between God's sovereign rule over creation and his coming saving reign to make all things right. For God to save, he must act, which sets the stage for the Bible's story of a coming Redeemer to set creation right, and to usher in a new creation.

Third, how does God's saving kingdom come? It comes through the covenants. Following the loss of Eden, redemption is linked to a promised human (Gen 3:15)—who will be more than human—but which is given greater definition through Noah, Abraham, Israel, and the Davidic kings. Through the covenants, God reveals how his image-bearers ought to live and how he will establish his saving reign and restore creation through a promised, obedient Son.

Kingdom *through Covenant*

Kingdom and covenant are organically linked: it is through the covenants that God's saving reign comes in Christ. Let me summarize how the covenants unfold God's plan leading us to Christ, which in turn helps us see the continuity and discontinuity of God's plan over time.

The Creation Covenant

Covenant theology refers to the covenant in Genesis 1-2 as the "covenant of works," but dispensationalism rejects such a covenant. For covenant theology, the "covenant of works" is made with Adam as the head or representative of the human race. To him and his entire posterity, eternal life is promised upon the condition of perfect obedience to God's law. But due to his disobedience, Adam, along with all humanity, was plunged into a state of sin, death, and condemnation. But God graciously did not leave us in this condition; instead, he gave a saving promise that is ultimately fulfilled in Christ.

Although this articulation is common for covenant theology (and progressive covenantalism), some have questioned such a covenant in Genesis 1-2 due to the absence of the word "covenant." Yet, this skepticism is unwarranted for three reasons.

First, the absence of the word *covenant* does not entail that there is no covenant; context and later Scripture are decisive (for example, Hos 6:7; Gen 2:19-25 [marriage]; 2 Sam 7:14). Second, contextually, not only are covenantal elements present such as the Lord-vassal relationship, the obedience-disobedience motif (Gen 2:16-17), but also God identifies himself by his covenant name: Yahweh (Gen 2:4, 5, 7, 8; Ex 3:13-15). God creates Adam as God's image-bearer and son (Luke 3:38), which are

covenantal terms and assumes a covenant relationship. Third, the canonical context reveals that the Bible's story divides humanity under the headship of two individuals, Adam and Christ (Rom 5:12-21). The new covenant headship of Christ as the last Adam makes little sense without the covenant headship of the first Adam.

Additionally, starting with a creation covenant is crucial for two reasons. First, the creation covenant is foundational for all future covenants since all subsequent covenants unpack Adam's role in the world. Adam, and all humanity, is created as God's image-son, a priest-king to rule over creation. Adam is created in relationship to God as he mediates God's rule to the world. Yet, God demands perfect obedience from his covenant partner. All subsequent covenant heads will function as subsets of Adam, who, in God's plan, will point forward to Christ. Adam's role as the representative head of creation defines what comes after him, along with the entire work of Christ (Heb 2:5-18). Second, the creation covenant is foundational for establishing various typological patterns that eventually reach their telos in Christ and the new covenant.[6] All of these patterns will eschatologically terminate in Christ and God's new covenant people, the church.

One last point: we must also discuss sin's entrance into the world and God's first redemption promise, a promise that receives expansion in subsequent covenants (Gen 3:15). Genesis 3 describes how sin entered the human realm, and it requires that we make a crucial distinction between pre-fall under Adam and post-fall redemptive promise in Christ. Humans, created to know God and to rule, now end in death (Gen 2:17; Rom 6:23). Sin's effects are disastrous, but God graciously speaks a word of promise. Before God, sin creates a covenantal tension. Covenants allow God to be present with his people. But how can sinners dwell in his holy presence? How can God be just and the justifier of the ungodly (Rom 3:25-26)? Scripture's answer is glorious: God himself will save us by his Son ("seed") who will perfectly obey unto death thus reversing the effects of sin and ratifying a new covenant (Phil 2:5-11; Heb 2:5-18). This truth is gradually revealed by the progression of the post-fall covenants which all culminate in Christ and his ratification of the new covenant.

This way of stating it differs from covenant theology. Covenant theology divides redemptive history into two covenants: the covenant of works ("law") and the covenant of grace ("gospel"), and then subsumes all postfall covenants under the latter covenant. No doubt, there is some truth in this. The theological categories of "law" and "gospel" are true, but they are not derived simply by covenant theology's bicovenantal structure. In Genesis 2, God establishes a covenant relationship with Adam, and postfall, God graciously promises redemption through Christ (Gen 3:15). Postfall, salvation is by grace through faith in Christ alone. Yet, Genesis 3:15 is not

6. For example, the rest concerning the seventh day (Gen 2:1-3; Ex 20:8-11) and salvation rest in Christ (Heb 3:7-4:13); Eden as a temple sanctuary that is fulfilled in Christ as the new temple; and marriage which points to a greater reality, namely, Christ's relationship to his people (Gen 2:24-25; Eph 5:32).

the ratification of "the covenant of grace" (which is a theological category and not a specific biblical covenant) but as a gracious promise that is progressively revealed via the covenants reaching their fulfillment in the new covenant. This way of stating it better reflects how Scripture describes God's plan revealed through a plurality of covenants (Eph 2:12) culminating in Christ. It is true that the Bible's metanarrative is subsumed under two covenant heads: Adam and Christ. But postfall, and due to God's salvific promise, it is best to think of God's plan unfolding through multiple covenants which all progressively reveal the new covenant.

Also, this way of stating it allows for each covenant to contribute to God's unfolding plan; it does not subsume all of the OT covenants under the "covenant of grace" and then draw lines of continuity too quickly from old to new, especially regarding circumcision-baptism and the "mixed" nature of Israel-church. After Genesis 3, all humans are born in Adam, while God's elect experience grace, thus creating two humanities. Those who believe the promise are in Christ (in the sense that they look forward to him and the dawning of the new covenant). But as subsequent covenants are cut, a clearer delineation is made between these two humanities. In the OT covenants (Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic), they remain mixed, and it is not until the new covenant that "in Christ" entails a regenerate people. This understanding better explains why and how the new covenant is new and how all the covenants reach their fulfillment in it.

The Noahic Covenant

The word "covenant" first appears with Noah (Gen 6:18; 9:9-11). This covenant is a continuation of the creation covenant demonstrating God's commitment to creation, now in a post-fall context. Given sin, humans and creation are threatened, but given God's promise (Gen 3:15) and now his promise, as "the earth remains" (8:22), this covenant re-enforces God's intention that humans will fulfill their role as image-bearers in creation. The "seed of the woman" will come through Noah, the covenant mediator and his family. Noah is "another Adam" (Gen 9:1-7; compare with 1:26-30), and the universal scope of the covenant reminds us that God's purposes encompass not just one people, but all nations and the entire creation.

The Noahic covenant establishes two other points. First, Noah's disobedience (Gen 9:18-28) demonstrates that our heart problem remains (see Gen 6:5-7 with 8:21-22), and that he is not the "last Adam" to come. What we need is a greater heart transformation by the Spirit so that we will fulfill our role as image-bearers. Second, the Noahic covenant explains why fallen humanity simultaneously exists alongside God's people until the consummation. While Christ has already inaugurated the future age, the fallen creation order will continue *until* the end.

The Abrahamic Covenant

Given its location in Scripture, the Abrahamic covenant stands in contrast to the judgments of God on human sin and presents anew the plan of creation. Important elements in the creation of humans are repeated in the blessing to Abraham: God's promise of a great name and seed, the multiplication of humans, the provision of the land, a peaceful relationship between God and humanity, the restoration of the nations (Gen 12:1-3; compare with 15:4-5; 17:1-8; 18:18-19; 22:16-18).

Yet, unlike with Noah, God does not destroy humanity. Instead, God allows the nations to exist and then calls Abraham out of the nations to become a great nation (*gôy*), that is, a kingdom. God's intent is to work through the covenant mediator, Abraham and his seed, to bring blessing to the nations by making him a great nation.

The Abrahamic covenant is the means by which God will fulfill his promises for humanity (Gen 3:15; Gal 3:16). Abraham and his family constitute "another Adam." The Abrahamic covenant functions as a subset of the creation covenant in a postfall context yet narrowed through one family (or nation). In Abraham and his seed, first in Isaac, then in Israel, and then the Davidic king, all of God's promises for humanity will be enacted—promises that God unilaterally keeps, as beautifully portrayed in the covenant inauguration ceremony in Genesis 15.

In the text, there is also a hint that over time the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant will occur in two stages: first, in the nation of Israel who will live in the promised land and serve as a kingdom of priests under the old covenant (Ex 19:4-6; Deut 4:5-8). Second, in Christ, Abraham's royal, singular seed will bless all nations (Gen 17:4-6; compare with 22:17b-18; 49:8, 10; Isa 9:6). Even in Genesis, Abraham's fatherhood is expanded to include the nations. This expansion entails not only the promise of a global inheritance, but also an expansion of the promised land (Gen 1:28; Matt 5:5; Rom 4:13; compare with Eph 6:2-3; Heb 11:13-16). This expansion is suggested in Genesis 22:17b-18. The male deliverer will bless all nations and possess "the gate of his enemies," which implies that his kingdom expands to fill the earth (compare with Gen 24:60). This makes perfect sense since the Abrahamic covenant is the means by which God will fulfill his promises for humanity (Gen 3:15).

Two other elements of the Abrahamic covenant are important. First, it is multifaceted. It not only encompasses spiritual aspects that link it ultimately to the new covenant, but it also consists of national and typological elements that must be carefully unpacked through the covenants. Second, it also consists of unilateral and bilateral elements. God's action in Genesis 15 is unilateral, yet God also demands full obedience from his covenant partner for the covenant to continue (Gen 17:1; 18:19; 22:16-18). And like Adam and Noah, Abraham fails to meet this demand. This growing tension between God keeping his promises and demanding an obedient covenant-partner is only resolved in the true seed of Abraham, Messiah Jesus (Gal 3:16).

The Mosaic-Old Covenant

In the OT, the amount of space devoted to the old covenant is vast, yet Scripture teaches that it is not an end in itself. Scripture views it as temporary in God's plan and thus when Christ comes, as an entire covenant, it is fulfilled and Christians are no longer under it as a covenant (Gal 3:15-4:7). What was its purpose? The answer is diverse, but centrally it revealed and intensified sin and prepared God's people for Christ's coming (Rom 5:20-21; 7:13; Gal 4:4). Also, three points are important in summarizing the role of the old covenant in God's plan.

First, given its epochal and covenantal context, God calls Moses to deliver Israel from Egypt and establishes a covenant with them because of his promises to Abraham (Ex 3:6; compare with 2:24-25; Deut 4:36-38). In relation to the previous covenants, the old covenant reveals with greater clarity how Abraham's "seed" is narrowed to the nation of Israel. Israel, as a nation (*gôy*) (Ex 19:5-6), is a corporate Adam as she fulfills that role to the nations. It is through Israel that God fulfills his promise (Gen 3:15) to undo Adam's sin. Further proof of this truth is that Israel, as a nation, is called God's "son" (Ex 4:22-23). The "Father-son" relationship looks back to Adam *and* looks forward to the Davidic kings, linking the covenants together. Israel, as a nation, is called to serve as God's son-priest-image and through them to bring blessing to the world.

Second, the old covenant is a unit. Scripture does not partition the covenant into moral, civil, and ceremonial laws; rather, it is a unit that governed Israel's life, and now, in Christ, is fulfilled. Also, as a unit, the covenant develops in greater detail a number of typological patterns that find their antitypical fulfillment in Christ and his people. For example, Israel, as a kingdom of priests, needs Levitical priests to represent them before God. Related to the priesthood is the entire tabernacle-temple-sacrificial system, which not only served as a means by which Israel dwelt in God's presence, but also pointed to their antitypical fulfillment in Christ and the full forgiveness of sin (John 2:19-22; Isa 52-53; Heb 5:1-10; 7-10). The same is true of the role of the prophet and the anticipation of the king (Deut 18:15-18; Acts 3:22-26; Deut 17:14-20; Rom 1:3-4; Heb 1:5). Or, the Passover and Exodus become patterns of a greater, new exodus and redemption to come, all of which is fulfilled by Christ.

Third, although the covenant is strongly bilateral, it is more. As with all the covenants, God unilaterally keeps his promises, yet Israel is called to be an obedient son. And like Adam, they disobeyed. The old covenant heightens the tension in how God's kingdom comes through fallen people. God will keep his promise to bring forth the offspring of Abraham, now through an Israelite. And yet, Israel cannot produce the son and faithful covenant partner that God demands. This is why the OT prophets anticipate a permanent, unbreakable new covenant to solve this dilemma (Jer 31:31-34).

The Davidic Covenant

This covenant is the epitome of the OT covenants; it brings the previous covenants to a climax in the king. There are two main parts to it: (1) God's promises about the establishment of David's house forever (2 Sam 7:12-16), and (2) the promises concerning the "Father-son" relationship between God and the Davidic king (2 Sam 7:14; compare with Ps 2; 89:26-27). The sonship promise links the Davidic covenant to the previous covenants, and it anticipates in type the greater Sonship of Christ. Previously sonship applied to corporate Israel (Ex 4:22-23; compare with Hos 11:1), but now it is applied to the individual Davidic king, who, in himself, is true Israel. He becomes the mediator of the covenant thus representing God's rule to the people (2 Sam 7:22-24), and fulfilling the role of Adam by effecting God's rule in the world (2 Sam 7:19b).

God's redemptive plan was always to restore humanity's vice-regency via the woman's seed. We now know that this will occur through the Davidic king. This truth is borne out in many places that speak of the Davidic son as having a universal rule (for example, Ps 2, 8, 45, 72, compare with Isa 9:6-7, 11, 53). Yet, in OT history, this was never realized. As previous covenant mediators disobeyed, so the Davidic kings, but the hope of salvation is in them. God continues his unilateral resolve to keep his promise to bring forth Abraham's seed, now more specifically a Davidic king, who will reign under God over the whole world. And yet, there is no faithful son-king who effects God's saving reign. This leads to the message of the Prophets and the anticipation of a new covenant.

The New Covenant

All of the OT writing prophets are post-Davidic. Why is this significant? Because their prophecies build on what God has already revealed through the covenants. The prophets proclaim an overall pattern of renewal by recapitulating the past history of redemption and projecting it into the future. The prophets announce that God will unilaterally keep his promises to save, but he will do so through a faithful Davidic king (Isa 7:14; 9:6-7; 11:1-10; 42:1-9; 49:1-7; 52:13-53:12; 55:3; 61:1-3; Jer 23:5-6; 33:14-26; Ezek 34:23-24; 37:24-28). In this king, identified as the "servant of Yahweh," a new or everlasting covenant will come, and with it the pouring of the Spirit (Ezek 36:24-38; 37:11-28; Joel 2:28-32), God's saving reign among the nations, the forgiveness of sin (Jer 31:34) and a new creation (Isa 65:17). The hope of the prophets is found in the new covenant.

Within the OT, the new covenant is national (Jer 31:31-40; 33:6-16; Ezek 36:24-38; 37:11-28) and international. It will include Jews and Gentiles, and its scope is universal, thus fulfilling the Abrahamic promise.[7] Isaiah projects the ultimate

7. For example, see Isa 14:1-2; 19:23-25; 42:6, 20; 49:6; 55:3-5; 56:4-8; 66:18-24; Jer 16:19; 33:9; Ezek 36:36; 37:28; Amos 9:11-12; cf. Ps 47:9; 87:3-6; 67:2-3; 117:1.

fulfillment of the divine promises in the new covenant onto an ideal Israel, that is, a community tied to the Servant of Yahweh located in a rejuvenated new creation (Isa 65:17; 66:22). This "ideal Israel" picks up the promises to Abraham and is the ultimate fulfillment of the covenants that God established with Adam, the patriarchs, the nation of Israel, and David's son.

What is new about the new covenant? Jeremiah 31:29-34 speaks of newness by a change in the structure and nature of God's people because of the work of its greater covenant mediator. Let us look at these respective changes.

First, the new covenant changes the structure of God's people. Under the old covenant, God dealt with his people through specially called leaders. The OT does pay attention to individual believers, as evidenced in the remnant theme. But in general, the people's knowledge of God and their relationship with him depended upon specially endowed leaders. The entire nation benefited when these leaders did right, and they suffered when they did not. Thus, the OT does not emphasize God's Spirit being poured out on every individual believer and empowering them but distinctively on prophets, priests, and kings. But Jeremiah signals a structural shift in the covenant community where all of God's people will know him, from the least to the greatest. By this change, the new covenant raises every member of the covenant to the same relationship with God through the universal distribution of the Spirit (see Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2). The Messiah, being the first to be anointed with the Spirit (see Isa 11:1-3; 49:1-2; 61:1ff), will in turn pour out his Spirit on all flesh, namely, everyone within the covenant community (see Ezek 11:19-20; 36:25-27; Joel 2:28-32; compare with Num 11:27-29).

Second, the new covenant changes the nature of God's people. Jeremiah distinguishes between the old and new covenant based on the heart condition of its members (Jer 31:31-34). Whereas only a remnant under the old covenant truly knew Yahweh, God changes the heart ("circumcision of heart") of every new covenant member (Jer 31:33-34; compare with Deut 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:4; 9:25; Rom 2:29). This does not mean that OT saints were not regenerate; instead, it implies that that the new people will all be regenerate. The old covenant community was a mixed people (Rom 9:6), but this is not true of the new. The entire community will savingly know God.

Third, the new covenant changes the sacrifice made for God's people. The old covenant offered the forgiveness of sins through the priestly-sacrificial system, which was never intended to save (Heb 10:4). The old covenant sacrifices were designed to remind God's covenant people of their sinfulness through repetition. Yet, Jeremiah says, God "will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more" (Jer 31:33-34; Heb 10:17). Under the new covenant, then, a better priest will offer a better sacrifice (Ps 110), and all in the covenant will be justified before God.

How the OT Covenants are fulfilled in Christ and the New Covenant

As the NT begins, fulfillment is in the air: what the OT anticipated and predicted is now here in Christ. Our Lord's identity is that he is the eternal Son of the Father and the promised Messiah who has come to restore humanity's vice-regent rule over creation. Jesus teaches us that he is now fulfilling all of God's covenantal promises and establishing God's promised kingdom through new covenant by his obedient work and the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost. Also, Jesus reminds us that his work is to redeem a new people for that kingdom, his church (Matt 16:18). Let us think of the fulfillment of God's covenant promises in three steps, which in turn allow us to think properly about the continuity and discontinuity in God's plan: (1) how Christ fulfills the previous covenants, (2) fulfillment in terms of inaugurated eschatology, and (3) how the church is new and receives all of God's covenant promises in and through Christ.

Messiah Jesus Fulfills the OT Covenants

From the opening verse of the NT, Jesus is identified as "the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Matt 1:1), which is significant. Jesus, the eternal Son made flesh (John 1:1-2, 14), has not only become the first man of the new creation, but also in him all of the previous covenant mediators, typological structures, and promises have reached their fulfillment (2 Cor 1:20).

Think about how the NT presents Jesus's identity, especially tied to the covenants. Jesus is the divine Son who comes to save his people, and, by virtue of his incarnation and work, becomes the son, the antitypical fulfillment of the previous covenant mediators, thus securing our eternal redemption by his obedient life and death (Rom 1:3-4; Phil 2:6-11; Heb 1:1-3). In his incarnation and cross, Jesus becomes David's greater Son, who inaugurates God's kingdom, and is now seated as the Davidic king, leading history to its consummation at his return (Matt 1:1; 28:18-20; Acts 2:32-36; Rom 1:3-4; Eph 1:9-10; Phil 2:9-11; Col 1:15-20; Heb 1 [compare with Ps 2, 45, 110]). Jesus is also the true Israel, who fulfills Israel's role and brings Israel's exile to its end in a new exodus, and who obeys where Israel disobeyed (Matt 2:15 [Hos 11:1]; Matt 3:15-17 [compare with Isa 11:1-2; 42:1; 61:1]; Matt 4:1-11; John 15:1-6 [Isa 5:1-7]). Jesus is Abraham's true seed (Gal 3:16) who constitutes all those in him, the true children of Abraham, and inheritors of all the Abrahamic promises (Rom 2:25-29; 4:9-22; Gal 3:6-9; Heb 2:14-18; Rev 5:9-10).

Moreover, Jesus, as the last Adam, fulfills the foundational role of Adam and the creation covenant (Rom 5:12-21; 1 Cor 15:21-22; Heb 2:5-18; 8-10). In his conception, the Spirit brings about the beginning of the new creation (Luke 1:35; compare with Gen 1:2). In Jesus's baptism, the promised Messiah receives the Spirit in full measure (Isa 11:1-5; 61:1-2; Luke 4:14-21) and he pours out the Spirit on his people (John

20:21-23; Acts 2:1-36; 10:44-48; Gal 3:1-6; 3:26-4:7), fulfilling OT expectations of the new covenant. In fact, in Christ's bodily resurrection, the new creation is now visible and physical. No wonder, in Christ, we are now a new creation by the Spirit, both individually (2 Cor 5:17; Eph 2:1-10) and corporately as the church (Eph 2:11-22).

In every aspect of Jesus's life, ministry, and cross-work, he fulfills all of the promises, instruction, and typological patterns of the previous covenants. Yet, it is important to think about the nature of this fulfillment in terms of inaugurated eschatology.

Inaugurated Eschatology and Fulfillment in Christ

The NT clarifies how Christ fulfills all of the OT promises and covenants. The OT prophets speak of the one coming of the Lord and Messiah to consummate all things. This one coming will result in the end of this present age (characterized by sin, death, and opposition to God) and the beginning of the last days or "the age to come" (characterized by life, forgiveness of sin, the defeat of God's enemies, and the arrival of a new creation).

Additionally, the OT prophets think of the "age to come" in terms of an entire package. Minimally, when the Lord and Messiah come, we will see such things as: the arrival of God's kingdom, the pouring out of the Spirit, a new temple, the full forgiveness of sin, the judgment and defeat of God's enemies, resurrection life, eschatological rest, a restored Israel, a transformed people comprised of believing Jews and Gentiles, and a new creation.

The NT teaches the same truths, yet it modifies the redemptive-historical timeline to speak of two comings of Christ. In his first coming, Jesus appears as Lord and Christ, and brings all that the OT associates with the age to come into this present age in principle. Yet, the consummation of the age to come awaits the second coming of Jesus. Between these two comings, Scripture teaches that Christ is currently reigning over his creation-kingdom. The realities of life in the age to come have already come into this present age, but not yet in full.

What is true regarding the already-not yet dynamic of Christ's rule is also true of the entire package of prophetic anticipation of the age to come. For example, because Jesus is the risen and exalted Davidic king and Lord, he pours out the promised Spirit on his new covenant people, in fulfillment of Joel's prophecy (Acts 2:32-36; compare with Luke 24:46-51; John 14:15-17). Yet, the present gift of the Spirit is the deposit and guarantee of our future inheritance (Eph 1:13-14). The reception of the Spirit signals that the OT restoration promises, first given to Israel, are now taking place in Christ and the church, which entails that everyone in Christ has the Spirit and now participates in the promised age.

Or, think of other OT promises which are now here, yet await their final consummation. In Christ, we are now forgiven of our sin, partakers of new covenant

blessings (Jer 31:34; Rom 3:21-26; 8:1), yet we will still publicly stand before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor 5:10). Presently, in Christ, we are raised from spiritual death to life, adopted, redeemed, reconciled, and holy. Yet, we still await our bodily resurrection at Christ's return, the full benefits of our adoption and inheritance, and our glorification. Presently, in Christ, new covenant believers are now, individually and corporately, God's temple indwelt by the Spirit. Yet, we still await the new creation where there is no temple because of the Lord and the Lamb (Rev 21:22). Even the new creation promise is fulfilled in an already-not yet way. Our Lord is the first man of the new creation in his incarnation and resurrection. And, in union with Christ by the Spirit, we, individually and corporately, are now "new creation" (2 Cor 5:17; Eph 2:1-22), although we wait the consummation of all things.

Also note how the promise of a transformed people participates in the already-not yet dynamic. The prophets anticipate that Messiah's new covenant people (believing Jews and Gentiles) will not be like Israel (Jer 31:29-32). God will circumcise their hearts (Deut 30:1-6; Jer 31:33) by the Spirit (Ezek 36:25-27; 37). The Spirit will empower and gift the entire community (Joel 2:28-32) so that all know God (Jer. 31:34) and all experience the forgiveness of sins (Jer 31:34). In Christ, this is fulfilled in us, individually and corporately. A Christian is now no longer in Adam but "in Christ," which entails that all new covenant blessings are ours now, although we still await our glorification and resurrection bodies.

Why is inaugurated eschatology significant in debates over theological systems? Because although inaugurated eschatology is widely accepted within evangelical theology, dispensational and covenant theology often apply it inconsistently at specific points in their systems.

For example, dispensationalism distinguishes Israel from the church ontologically so that in the future, national and ethnic Israel must receive certain promises tied to the land, distinct from believing Gentile nations. The church is not viewed as the true, eschatological Israel who receives all of the promises, including the inheritance of the land fulfilled in the new creation. So, when Jeremiah addresses "the house of Israel and Judah" (31:31) but in the NT it is applied to the church, many dispensationalists explain this by appealing to inaugurated eschatology. In the already, the new covenant is spiritually applied to the church, but in the not yet, the new covenant will be applied literally to national Israel in the land. In the future, Israel, as a nation, will receive her distinct promises (tied to the land) different from believing Gentile nations.

This view has two problems. First, it assumes a faulty understanding of the Israel-church relationship because it does not properly follow the Bible's covenantal progression. It does not start with creation and Adam and then situate Israel and her role within the covenantal storyline. It does not consistently see how Christ, as David's greater Son is the true Israel and last Adam, and how he fulfills all of God's promises. In turn, it fails to view Messiah's people, the church, consisting of

believing Jews and Gentiles, as the recipient of all of the OT promises equally as the one new man. Second, regarding inaugurated eschatology, dispensationalism fails to see how all new covenant realities are now here in Christ and applied to the church in principle. We cannot simply apply spiritual blessings to the already and physical blessings to the not yet. Both are present now, although the fullness of both still awaits the consummation.

On the other hand, covenant theology insists that the church, like Israel, is mixed. But this view conflicts with the OT expectation that Messiah's people will be a regenerate people. Some covenant theologians admit that Jeremiah 31:31-34 anticipates such a people, yet they explain the mixed nature of the church by appealing to inaugurated eschatology: presently, the church is mixed, but in the future it will be regenerate.

This view also has two problems. First, it does not sufficiently account for the relationship of Christ to his people. Through covenantal progression, the relationship between the covenant mediator and his seed is transformed in the new covenant. In the previous covenants, the relationship is more biological/physical, but now in Christ, the relationship is spiritual, that is, of the Spirit. One is in Christ and the new covenant, not by physical circumcision but by spiritual rebirth and faith. Second, covenant theology fails to see how all new covenant realities are now here in Christ and applied to the church in principle. Now that Christ has come, one is either in the new covenant or not, and to be in the new covenant entails that one now knows God, is forgiven of their sins, and is circumcised in heart, even as we await the not yet.

In Christ, the Church Receives All of God's Promises

The relationship between Christ and his people is inseparable. For this reason, the church receives all of God's promises in Christ. Two entailments follow. First, the church is part of the one people of God (elect) across time, but covenantally new and constituted as a regenerate people (pace covenant theology). Second, the church is God's new creation that remains forever, consisting of Jews and Gentiles, who, in Christ, equally and fully receive all of God's promises. The church is not a parenthesis in God's plan or a present-day illustration of what national Israel and Gentile nations will be in the millennium and (or) consummation as recipients of distinct blessings (pace dispensationalism). Three points warrant these entailments.

First, there is only one people of God over time who are saved by grace through faith in God's promises grounded in Christ alone. Evidence of continuity between OT and NT saints (Rom 1:1-2, 11; Phil 3:3, 7, 9) is in the language used to describe each. Descriptions of Israel as God's covenant people are applied to the church through Christ (Ex 19:6; Deut 32:15; 33:12; Isa 43:20-21; 44:2; Jer 31:31-34; Hos 1:6, 9-11; 2:1, 23; see Rom 9:24-26; Gal 3:26-29; Eph 2:12, 19; 3:4-6; 1 Thess 1:4; Heb 8:6-13; 1 Pet 2:9-10). Also, the language of "assembly" is applied to Israel and the church (Deut

4:10; Isa 2:2-4; Matt 16:18; 1 Cor 11:18; Heb 10:25), and the church, comprised of Jewish and Gentile believers, is described as the "Israel of God" (Gal 6:16).

Second, the church is covenantally new and constituted as a regenerate people. Alongside Jeremiah's depiction of a transformed new covenant people, which the NT applies to the church (1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:7-18; Heb 8-10), are other truths that underscore the church's newness. For example, the church is viewed as an eschatological and gathered community—identified with the age to come—that has arrived in Christ and is consummated at his return. Her identity is not with this present age but with the saving reign of Christ that is now here. Those who have placed their faith in Christ are now citizens of the new (heavenly) Jerusalem, transferred from being in Adam to being in Christ with all the benefits of that union (see Heb 12:18-29). Thus, to participate in these realities now is another way of saying that the church is, by definition, part of the new creation; consisting of people who are raised and seated with Christ in the heavenly realms (Eph 2:5-6; Col 2:12-13; 3:3)—which is only true of regenerate people.

Furthermore, in Christ, the church is God's new temple (1 Cor 6:19; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:21; Heb 3:6; 1 Pet 2:5). As God's temple, we have direct access to the Father by the Spirit (Eph 2:18; Heb 10:19-22), something new in contrast to Israel. As God's temple, the Spirit indwells each person, but this description is only true of regenerate people (Rom 8:28-39; Eph 1:13-14).

Third, the church is God's new creation or humanity that remains forever, comprised of believing Jews and Gentiles, who equally and fully receive all of God's promises in Christ. Ephesians 2:11-22 teaches this truth. Gentiles, who were once outside of Israel (vv. 11-12), now in Messiah Jesus are recipients of all of God's promises. By Christ's work, the law-covenant, which purposely separated Jews and Gentiles, is fulfilled. Result? Both Jews and Gentiles are now reconciled to God and each other by entering a new covenant (vv. 14-18), who together inherit the same promises. Paul is forthright: the church is new (see 1 Cor 9:19-23). The church transcends the old entities, although unbelieving Israel and disobedient Gentiles continue to exist. The church is not simply a replacement of Israel or a "renewed" instantiation of it, or one phase in God's plan to end in the future when God returns to his previous plan for Israel and the nations. God's eternal plan always anticipated the creation of the church (Eph 3:8-13). What makes this possible is Jesus, who fulfills God's promises and applies them to his people.

Further evidence that the church receives all of God's promises is how OT restoration promises for Israel are applied to the church in Christ (Acts 1:6, 2, 8, 10-11). That is why in Christ and the church, all of God's promises are now being fulfilled (Ex 19:6; 1 Pet 2:9-10). The church is Abraham's offspring (Rom 4:9-22; Gal 3:6-9); true Jews by heart circumcision (Rom 2:25-29; Phil 3:3); the one new man (Eph 2:11-22); from the same olive tree (Rom 11:17-24); and part of the 144,000 who symbolically refer to the entire church (Rev 7:1-8; 14:3). Captured in Scripture's final

vision, the church is Christ's bride, the heavenly Jerusalem, whose foundation is the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles (Rev 21:9-14), an international people (Rev 5:9-10) who inherit the new creation (Rev 21-22).

Does this mean that God is finished with ethnic Israel? In Romans 9-11, Paul says, no. Although people debate over whether ethnic Jews are now being converted throughout church history, or we still await a mass conversion at the end of history, pace dispensationalism, this text says nothing about Israel as a nation receiving outstanding promises in the millennium (and eternal state) distinct from believing Gentiles. Instead, what Scripture teaches is that all of God's promises are fulfilled in Christ and his people, the church.

Conclusion

In summary form, this is the view of progressive covenantalism. On gospel issues, although there is more agreement than disagreement with covenant and dispensational theology, progressive covenantalism insists that at the center of God's plans and purposes is Christ Jesus. In him, all of God's promises are "yes and Amen" (2 Cor 1:20), and by grace, we, as the church, are the beneficiaries of his glorious, triumphant work.

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Introducing Reformed Covenant Theology

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Introduction

We must meet God somewhere. Despite prevailing cultural winds of mystical spirituality, the true God is not accidentally discovered in smoke signal, crop circles, tea leaves, or astrological patterns. As creatures made for communion with God, we need to encounter him. Since God is the Creator, he determines where we get to have that majestic encounter. John Owen (1616–83) wrote about how God delivers all his promises to us now through the one covenant of grace:

> But whereas all the promises belong unto the same covenant, with all the grace contained in them and exhibited by them, whoever is interested by faith in that covenant is so in all the promises of God that belong thereunto, and hath an equal right unto them with those unto whom they were first given.[1]

If all God's promises come to us through the covenant, then an understanding of this covenant relationship is of monumental importance. God has determined that his image-bearing creatures, both in our original integrity and now after the fall, will meet him in the *covenant* that he makes with us.[2]

A covenant is simply a formal or official bond which establishes the nature of how the people in covenant can and should relate to one another. Still, the Bible teaches us about multiple types of covenants, which all have their role in helping us more deeply understand our present relationship with our Lord. As Psalm 25:14 reminds us, "The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him, and *he makes known to them his covenant*." The bottom line, however, is that covenant theology is simply about our relationship with God.

1. John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. by William H. Goold (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1850), 4:261.

2. Michael Horton, *Lord and Servant: A Covenant Christology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 3–21; Michael S. Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 35–79, 151–86.

This article introduces the main themes and core principles of traditional Reformed covenant theology. Although the historic association of covenant theology with the Reformed tradition may be obvious to some, we are including the adjective "Reformed" simply to recognize that most traditions have a covenant theology. Even in this issue, my friend, Steve Wellum, articulates a covenantal outlook from a Baptist perspective that I believe largely aligns with some core commitments of Reformed covenant theology—obviously we disagree on how to put together some developments in the Bible's covenantal storyline at least as they pertain to ecclesiology. In other words, this article highlights some core theological commitments belonging to traditional covenant theology alongside the other aspects of our paradigm of biblical theology, precisely because the longstanding concerns driving covenant theology have been our clarity on issues of salvation and how God meets his people.[3]

God and God's Works: Locating Covenants in the Theological Enterprise

Covenant theology, as with every doctrine, has its specific place among other topics. This section aims to locate how Reformed covenant theology relates to wider theological reflection. More specifically, we are fitting the Reformed use of covenant within the task of systematic theology, primarily because, historically, Reformed theology has used covenant to do more than just rehash and explain the biblical narrative— as important as that endeavor may be.

First, John Webster (1955–2016) has forcefully reminded us that the doctrine of God's triune life is the supreme category among doctrines, including even the doctrines of salvation.[4] The explanation of salvation, then, has a specific *in some ways* secondary place within the overarching task of theology to elaborate upon God in himself and then the works of God towards the creatures.[5] Every Christian should want as full an understanding of our relationship with God as God's revelation permits, and Reformed covenant theology focuses on the principles and dynamics of how God relates to us.

This emphasis on communion with God situates covenant theology within its proper relation to other theological doctrines. Christian theology has a traditional distinction between *theologia*, discussing God in himself, and *oeconomia*, delving

3. Michael S. Horton, *Introducing Covenant Theology (*Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006); Michael S. Horton, "Covenant," in Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Reformed Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 434–45.

4. John Webster, "*Rector et Iudex Super Genera Doctrinarum?* The Place of the Doctrine of Justification," in *God without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology Volume I: God and the Works of God* (London: T&T Clark, 2016), 159–61.

5. John Webster, "'It was the Will of the Lord to Bruise Him': Soteriology and the Doctrine of God," *God without Measure I*, 143–57.

into God's works and how we know God according to his works.[6] In Webster's terms, covenant theology does not directly expound the doctrine of the Trinity, even though it fits within that endeavor as the broadest dogmatic task.[7] Accordingly, covenant theology focuses on God's works towards the creature, although still keeping in mind that God's works should then orient us toward the triune God. Since God has life in himself, he is able to be the giver of life to his creatures, and the Scripture indicates that he grants the supreme offer of that life by way of covenant.[8] Hence, covenant can occupy a dominant place in our theological system without being the "center" of Scripture's theology because God is Scripture's primary theme but covenant encompasses the discussion of "all things (or at least us) in relation to God."[9] As daring as it may be, this point suggests that the two encompassing categories of theology are then the Trinity and the covenants, since the covenants include all God's works toward creatures.[10] The works of God in the covenants are, after all, inseparable from the triune God who performs them.[11]

The lens of communion with God is then meant to highlight that covenant theology is not the end in itself but a category that adds richness to our understanding of how we as God's creatures have the privilege of knowing the triune God. Although the exposition of theology proper may be the supreme dogmatic task, the fact that God made a covenant with his image bearers means that we are the only earthly creatures who have the honor of being able to expound about the majesty of our God. Covenant theology as the expression of our communion with God highlights that intersection between the highest end of humanity to glorify God and enjoy him forever—even in explaining God in theological exposition—and the need for us to understand ourselves in relation to God.[12] So John Calvin argued that true wisdom resides in knowledge of God and of ourselves, but knowledge of both is so inherently linked that they cannot be disconnected.[13] As Webster himself highlighted, "The gospel, that is, concerns the history of fellowship—covenant—between God and

6. Stephen J. Duby, *God in Himself: Scripture, Metaphysics, and the Task of Christian Theology* (Studies in Christian Doctrine and Scripture; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019).

7. Webster, "*Rector et Iudex*," 159.

8. Webster, "It was the Will of the Lord to Bruise Him," 152–57; Webster, "*Rector et Iudex*," 159–61.

9. Rightly, Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum similarly nuance covenant's place within the scope of the theological discipline. Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 31–33.

10. Compare with the categorical suggestions of Trinity and creation or Trinity and atonement: John Webster, "*Non ex Aequo*: God's Relation to Creatures," in *God without Measure I,* 115–26; Webster, "*Rector et Iudex*," 159–76; Fred Sanders, *Fountain of Salvation: Trinity and Soteriology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021), 54–69.

11. The reverse— that God is inseparable from the covenants— is not true since God would be God as he is *in se* regardless of whether he had created and covenanted with us.

12. Webster, "*Rector et Iudex*," 164.

13. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 1.1.1–3.

creatures; Christian soteriology follows this double theme as it is unfolded in time."[14] Covenant then is the explanation of how we know our God. God himself remains most important, but we relate to him in covenant.

Second, covenant relates to other theological categories is that it takes seriously the purposes for humanity that God built into creation. God built the potential to obtain a higher existence of new creation into creation as he originally made it (1 Cor. 15:35–49). As Geerhardus Vos famously articulated, "The eschatological is an older strand in revelation than the soteric."[15] Vos's point is that God created humanity with the potential to gain the highest possible communion with him in the new creation, and that potential was part of our relationship with God even before our need for salvation from sin. Covenant theology contributes to that premise by outlining that the means to reach that consummate communion with God have always been thoroughly tied to the covenantal structure of our relationship with God. So, the scope is set within the developing trajectory of creation to new creation.[16]

Third, that context then highlights a necessary point about theological method. The most common approach to explaining covenant theology in recent decades has been biblical theology.[17] Briefly, biblical theology, rightly implemented, explores Scripture's unity in the progress of its narrative as well as in its ongoing development and use of ideas, imagery, and themes throughout Scripture's unfolding revelation, while systematic theology synthesizes everything Scripture says about a given topic into a categorical statement of the truth.[18] The approach of biblical theology examines how the theme of covenant contributes to the developing storyline of God's plan as it progresses across the Scripture. The focus is then on the distinct aspects that are attached to the individual covenants—such as the covenants with Adam, Noah,

14. Webster, "It was the Will of the Lord to Bruise Him," 143.

15. Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988), 140.

16. G. K. Beale has highlighted this new creation trajectory as a main theme of the New Testament's explanation of history's culmination and unfolding in Christ; *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011).

17. For example, O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1981); Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Overland Park, KS: Two Age Press, 2000); Paul R. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God's Unfolding Purpose* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007); Thomas R. Schreiner, *Covenant and God's Purpose for the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017); Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*; Guy Prentiss Waters, J. Nicholas Reid, and John R. Muether, eds., *Covenant Theology: Biblical, Theological, and Historical Perspectives* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020); Daniel I. Block, *Covenant: The Framework of God's Grand Plan of Redemption* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021); Stephen G. Myers, *God to Us: Covenant Theology in Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2021).

18. On biblical theology: Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 5–9, 16–18; J. V. Fesko, "On the Antiquity of Biblical Theology," in Lane G. Tipton and Jeffrey C. Waddington (eds.), *Resurrection and Eschatology: Theology in Service of the Church. Essays in Honor of Richard B. Gaffin Jr.* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 443-77; Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 39–47.

Abraham, Israel under Moses, David, and the new covenant—and what each covenant means for the whole story arc of Scripture. This approach is critically necessary for understanding both the unfolding story of redemption and how the covenants historically condition our experience of God and salvation.[19]

This article, on the other hand, emphasizes the method of systematic theology, emphasizing the categorical payoff of covenantal principles.[20] Although biblical-theological and systematic approaches should stand in harmony, the number of biblical-theological studies of covenant suggests that the time to synthesize the fruit of those exegetical labors into systematic conclusions has come.[21] The inspired account of God's workings in history has endless riches as the narrative development shows God's ongoing faithfulness, but the descriptions of God's historical works can be summarized into categorical statements about God and how he works.[22] Necessarily, even the historical contours of progressive revelation yield concrete categorical conclusions because the immutable God stands behind history working within it and he himself—along with his eternal commitments—does not change with history nor is he realized or shaped by it.[23]

Although systematic theology certainly requires more than lining up proof texts, theology's fundamental bedrock is to answer God's own call in the Bible to meditate upon his Word. The Psalter begins by describing how the blessed man is the one who continually thinks about God's law:

> Blessed is the man
> who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
> nor stands in the way of sinners,
> nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
> but his delight is in the law of the Lord,
> and *on his law he meditates day and night*. (Psalm 1:1–2)

Meditation on God's law undoubtedly includes many elements but at least includes reflection upon how the whole of Scripture hangs together as God's unified story of his relationship with his people. This synthetic approach explains doctrine by reading the point of biblical texts in light of the point in other biblical texts on the

19. R. Michael Allen, *Reformed Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 34.

20. Benjamin B. Warfield, "The Idea of Systematic Theology," in Studies in Theology (Oxford: OUP, 1932), 49–87; Geerhardus Vos, "The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg NJ: P&R, 1980), 3–24; John Murray, "Systematic Theology," in *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), 4:1–21; Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 39–50.

21. Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 220–64; Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 15–16.

22. Horton, *Lord and Servant*, 22–65; Webster, "*Rector et Iudex*," 162–64.

23. Michael Allen, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology—Part Two," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 14, no. 4 (2020): 344–57.

assumption that each text coheres together in a unified theological message, which is really nothing more than interpreting Scripture by Scripture. When we think about biblical theological paradigms, it can be easy to get lost in their value apart from their concrete doctrinal implications. Thus, even as this article outlines covenant theology's hermeneutical principles and understanding of the shape of the *historia salutis*, we want to keep an eye on the categorical payoff from those issues.[24]

Distinctives and Assumptions

Reformed theology prioritizes the sole, final authority of God's written Word, explaining how the full scope of our salvation is founded on grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, living in such a way that emphasizes the centrality of the local church, and proclaiming Jesus Christ from the whole of Scripture. Our basic assumptions revolve around these truths being key and central to the Christian life as well as for interpreting Scripture. Our covenant theology is distinct in its commitment to three *theological* covenants: the covenant of redemption, the covenant of works, and the covenant of grace. Each of these categories, highlight a different aspect of the whole picture for understanding the full scope of God's sovereign plan for history, drawing attention to features of God's covenantal relations that inform our theological categories.[25] This section, admittedly sparce in its defense of these doctrines so directing readers to more extensive discussions in the footnotes, outlines the basic premises of these three covenants, since they form the backbone of our theological system. Subsequent sections then frame hermeneutical issues and theological implications that further explain why these doctrines' importance within Reformed theology.

First, in the covenant of redemption, the eternal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit assume particular missions for executing the plan of salvation. The Father arranges salvation by electing some from the mass of fallen humanity and giving them to the Son to redeem. The Son accomplishes salvation by completing his mission to fulfill all the requirements of salvation on our behalf and so procure everlasting life for us. The Spirit applies salvation by joining us to Christ by faith. This covenant has struck many as a speculative imposition upon Scripture but, in truth, is a way of describing the mysterious tensions that Scripture presents about eternal "conversations" among the Godhead.[26]

24. The rest of this article reworks or compresses more extended arguments from Harrison Perkins, *Reformed Covenant Theology: A Systematic Introduction* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2024). Obviously, I cannot defend the whole scope of Reformed covenant theology with adequate exegetical, theological, and historical rigor in the space of this article, so point readers beyond this *introductory* essay to that more substantive case.

25. These summaries draw from Perkins, *Reformed Covenant Theology*, 7–9.

26. For more extensive explanation and defense, see J. V. Fesko, *The Covenant of Redemption: Origins, Development, and Reception* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016); Fesko, *The*

Space prevents a detailed explorations of this sort of intertextuality, so one example must suffice here.[27] The use of Psalm 110 in Hebrews 7:15–22 provides inspired insight about the trinitarian realities behind the Old Testament. Psalm 110 began by describing a conversation between two persons whom David could call "Lord" (v.1), marking both as divine. Drawing attention to God's priestly appointment of David's Lord, Hebrews points out how Psalm 110 was about Christ's work as the guarantor of the new covenant.

> The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, "You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek." (Ps 110:4)

Hebrews emphasized that this announcement in Psalm 110 appointed Christ as the everlastingly effective high priest after Melchizedek's order. The point we need to note is that the inspired narratives about Jesus's life never record God stating this oath to Christ during his earthly ministry. The New Testament often refers to Psalm 110, although never depicting the Father as saying these words to the Son during his time on earth. Psalm 110, therefore, is not simply prophetic about Christ's ministry but also records God's eternal counsel whereby the Father appointed the Son as the everlasting priest to save his people. In Psalm 110, the Father speaks to the pre-incarnate Son concerning his incarnate mission. Hebrews 7:22 says, "This," referring to God's words in Psalm 110:4, "makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant." God from eternity appointed Christ as the effectual covenant mediator. This Psalm provides insight into the New Testament's perspective on how passages in the Old Testament actually describe a covenantal relation among the persons of the Godhead within the plan of salvation.

The covenant of redemption is a way of accounting for the biblical depictions of eternal trinitarian interactions concerning something dear to the heart of every Christian: Christ's role as our saving mediator. It is an indispensable truth of all true Christian theology that Christ is the redeemer of his people, coming from God to act on our account. The Westminster Confession of Faith 8.1 explains,

> It pleased God, in his eternal purpose, to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus Christ, his only-begotten Son, to be the Mediator between God and Man, the Prophet, Priest, and King; the Head and Saviour of his Church, the Heir of all things, and Judge of the world; unto whom he did, from all eternity, give

Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption (Fearn, UK: Mentor, 2016); David VanDrunen and R. Scott Clark, "The Covenant Before the Covenants," in R. Scott Clark, ed., *Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 167–96; Guy M. Richard, "The Covenant of Redemption," in Guy Prentiss Waters, J. Nicholas Reid, and John R. Muether, eds., *Covenant Theology: Biblical, Theological, and Historical Perspectives* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 43–62; Horton, *Introducing Covenant Theology*, 78–82.

27. Perkins, *Reformed Covenant Theology*, 101–84 provides detailed defense of the biblical and theological foundations for the covenant of redemption.

> a people to be his seed, and to be by him in time redeemed, called, justified, sanctified, and glorified.[28]

At least the first stretch of this statement ought to find wide acceptance among Christians from all traditions, that the triune God has decreed that the eternal Son would come in the incarnation, serving as mediator between God and man to effect salvation for his people (Is. 7:14; Is. 45:22–25; Matt. 1:21–23).[29] The closing addition rounds out the basic premises of the Reformed doctrine of the covenant of redemption, stating that God gave the elect to the Son as those for whom he would act as mediator (Jn. 6:38–40; Jn. 10:25–30; Jn. 17:2, 6–7, 9).[30] The covenant of redemption is the Reformed way of describing the eternal foundations for the triune God's plan of redemption wherein Christ performs his incarnate obedience as the second Adam on behalf of his people, earning his own (re)exalted status in resurrection life as well as salvation for those given to him (Phil. 2:5–11).[31]

Several corollaries are worth noting here. First, from a hermeneutical vantage point, the covenant of redemption grows from an obviously intertextual approach to reading Scripture. The resolution of certain tensions in Old Testament passages through the New Testament's rereading of redemptive history in light of Christ's first advent results in our conclusions concerning this covenant.[32] Second, the covenant of redemption forges the template for the covenant of works and the covenant of grace as they take place in history. In this covenant, the incarnate Son had to fulfill the law and make satisfaction for his people's sin, reflecting the condition and consequences, as we will see shortly, from Adam's first condition in covenant with God in the Garden of Eden. On the other hand, Christ's fulfillment of this office as the last Adam for his people is the legal grounds according to God's natural justice for him to provide grace. The Westminster Larger Catechism 31 reflects this idea: "The Covenant of Grace was made with Christ, as the second Adam, and, in him with all the elect, as his seed."[33] In other words, the covenant of redemption was a covenant of works for the Son but a covenant of grace for us.

Second, in the covenant of works, by which God related to Adam before the fall, God offered reward based on Adam's perfect obedience. On the one hand, this covenant expresses a traditional Augustinian principle concerning original sin, namely that God appointed Adam as the representative of all humanity, meaning that

28. Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom* (New York, NY: Harper and Brothers, 1877), 3:619.

29. For more on the trinitarian and eternal scope of the Son's appointment as mediator, especially from the perspective of classical theism, see Perkins, *Reformed Covenant Theology*, 101–23.

30. Perkins, *Reformed Covenant Theology*, 131–48.

31. Perkins, *Reformed Covenant Theology*, 144–48, 171–82.

32. Perkins, *Reformed Covenant Theology*, 123–29.

33. John R. Bower, *The Larger Catechism: A Critical Text and Introduction* (Principal Documents of the Westminster Assembly; Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 71.

Adam's success or failure determined whether all humanity would receive reward or condemnation. Christians know that Adam failed, fell into sin, and so plunged the rest of us into sin with him.[34]

More specifically, this covenant offered the potential of glorified life and the beatific vision to Adam if he met the terms of the covenant by rendering perfect obedience and passing the probationary test with the tree of knowledge of good and evil. We need not spend more time on the point about the tree, since the biblical record in Genesis 3 plainly recounts Adam's sin and confessionally minded Christians will all share the conclusion that Adam's fall brought sin into the world with consequences for us all, including our need for salvation.[35] The notion of Adam's reward for his obedience likely needs further explanation.

The basic premise standing behind this reward aspect of the covenant of works is that God created humanity with the prospect of advancing into confirmed righteousness and deeper communion with God on the other side of Adam's probation. Respectively, Geerhardus Vos's maxim for this point is that eschatology precedes soteriology, meaning that we had the potential for new creation life even before the fall.[36] G. K. Beale, followed also by Stephen Wellum and Peter Gentry in the progressive covenantalism trajectory, has argued at length that the creation order contains themes of kingship, dominion, temple/God's presence, and priesthood that relate Adam's status as God's image bearer to a higher destiny.[37] Although these arguments are framed in a particular biblical-theological hue, the conclusion is a highly traditional Christian idea that can be traced back through the doctrine of the beatific vision, which became a major theme in the medieval period concerning the hope for attaining the sight of God in a consummate way.

Two sides pertain to this eschatological destiny bound to creation. One of the clearest biblical expressions of the prospect for advancing to glorified life is in 1 Corinthians 15:44–46:

34. For more extensive explanation and defense, see J. V. Fesko, *The Covenant of Works: The Origins, Development, and Reception of the Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); J. V. Fesko, *Adam and the Covenant of Works* (Fearn, UK: Mentor, 2021); Michael S. Horton, "Covenant Theology," in Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas, eds., *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 41–52; Richard P. Belcher Jr., "The Covenant of Works in the Old Testament," in Waters et al, *Covenant Theology*, 63–78; Guy Prentiss Waters, "The Covenant of Works in the New Testament," in Waters et al, *Covenant Theology*, 79–98; Horton, *Lord and Servant*, 91–155; Horton, *Introducing Covenant Theology*, 83–104; Perkins, *Reformed Covenant Theology*, 19–98.

35. Perkins, *Reformed Covenant Theology*, 41–45.

36. Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1930; repr. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1994), 60; Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 140.

37. G. K. Beale, *Union with the Resurrected Christ: Eschatological New Creation and New Testament Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2023), 21–130; Beale, *New Testament Biblical Theology*, 29–87, 381–465; Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 666–85.

> It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. Thus it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first but the natural, and then the spiritual.

In his case for the necessity of believing in the bodily resurrection at Christ's return, Paul appealed to Adam's own creation condition, arguing on account of his citation of Genesis 2:7 that the original natural body always entailed a corresponding spiritual body. Certainly, Paul meant that Adam's potential body was characterized by spiritual glorification, rather than any notion of disembodiment, since he was contending for the bodily resurrection.[38] The covenant of works was then oriented toward a new creation telos.

The other side to this eschatological orientation is the condition of perfect obedience. Few if any question that Adam had to be truly faithful to God and his obligations before the Lord. Despite some modern exceptions wherein the fallen and corrupt condition is increated with the primeval state, traditional Christianity has holistically accepted that sin is a wicked intrusion into God's ordering of the world. Thus, Reformed covenant theology has historically affirmed that Adam's obedience in keeping the natural law engraved on his heart and to the probationary command about the tree of knowledge was the condition for obtaining that eschatological, glorified life. As Paul taught in Romans 2:13–15,

For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them.

The covenant of works is then called such because the law was its condition for reaching our consummate, new creation state.[39]

Because Adam broke the covenant of works, the path to everlasting life by our own obedience is forever closed. Paul explained this aspect of sin's curse in Galatians 3:10–11,

> For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them." Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith."

Human nature remains hardwired with an orientation to our eschatological destiny, but sin has destroyed our ability to reach it according to our natural capacities, since

38. Perkins, *Reformed Covenant Theology*, 56–75.
39. Perkins, *Reformed Covenant Theology*, 49– 56, 449–58.

the covenant of works was founded on our natural strength to keep the law.[40] Sinners, therefore, need another route to new creation communion with God other than one that rests about our works.

Third, and following upon the just mentioned problem, the covenant of grace is God's one way of saving his people from their sin by Christ's work, which is applied to believers in history through each biblical covenant, which unifies the Triune God's saving work from Genesis 3 to Revelation 22. God has always saved his people by administering the same promise of grace through various historical covenants, but the underlying premise of the entire covenant of grace is that God has been our God because of Christ's work. James Ussher (1581–1656) explained, "What then is the sum of the covenant of grace? That God will be our God and give us Life everlasting in Christ, if we receive him, being freely by his Father offered unto us."[41] So, in contrast to the covenant of works, wherein glorified life in new creation communion with God depended upon our own obedience, the covenant of grace charts a path to our eschatological destiny by faith in Jesus Christ.[42]

This doctrine arguably seems most out of step with other traditions in terms of their biblical theological systems and sets up our later sections on hermeneutics and theological commitments. Although later sections pull at those implications in greater depth, we should clarify one issue now: covenant theology is often accused of "flattening" the Scripture via the doctrine of the covenant of grace, so we should state now that covenant theology holds to some unity and diversity concerning redemptive history. We affirm historical diversity among the covenants as the *historia salutis* develops. Our more fundamental point in positing one covenant of grace concerns unity across Scripture in soteriology, namely the *ordo salutis* functions the same way throughout redemptive history—as I will defend below. Although the discussions of the covenant of redemption and covenant of works contained brief exegetical defenses, we are going to bypass that at this exact junction because the covenant of grace will occupy our majority focus under our explorations of hermeneutics as well as the issue of continuity and discontinuity.

40. For example, Westminster Confession of Faith 4.2, in Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:611; Robert Rollock, *Tractatus De Vocatione Efficaci* (Edinburgh, 1597), 9; Herman Witsius, The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man, trans. William Crookshank, 2 vol. (Edinburgh: Thomas Turnbull, 1803), 1.2.13; Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003–2008), 2:567.

41. James Ussher, *A Body of Divinitie* (London, 1645), 159.

42. For more extensive explanation and defense of the covenant of grace, see Horton, "Covenant Theology," 52–60; Horton, *Introducing Covenant Theology*, 104–7; Horton, *Lord and Servant*, 159–270; Perkins, *Reformed Covenant Theology*, 187–441.

Hermeneutics

This section outlines four key hermeneutical factors undergirding covenant theology's approach to reading Scripture. The principles discussed here reveal that covenant theology has room for an eclectic appropriation of hermeneutical methods so long as they cohere with certain fundamental commitments about what Scripture is and its function in relating God to his people. Thus, Reformed covenant theology holistically contains diverse approaches to particular biblical passages and interpretive issues precisely because it has a natural flexibility in relation to aspects of hermeneutical methods, providing that they square with basic theological premises about how the Bible operates within the divine economy.

We Must Read the Bible in the Posture as Someone in Covenant with God

The Scripture is the divine address to God's covenant people. Covenant theology is, again, simply about our relationship with God quite basically because God forges covenants as the way he relates to us. Scripture is God's covenantal word to his people. Like the constitution is a document with relational and ethical ramifications for living in the United States because it grounds the government of the American people, Scripture is a document with relational, ethical, and doctrinal ramifications precisely because it grounds the government of *God's* people. We must, therefore, read Scripture as God address to us with all that this posture entails about being drawn into and included in the story it tells of the gospel throughout the age, and what this posture entails about being ready to submit ourselves into this covenantal governance.

That postural point for our hermeneutics has further concrete entailment for our paradigm of biblical theology. We cannot stand aloof analyzing Scripture without reckoning with God's address to us through Scripture. More pointedly our hermeneutical method must account for what Scripture is and who we are in relation to it: because Scripture is the product of the triune God as a communication to his people, we cannot merely describe its features but must listen to what it prescribes for us. The proper use of biblical theology is a necessary but descriptive enterprise that accounts for Scripture's interconnected development. Nevertheless, describing those intertextual features on its own comes short of reaching prescriptive conclusions from our exegesis. In other words, biblical theology stalls out the whole hermeneutical process if we do not follow that analysis all the way to systematic conclusions that tells us roundly something about God and how we are to live with him. The hermeneutical payoff from this postural consideration is that we must interpret Scripture as if it is still living and active as God's instrument to address us with what are meant to know about him and our relationship with him. We must treat Scripture as God's Word and God's Word to us.

We must read Scripture as God's Covenant (Revelatory) Discourse

The only way to understand truly what the Bible means is first to understand what the Bible is.[43] We must resist the urge to interpret Scripture as if it is a product of only historical factors. Since modernity, the focus in biblical studies has been on the historical processes and backgrounds that gave us the Bible and shaped its philological and conceptual contours. To interpret Scripture rightly, we also need to reckon with how it is the product of the triune God who inspired it. If the triune God inspired Scripture, as covenant theology presumes as a hermeneutical foundation, then Scripture must be holistically about the triune God.[44]

We interpret the Bible then as to see it as communication from and about the true God. He gave it to us as the medium of his covenantal discourse. The Scripture is the covenantal constitution of the people of God, who binds his people to himself and uses that covenant as the way that we know him.[45] Covenant is, therefore, not a mere feature of Scripture since Scripture came to us through God's covenant with us. On the conservative premise, which I hold, that Moses was the human author of the Pentateuch, God gave us the Scripture's introductory books as part of making his covenant with Israel at Sinai. We cannot then reduce covenant to something in Scripture, since Scripture is covenantal by nature. We must reckon with how, regardless how clear it might have been to any original author, the triune God made these covenants with his people as part of his developing plan for redemptive history.

The Scripture is then inescapably theological. Exegesis, properly done, cannot be limited to grammatical-historical word studies and analysis but must include reasoning theologically toward the Scripture's subject matter, namely God and all things in relation to God.[46] We must grab hold of the rationale for the words of Scripture, owning the realities that must give rise to God's inspired wording as much as the words themselves. At times, we must ask the question, what theological assumption makes the Scripture's inspired wording most comprehensible?

We must Read Scripture as though it Were Given to His Covenant People

Covenant theology, in its classic form, has attempted to be non-innovative. Whatever one might make of the correctness of its teaching, the Reformed tradition

43. Michael Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 1–19, 147–264; Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 109–18.

44. Scott R. Swain, *The Trinity and the Bible: On Theological Interpretation* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2021), 122–31.

45. Scott R. Swain, *Trinity, Revelation, and Reading: A Theological Introduction to the Bible and its Interpretation* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 4–10.

46. R. B. Jamieson and Tyler R. Wittman, *Biblical Reasoning: Christological and Trinitarian Rules for Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022), 232–34.

has perceived its covenant theology as aligned with ecumenical concerns and trajectories. In the church's earliest centuries, ancient theologians like Justin Martyr and the author of *The Epistle of Barnabas* were reaching for the doctrine of the covenant, specifically regarding the relationship of the church to God's old covenant people, to explain Christianity's place in God's redemptive plan as they answered challenges from Judaism and the Roman authorities concerning the church's origins.[47] In developing a system of covenant theology, the Reformed tradition has long saw itself in continuity with similar concerns raised from the earliest years after Christ's ascension. The point was never that our covenant theology is exhaustively identical to how the ancients explained these issues but that we stand in the same trajectory of appeal to the covenants.

Hermeneutically, covenant theology then prioritizes reading and interpreting Scripture with the church. The doctrine of Scripture alone can be easily bent into a practice of "me alone." The Bible, not the tradition, is our only infallible rule of faith and practice. Nevertheless, to read Scripture as if I can interpret it accurately apart from considering and listening to how the church of ages past and in the present has understood its message is like trying to play baseball by yourself: it was designed to be a team sport and malfunctions when done in isolation. We must remember that Scripture was given to God's covenant *people*, entailing that the corporate body must be active in confession the Bible' truths. If we develop new systems of doctrine that suggest the historical church has never clearly grasped central aspects of holy Scripture, our theological inclinations will misfire all the way down the line because we have failed to reckon with what the Scripture is in relation to the church.[48] Covenant theology is, therefore, committed to reading Scripture as the people of God, resisting the pressure to be fully shackled to the parameters of exclusively *modern* approaches to biblical interpretation.

The New Testament Reveals that the Old Testament Was about the Same Divine Realities

The phrase, "according to the Scripture," forms a basic principle for understanding how God has been working his Christological purposes throughout redemptive history by using the covenants. The matters of "first importance" in the gospel concerning Christ's death for our sin, burial, and resurrection were all "in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3–4). God promised the gospel "concerning his Son" throughout the ages "in the holy Scriptures" (Rom. 1:1–6). The New Testament realities of Christ and his work were the mystery long made known through God's revealed Word in his previous covenants (Heb. 1:1–2; Rom. 16:25; Eph. 1:7–10; Eph. 3:1–10; Col. 1:24–27; Col. 2:2).

47. Perkins, *Reformed Covenant Theology*, 191–93.

48. Swain, *Trinity, Revelation, and Reading*, 100–18.

From standpoint of our theological systems, we must account hermeneutically for the Christological ground of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. From a backward-facing perspective, Christ and his work accords with Scripture inasmuch as he recapitulated the Old Testament narrative and structures unto fulfillment. From a forward-facing perspective, God set the Old Testament narrative and structures in place precisely because of the Christological realities determined from eternity in the covenant of redemption. In other words, the Old Testament has a Christological ground. This ground is arguably the key feature of the hermeneutics in covenant theology.

Thus, this Christological ground needs an example and defense. In Hebrews, 8:3–5, the author explains,

> For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; thus it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer. Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things.

The overall argument in this section of Hebrews is the preeminence, permanence, and perfection of Christ's priesthood. Here, the author explains why the Old Testament priests were ineffectual in bringing about the promises that Christ has procured. His contention was that those priests were mere copies of the heavenly reality.[49] In other words, a higher reality determined why God set these Old Testament structures in place, namely they had a Christological ground. The reality of the eternal Son appointed from eternity as mediator for the elect shaped how God contoured redemptive history and established features of covenantal life to relate to his people. The Christological reality was not plainly clear until the Son came in his incarnation and wrought the work of redemption. Nevertheless, as Westminster Confession of Faith 8.6 articulates "the virtue, efficacy, and benefits" of Christ's work "were communicated unto the elect, in all ages successively from the beginning of the world, in and by those promises, types, and sacrifices."[50] Although contributing in diverse ways to the development of history itself as it progressed toward fulfillment in Christ, the Old Testament's Christological ground meant that the features of covenantal life in the old economy distributed the same spiritual realities on account of which they were instituted in the first place.

This premise of the Old Testament's Christological ground then explains the New Testament perspective on Christ's own relationship to the old covenant Scriptures. On the road to Emmaus, Jesus appeared to two of his disciples and opened the Scripture for them. His summary point was that "everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled."

49. Geerhardus Vos, *The Teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 55–65.

50. Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:621–22.

(Lk. 24:44) The old covenant Scriptures were written about Christ, entailing that the features of redemptive history recorded therein were shaped by their Christological ground. Recounting the rationale for justification by faith alone, which rests upon the finished work of Christ alone, as exemplified in the Old Testament, Paul interpreted Genesis 15:6 to mean that "the words 'it was counted to him' were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also." (Rom. 4:23–24) Moreover, not only are the realities of salvation mirrored between the Testaments, always having basis in Christ and his work applied by faith before and after he came, the Old Testament events themselves occurred in God's providence and were recorded in holy Scripture for the sake of God's Christological purposes: "Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did." (1 Cor. 10:6) Christ is then Scripture's all-encompassing reality, the ground of why God shaped the Old Testament economy in the way he did and why he inspired the Scriptures to be about Christ in advance (Gal. 3:8).

Continuity and Discontinuity

Concerning the relationship of the Old and New Testaments, traditional covenant theology balances continuity in certain spiritual realities with tempered discontinuity in the progress of redemptive history. Stated more pointedly, covenant theology maintains specific theological and soteriological stability along with real historical dynamism.

On this issue, misperceptions may well prevail among other traditions as they observe covenant theology, possibly on account of reasons within covenant theology itself. Several historical factors have perhaps led covenant theologians to set forth unbalanced and uneven presentations of our biblical-theological system. In the twentieth-century, numerous issues led to a loss of Reformed theology's classic moorings. These debates honed discussion on internal issues that are only now restabilizing, producing a lot of literature attuned only to intra-Reformed discussions. On the other hand, our limited attention in the twentieth century to external discussions prioritized distinguishing our covenant theology from dispensationalism, which we often perceived to be the default and presumed theological outlook. Although dispensationalism's prevailing status may be waning in American theological discussions, older literature on covenant theology likely emphasized continuity so heavily in response to dispensationalism that we may have eclipsed the ways that we perceive discontinuity.[51]

Given that admission, perhaps we ought to start with covenant theology and discontinuity. Stephen Wellum outlined progressive covenantalism's view of redemptive history's progression, stating, "Progressive covenantalism argues that the

51. Daniel G. Hummel, *The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism: How the Evangelical Battle over the End Times Shaped a Nation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2023).

Bible presents a *plurality* of covenants that *progressively* reveal our triune God's *one* plan redemptive plan for his *one* covenant people, which reaches its fulfillment and terminus in Christ and the new covenant."[52] Covenant theology heartily agrees with this view of development in that redemptive history did truly need to progress unto Christ. The Old Testament was the age of promises, the New the age of fulfillment. The Old Testament limited the covenant community to one genealogical line, the New expands it constitutionally to include believers from every tribe, tongue, and nation. Religious life in the old covenant prescribes rituals and practices that were all-encompassing, but now the new covenant requires worship and devotion that is relatively simple and has a more patently internal focus.

The plurality of biblical covenants served varying historical purposes to drive forward the progress of redemptive history. They were not equivalent to one another in their historical function. God's people came to greater clarity about what salvation meant throughout the progression of covenants, especially in the transition to the new covenant. The shape of God's people morphed, admittedly for covenant theology not in the way that our Baptists friends affirm, as God variously angled the scope of particular covenants from the family of Abraham to the nation of Israel to the new covenant's inclusion of the gentiles. Each covenant made its own contribution to the development of covenantal history as Noah laid a foundation of common grace, Abraham forged the promise of redemption, Moses placed God's people under the legal pedagogue to preserve and teach them unto salvation by grace alone, David focused the promises in the coming king, and the new covenant revealed the culmination of all those historical factors driving home and leading to our need for Christ. In terms of the history of salvation (*historia salutis*), covenant theology affirmed multiform development driven by the successive covenants.[53]

At a theological level, Christ unified the various covenants of the old economy because he has always been active as the saving mediator for every believer since the beginning of the world. Jude 5 says, "Now, I want to remind you, although you once fully knew it, that *Jesus* after saving a people out of the land of Egypt later destroyed those who did not believe."[54] Notably, Jude referred to the eternal Son by his incarnate name, signaling that he was active in his role as mediator throughout the Old Testament period. In 1 Corinthians 10:1–6, Paul also interpreted Old Testament as including Christ's activity and presence, concluding, "They drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and *the Rock was Christ*." When, in Romans 4:1–12, Paul

52. Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 35 (italics original).

53. Michael S. Horton, "Covenant Theology," in Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas, eds., *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 52–72.

54. My translation. Regarding the text critical issue in Jude 5 of whether the original text was Ἰησοῦς or κύριος, the evidence weighs decisively in favor of the former, especially considering the *lectio difficilior* rule, see Gene L. Green, *Jude and 2 Peter* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 64–65, 77–78.

appealed to Abraham and David as examples of *how* justification occurs by faith alone for believers in the new covenant, his logic works only if their justification had the same basis and mechanics as ours does today: namely, Christ's righteousness was imputed to believers by faith alone before and after Christ's coming. In other words, covenant theology's most important point of continuity concerns the order of salvation (*ordo salutis*) to affirm that salvation has always been by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

Two other areas of continuity include the moral law and the people of God. The Reformed view of creation teaches that God created humanity in his image with the moral law written on our hearts.[55] This moral law is natural to our constitution as God's image bearers because it is a description of God's own character, which we are meant to reflect. In the Mosaic covenant, God summarized this moral, natural law in the Ten Commandments. Hence, Reformed covenant theology does not believe that any specifically Mosaic law carries into the new covenant. We do believe that the natural law, which was specially revealed again among other positive and ceremonial laws, still pertains to all humanity. The unity of the people of God simply means that we believe the church is the new covenant Israel and that God is fulfilling the promises he made to Israel in the church.

Theological Commitments and Themes

In covenant theology, two theological corollaries come to the fore from these issues of continuity and discontinuity.

Law and Gospel

Covenant theology's theological category of the covenant of grace relates to several doctrines but pertains fundamentally to a soteriological reality. Its purpose in our doctrinal system is not to flatten the real contours of redemptive history as it develops. Rather, it means to underscore that no one comes to the Father except through Jesus Christ (Jn. 14:6), which is a reality that applies both before and after the Son's arrival in the incarnation. Although we can agree across theological camps that the covenants progress one *plan* of salvation at the historical level, Reformed covenant theology emphasizes that the only *way* of salvation has always been through faith alone in Christ alone.

This issue explains why Reformed theology has often divided covenants into two categories. Although sometimes our appropriation of some distinctions about differing types of ancient Near Eastern treaties has not made the point clearly, the main issue concerns the basis of salvation.[56] Whatever contours each historical

55. Perkins, *Reformed Covenant Theology*, 29–34.

56. As pointed out in Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 36.

covenant might have had after the fall, the basis of salvation for believers in each was always grace alone.[57] The covenant of works was the only true and pure law covenant, while each covenant after the fall promulgated grace through Christ the mediator as the basis of our right standing with God.

The covenant of grace simply underscores that the law and the gospel cannot be mixed concerning the basis of our justification. The covenant of works was broken. Across the ages of redemptive history, therefore, salvation had to be according to the gospel of grace. If the accusation that covenant theology flattens redemptive history means that we make the whole Bible about Christ as the grounds of salvation, then at least this covenant theologian is happy to be called flat as a pancake or as an Oklahoma highway. The desire for due justice to the changing contours of redemptive history will not override the more basic commitment to the Christological basis of the whole canon nor to Christ as the sole ground of salvation throughout the differing covenantal epochs. The new covenant preaching of the gospel clarified the mystery that had always been active unto salvation: Christ as the mediator for all who believe in him.

Substance and Administration

The other distinction that rises from the preceding discussion concerns how Christ was given to believers throughout redemptive history. Covenant theology has traditionally distinguished the substance of the one covenant of grace, which encompasses all redemptive history, from its various administrations. This distinction, as outlined above, does not entail that each covenant is the same at the historical level. It does mean that certain theological commitments pertain to every covenant. As all biblical Christians agree, the same God authored each covenant of the purposes of his glory in driving history salvation in Christ. Furthermore, each covenant offered the same way of salvation to everyone who believed. The arguments above about Christ as the mediator for believers across the Testaments points to the reality that everyone with true faith always received their spiritual and saving blessings on account of Christ. The substance received by faith under each covenant was Christ and his benefits.

The other side of the distinction, namely administration, brings us in some ways to a culminating consideration, at least in terms of its practical value for the Christian life: the necessity and majesty of the church.[58] Although Christ has always been the substance of each historical covenant since the fall, those covenants contain ordinances that function to grant Christ and his benefits to believers as they participated in the covenant community. Although that community has looked

57. Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Salvation: Union with Christ* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007); Perkins, *Reformed Covenant Theology*, 187–270.

58. Michael S. Horton, *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008); Horton, *Introducing Covenant Theology*, 129–72; Horton, "Covenant Theology," 60–72; Perkins, *Reformed Covenant Theology*, 273–441.

differently across various covenants, the place where we receive Christ in the new covenant is the church.

Reformed theology holistically prioritizes Word, sacrament, and prayer as the "outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption."[59] These means of grace are the features of our covenantal life that God uses to create, sustain, and nourish our faith in the Savior. Although the sacraments of the new covenant are baptism and the Lord's Supper, the sacraments of the old economy included a multiplicity of ordinances, types, shadows, and ceremonies that God still used as means of fostering the same sort of faith for his elect under the Old Testament administrations, specifically faith in Christ. The soteriological difference between Old and New Testament amounts primarily to the forward or backward orientation of the believer's faith: Old Testament saints believed in Christ who would come (*incarnandus*) and new covenant saints believe in Christ who has come (*incarnatus*).[60] This area of continuity is a principle commitment of covenant theology, explaining what we primarily mean by the unity of the covenant of grace. Each historical covenant had external features that God used as means of grace to make and grow faith in Christ.

Conclusion

Covenant theology has its primary concern in the centrality of the gospel of Jesus Christ for understanding all Scripture. Its robust theological orientation may rub with friction against biblical-theological systems with a different sense for how far strictly grammatical-historical hermeneutics can get us in fathoming God's purposes in his revealed Word. Its fundamental commitments, however, prioritize issues relating to the very core of life with God.

According to covenant theology, every historical covenant has facilitated worship of the true God. Even before the fall, Adam's obedience to God's commandments was the way he would show his love for God (Jn. 14:15), meaning that the covenant of works facilitated creationally ordered worship. Since the fall, God has continually covenanted with his people to provide us with a place to meet him for worship and discipleship.

Covenant theology forefronts the gospel as the Scripture's central message, insisting that we see Christ as preeminent from every passage of God's Word. This commitment directs preaching to be Christ centered and aimed at discipling God's people. The Great Commission to baptize and to teach disciples to obey everything that Christ commanded then includes how all Scripture would inform us unto Christ and form us more into his likeness. Although not every portion of Scripture applies in the same way, it all applies Christ to us and directs us in his paths of righteousness.

59. Westminster Shorter Catechism 88; Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:695.

60. Perkins, *Reformed Covenant Theology*, 101–23, 187–216.

The structure of covenant theology also then sends us all into the church as the true place of discipleship. Christ saves us as individuals but saves us into his community (Eph. 1:3–11; Eph. 3:7–12; 1 Cor. 12:12–31). Having been joined to Christ, we are joined to one another. The church is then the sphere of our sanctification as God works upon us through his ordinary means of grace in Word, sacrament, and prayer. God has not left us to traverse the terrain of this pilgrim age aimlessly but has given us pastors, elders, and the fellowship of the saints so that we might bear one another's burdens and keep one another focused on the vision of our homeland in the age to come. When Christ returns, faith will give way to sight and we will see the God of the covenant in full glory, having been made fully like our older brother.

PART 2:

Soundings from Biblical-Theological Systems

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The Kingdom of God: A Traditional Dispensational View

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Introduction

Traditional dispensationalism has often lacked consensus not only in its view of the nature of the kingdom of God but also in its efforts to correlate New Testament (NT) teaching concerning Christ's present rule over the church. This shortcoming has provided an occasion for developments such as progressive dispensationalism and more recently progressive covenantalism to flourish. The purpose of this essay is to provide an alternative to inconsistent approaches within traditional dispensational views on the kingdom while avoiding the shortcomings of other systems that fail to distinguish discrete biblical kingdom programs.

The first part of the study surveys the historical contours of the kingdom debate within dispensationalism. Here, I identify the ways in which inchoate or inconsistent views on the kingdom provided a venue for other approaches such as progressive dispensationalism to emerge. Next, I look at the concept of inaugurated eschatology to draw upon helpful perspectives for comprehending the kingdom of God concept in the New Testament. After this, I will advance implications from this understanding toward a synthesis of the mystery kingdom parables in the Gospel of Matthew.

I contend that the NT develops the kingdom of God theme as a *two-stage eschatological kingdom program*. The first stage of this kingdom program encompasses roughly the present church age and is identified specifically in Matthew as the kingdom of the Son. The current stage entails Christ's Melchizedekian sacral kingship, as expounded in Hebrews, although this reign subsumes additionally the angelic sphere and the cosmos itself. The reign proceeds from the right hand of the Father and shares in the Father's sovereignty along the lines of co-regencies in the Old Testament (OT). The second stage of this eschatological kingdom program encompasses the terrestrial millennial kingdom. This reign entails the dominion of Christ from the Davidic throne on earth for a thousand years, fulfilling OT promises

1. The present essay is based in part on my forthcoming monograph on the kingdom of God in the *Studies in Judeo-Christian Thought Monograph Series* published by SCS Press (used with permission).

to the nation of Israel and consummation of the Davidic covenant. Given the suggested schema for understanding the kingdom of God, I conclude that other interpretive approaches fall short by attributing Davidic kingship to the presently exalted Christ. The current kingship of Christ consists instead of Melchizedekian kingship, in which Christ reigns over the church and the cosmos as a royal priest.

Dispensationalism and the Kingdom of God

Evangelical NT scholar George Ladd reserved his most vigorous polemic for dispensational scholars.[2] He found them, among other shortcomings, too separatist, too exclusive, and too narrow-minded.[3] His review of *The Greatness of the Kingdom* by Alva J. McClain exemplifies his disdain:

> McClain, like most dispensationalists, has lost contact with the world of theological thought. Dispensationalism has never thrived upon dialogue with other theological points of view; it flourishes only in the hothouse of its own exclusive system. Most of the literature, exegetical and theological, cited to give support to his interpretation, is about two generations old. Almost no modern literature on the Kingdom of God is used. Certainly a theology designed to meet the needs of the twentieth century should be relevant to the issues of the hour.[4]

Ladd's disparagement of dispensationalism touched a nerve, spurring a new generation to think outside inherited dispensational lines when correlating NT eschatology.[5]

The Fraying of Dispensationalism

The fabric of dispensationalism emerged from this twentieth-century ideological struggle with Ladd and other scholars frayed but not entirely rent. Still, its cohesion had come apart in many quarters.[6] A considerable portion of dispensationalists, becoming

2. See George Ladd, "Dispensational Theology," *Christianity Today* (October 1959): 39.

3. George Ladd, review of *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, by Alva J. McClain, *Evangelical Quarterly: An International Review of Bible and Theology* 32, no. 1 (August 1960): 50. Ladd upbraided dispensationalists for their "exclusivism and separatist mentality both in theological discussion and in practical church life."

4. George Ladd, review of *Greatness of the Kingdom*, 40–41. Walvoord, on the other hand, boasted that McClain's work might well become the greatest piece on the kingdom of God written in the twentieth century; John Walvoord, review of *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, by Alva J. McClain, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 117, no. 465 (January 1960): 67.

5. Craig Blaising suggests, "Although they refused to acknowledge him, revised dispensationalists appear to have taken Ladd's criticism to heart." Darrell L. Black and Craig A Blaising, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton: Victor, 1993), 39.

6. Perhaps the nadir in dispensational/nondispensational exchange came with the publication of Robert G. Clouse, ed., *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1977). Anecdotally, as a student at a traditional dispensational Bible college, I recall my professors lamenting Herman A. Hoyt's defense of dispensationalism. Ladd appears to have

known as progressive dispensationalists, modified long-cherished, key tenets of traditional dispensationalism.[7] Principal among these was the traditional dichotomy between the present church age and the prophesied millennial kingdom, borne out of desire for stringent theological distinction between Israel and the church.[8] For traditional dispensationalists, the present church age held no immediate connection with the coming millennial kingdom because the latter relates primarily to the nation of Israel and fulfillment of the Davidic covenant, while the church age serves as a parenthesis in that program.[9] Moreover, for many traditional dispensationalists, no biblical kingdom program is entirely to be identified with the church. Therefore, the nation of Israel and the NT church must be strictly distinguished.[10]

Progressive dispensationalists, on the other hand, recognize more continuity between Israel and the church as well as among between the kingdom programs.[11] They concur with Ladd on the weakness of conventional dispensational distinctives.[12]

the upper hand, and nearly every criticism he levels against the dispensational system found its way into the progressive dispensational movement. Compare with George Ladd, "An Historic Premillennial Response to Dispensational Premillennialism," 93–94.

7. For the progressive dispensational point of view, see Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993); Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, eds., *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church: The Search for Definition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992); Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993); Darrell L. Bock, "Current Messianic Activity and OT Davidic Promise: Dispensationalism, Hermeneutics, and NT Fulfillment," *Trinity Journal* 15, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 54–87; Bock, "The Son of David and the Saint's Task: The Hermeneutics of Initial Fulfillment," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150, no. 600 (October 1993): 440–57; Bock, "The Kingdom of God in New Testament Theology," in *Looking Into the Future: Evangelical Studies in Eschatology*, ed. David W. Baker (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001); Craig A. Blaising, "Premillennialism," in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999); Bock, "Progressive Dispensationalism," in *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture*, ed. Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2022), 112–46.

8. This consistent distinction between Israel and the church is part of Ryrie's well-known sine qua non of dispensationalism. See Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 38–41.

9. Lewis S. Chafer, *The Kingdom in History and Prophecy* (Philadelphia: Sunday School Times, 1926); John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Dunham, 1959), 198–99; Charles L. Feinberg, *Millennialism: The Two Major Views*, 3rd rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1980); Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland: Multnomah, 1980), 61–65.

10. Dwight L. Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1964), 142–43; Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, "Israelology: Part 2 of 6," *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 5, no. 3 (July 1999): 33–56.

11. Robert L. Saucy, "Contemporary Dispensational Thought," *Theological Students Fellowship Bulletin* 7, no. 4 (March–April 1984): 10–11; Saucy, "The Crucial Issue Between Dispensational and Non-Dispensational Systems," *Criswell Theological Review* 1, no. 1 (Fall 1986): 149–65; David L. Turner, "The Continuity of Scripture and Eschatology: Key Hermeneutical Issues," *Grace Theological Journal* 6, no. 2 (Fall 1985): 275–87; Darrell L. Bock, "Charting Dispensationalism," *Christianity Today* (September 1994): 29.

12. For the methodological similarity and congruence of theological premises between Bock and Ladd, see David A. Dean, "A Study of the Enthronement of Christ in Acts 2 and 3" (Th.M.

They simultaneously seek rapport with evangelical theologians of other traditions by synthesizing the kingdom programs beyond their traditional dispensationalist predecessors.[13] They argue that the present session of Christ at the right hand of God entails initial fulfillment of Davidic provisions, so that Jesus now reigns on the Davidic throne over the church. The church age is the "already" of the messianic kingdom, while the millennial reign of Revelation 20:4–6 constitutes the "not yet" consummation.[14] Bock affirms: "*Being seated on David's throne is linked to being seated at God's right hand*. In other words, Jesus's resurrection-ascension to God's right hand is put forward…as a fulfillment of the Davidic covenant, just as the allusion to Joel fulfills the new covenant."[15] Thus, whereas traditional dispensationalists maintain a strict distinction between the kingdom programs and between Israel and the church, progressive dispensationalists blend these entities, introducing the messianic, Davidic kingdom into the church.

Insufficient Clarity and Synthesis in Traditional Dispensationalist Approaches to Kingdom

One likely contribution to dispensationalism's fraying was some traditional dispensationalists' inconsistency in articulating the connection between biblical kingdom programs and the church.[16] Telling is the fact that progressive

thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1992), 92, 114; compare also with Stephen J. Nichols, "Already Ladd—Not Yet Dispensationalism: D. Bock and Progressive Dispensationalism," (paper presented at the eastern regional conference of the Evangelical Theological Society, Philadelphia, PA, 2 April 1993).

13. Walter A. Elwell observes: "The earlier movement had an 'in-groupish' feel about it that showed little interest in anyone outside the camp. Progressive dispensationalism, on the other hand, wants to find common ground with non-dispensationalisms. Saucy's section on the kingdom of God goes out of its way to avoid quoting the dispensationalist 'old guard,' while quoting at length from standard New Testament scholars." Elwell, "Dispensationalisms of the Third Kind," *Christianity Today* (September 1994): 28.

14. Bock, "Reign of the Lord Christ," in *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church*, ed. Darrell L. Bock and Craig A. Blaising (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic), 53.

15. Bock, "Reign of the Lord Christ," 49, emphasis his.

16. Not all traditional dispensationalists are inconsistent or inchoate on the kingdom of God. Arguably, consistent traditional dispensational theologians would include Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*; John F. Walvoord, "Biblical Kingdoms Compared and Contrasted," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, eds. Wesley R. Willis, John R. Master, and Charles C. Ryrie (Chicago: Moody, 1994); John Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*. However, two susceptibilities have been common within traditional dispensationalists' approach. First, they have been apt to change or develop their own views on the kingdom over time (e.g., Ryrie and Pentecost). This shifting gave the appearance of fluidity to dispensational definitions of the kingdom. Second, aside from a few articles and popular treatments, traditional dispensationalists have not produced many academic treatments of the kingdom of God except in response to polemical concerns. An exception is Michael J. Vlach, *He Will Reign: A Biblical Theology of the Kingdom of God* (Silverton: Lampion, 2017). Though, as his essay in the current journal makes clear, Vlach considers himself a sort of hybrid between traditional (or "revised') and progressive dispensationalism.

dispensationalists such as Bock argue that dispensationalism contains sufficient leeway to accommodate their merging of the kingdom programs.[17] Blaising, wishing to emphasize the historical lack of cohesion in dispensational kingdom thinking,[18] insists that mid-twentieth century dispensationalism contained four entirely distinct views of the church age's relationship to the Davidic kingdom: (1) an absence of a mediatorial kingdom in the church age, but only a limited interim rule (McClain and Toussaint), (2) a spiritual kingdom currently entailing the church within a mystery form of the kingdom which is Christendom (Ryrie), (3) a spiritual form of kingdom which is the church (Walvoord), and (4) a present theocratic kingdom program existing in four divergent spheres of authority in which is the kingdom operative in the church age (Pentecost).[19] For progressive dispensationalists, this lack of a unified traditional dispensational view of the continuity versus discontinuity between the church age and biblical kingdom programs allowed further development in kingdom interpretations.[20]

In seeking commonality with non-dispensationalist kingdom thinking, progressive dispensationalists concluded that traditional dispensationalism needed revision. For them, traditional dispensationalism's zeal for stringent distinction between Israel and the church, as well as the Davidic kingdom and the church age (as well as other categories including law versus grace), forced the movement to emphasize discontinuities and neglect legitimate continuities between the people(s) of God. Joined with this overemphasis was inattention toward the unified nature of God's historical plan of redemption, or *Heilsgeschichte*.[21]

17. See Darrel L. Bock, "Progressive Movement (1980–Present)" in *Discovering Dispensationalism: Tracing the Development of Dispensational Thought from the First to the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Cory M. Marsh and James I. Fazio (El Cajon: SCS Press, 2023), 333–51.

18. Blaising attributes the development of progressive dispensationalism to the inability in classical dispensationalism to synthesize sufficiently its dualistic eschatology. Classical dispensationalism sought to maintain a dichotomy between what he terms spiritual vision eschatology for the church and new creation eschatology for the nation of Israel (a more recent treatment of this distinction is Michael J. Vlach, *The New Creation Model: A Paradigm for Discovering God's Restoration Purposes from Creation to New Creation* (Sun Valley, CA: Theological Studies Press, 2023). This dichotomy, according to Blaising, began to be abandoned by dispensationalists during the period of so-called "revised dispensationalism" beginning in the late 1950s. During this period, dispensationalists took sides, advocating either an entirely spiritual vision eschatology for the church (Ryrie and Walvoord) or a strictly new creation eschatology for the church and for Israel (McClain and Pentecost). Progressive dispensationalists have abandoned the "systemic dualism" of classical dispensationalism in favor of a holistic approach in the integration of the people of God. Blaising, "Premillennialism," 182–86.

19. Block and Blaising, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 39–46.

20. Blaising, "Developing Dispensationalism, Part One: Doctrinal Development in Orthodoxy," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145, no. 578 (April–June 1988): 133–40; Blaising, "Development of Dispensationalism by Contemporary Dispensationalists," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145, no. 579 (July–September 1988): 254–80. Bock contends: "Dispensationalism has never been as monolithic as its proponents and critics have contended" Bock, "Kingdom of God," 30n6.

21. Saucy, *Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 29.

In presenting an underdeveloped and sometimes conflicting understanding of the relationship of the kingdom programs in Scripture, some traditional dispensationalists thus catalyzed progressive dispensationalism.[22] A survey of dispensational literature suggests that, at times, scholars have inconsistently integrated the church and the kingdom of God.[23] One example is Charles Ryrie in his understanding of the church's relation to biblical kingdom programs. In his *Basic Theology*, Ryrie presents a puzzling and superficially contradictory argument for four biblical concepts of kingdom: (1) the universal kingdom, (2) the Davidic/messianic kingdom, (3) the mystery form of the kingdom, and (4) the spiritual kingdom.[24] In defining the spiritual kingdom, Ryrie inconsistently equates it with the church.[25] Although he argues that the church is a spiritual kingdom, earlier in the work he denies current regal authority for Christ, suggesting that Christ possesses all the trappings but no functions of kingship.[26] He claims the church is a kingdom but denies a reigning king. Such discrepancies have perplexed dispensational students.

The Church and the Kingdom

In light of traditional dispensationalism's inconsistency on the kingdom of God, a more integrated approach to Scripture's teaching is necessary. On the one side, traditional dispensationalism should seek to avoid ambiguity concerning the kingdom's relationship to the church, and, on the other, to avoid the kingdom mingling of non-traditional approaches. Here I argue, in keeping with a primary concern of Ladd and progressive dispensationalists, that the NT links the kingdom to the current church age under the premises of inaugurated eschatology. At the same time, I maintain that traditional dispensationalism has correctly argued that the church age and millennial kingdom are distinct programs in the historical redemptive plan of God. Christ does not rule currently from the Davidic throne. This reign pertains rather to the fulfillment of promises with the nation of Israel during the terrestrial millennial kingdom prophesied in the Old Testament and delineated in Revelation 20.

22. This is not to deny that an incentive for progressive dispensationalism was to garner respect in the larger evangelical tradition. However, nascent progressive dispensational thought such as that espoused by Saucy faulted the legitimacy of Ryrie's *sine qua non* as determinative of dispensationalism. Also problematic was the manner in which traditional dispensationalists such as Ryrie failed to integrate the phases of redemptive history. Saucy, "Crucial Issue" 156.

23. Such a criticism may be leveled against dispensationalism in other topics as well, such as in explicating the relationship between the church and the new covenant. For an example of this inconsistency in Walvoord and Ryrie, see R. Bruce Compton, "Dispensationalism, the Church, and the New Covenant," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 8 (Fall 2003): 6n12.

24. Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton: Victor, 1986), 397–98; Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 156.

25. Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 399. Ryrie sounds closer to Berkhof than a dispensationalist when he argues that this kingdom is "the spiritual rule of God in individual hearts today." Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 156.

26. Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 259.

Christ reigns presently in one respect over the church by presiding over an eschatological kingdom in which the Melchizedekian sacral king governs by dispensing salvific benefits and mediates before God for his people as the ideal high priest.[27] Furthermore, in his triumphant ascension/exaltation to the right hand of the Father, Christ has achieved initial reign over the heavens, expressive particularly in his dominion over principalities and powers in the angelic sphere. In addition, Christ possesses a veiled reign over the cosmos. Such an understanding of the church lies within traditional dispensationalism and develops its conventional kingdom thought. Traditional dispensationalists have diligently constructed a polemic against the erstwhile spiritualistic kingdom of amillennialism[28] but often have neglected to flesh out sufficiently their own formulation of the relation between the church and biblical kingdom programs.[29] This study seeks to specify the nature of Christ's current kingdom while affirming the vital distinctions within traditional dispensationalism.

New Testament Theology as Inaugurated Eschatology

One of the most fruitful insights of twentieth-century New Testament theology[30] was its rediscovery that all NT doctrine should be viewed through the lens of inaugurated eschatology.[31] While systematic theology often relegates the doctrine of eschatology

27. My views on the kingdom of God develop those of Elliott Johnson. Johnson, "Hermeneutical Principles and the Interpretation of Psalm 110," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149, no. 596 (October–December 1992): 428–37; Johnson, "Premillennialism Introduced: Hermeneutics," in *A Case for Premillennialism*, ed. Donald K. Campbell and Jeffrey L. Townsend (Chicago: Moody, 19920, 32–34. Other dispensationalists have expressed similar views: Cleon L. Rogers, Jr., "The Davidic Covenant in the Gospels," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150, no. 597 (October–December 1993): 475; Mark L. Bailey, "The Doctrine of the Kingdom in Matthew 13," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156, no. 624 (October–December 1999): 443–51.

28. See, for example, McClain's critique of the Platonic dualism of Berkhof in Alva McClain, "The Spirituality of the Millennial Kingdom," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 113, no. 449 (January 1956): 16–23.

29. John Walvoord, *Millennial Kingdom*, 297, admits that a form of kingdom exists in this age, although it is to be distinguished from the millennial reign of Christ. However, Walvoord falls short of defining clearly what he intends the present kingdom to be. Charles Feinberg similarly argues for a present, spiritual form of kingdom without defining the nature of this kingdom. Feinberg, *Millennialism*, 269.

30. Jürgen Moltmann notes that the discovery of eschatology as bearing primary significance for NT theology has its roots in the last stages of the nineteenth century in the works of Johannes Weiss, *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes*, 1892; Weiss, *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God*, trans. and ed. Richard H. Hiers and David L. Holland (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), and Albert Schweitzer, *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God*, 1914 ed., trans. Walter Lowrie (reprint, New York: Schocken, 1964). See Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, trans. James W. Leitch (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 37. As the twentieth century unfolded several scholars, including Cullman, Kümmel, and, most notably, Ladd, would incorporate these insights, apart from portions of their critical thought, into the mainstream of NT scholarship.

31. Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 18, prefers the terminology "inaugurated eschatology" over "realized eschatology": "'Inaugurated eschatology' implies that eschatology has indeed begun, but is by no means finished."

to the study of last things, biblical theology posited that eschatology touches every aspect of the NT. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., points out the sweeping nature of this approach to NT theology:

> In the newer consensus, eschatology is expanded to include the state of affairs that has already begun with the work of Christ in what the New Testament calls 'the fulness of time(s)' (Gal 4:4; Eph 1:10), 'these last days' (Heb 1:2), 'at the end of the ages' (Heb 9:26). Involved also…are basic and decisive considerations already realized in the present identity and experience of the Christian, and so too in the present life and mission of the church.[32]

Eschatology thus constitutes not merely a branch of systematic theology but the very lens through which to view the NT.

From this basic vantage point, Ladd argued earlier that "eschatology provides a basic unifying structure for NT" because "the Kingdom of God, eternal life, justification, and the life of the Spirit all belong to the age to come, all are eschatological." The incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus has thrust the church into the last days (Heb 1:2; 9:26; 1 John 2:18). The church is experiencing the eschatological age in a new aeon linked organically to the future aeon culminating at the *parousia* of Christ. This understanding squares with Jesus's paradoxical statements concerning the blessings of the messianic era enjoyed both currently (Matt 13:16; Luke 10:23) and in the future kingdom (Mark 10:30; Luke 18:30). This eschatological orientation radiated not only in Jesus's teaching but also in the apostles'.[33] The roots of this turn toward the eschatological in NT theology lie in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century with a young biblical theologian teaching at Princeton Theological Seminary.

Geerhardus Vos

Seminal to this eschatological turn to the NT were the writings of Princeton Seminary professor Geerhardus Vos (1862–1949).[34] Vos concluded that Christ's first coming signaled a new epoch for the people of God. Furthermore, the resurrection of Christ

32. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "The Usefulness of the Cross," *Westminster Theological Journal* 41, no. 2 (Spring 1979): 228–29.

33. Gregory Beale, "The Eschatological Conception of New Testament Theology," in *Eschatology in Bible and Theology: Evangelical Essays at the Dawn of a New Millennium*, ed. Kent E. Brower and Mark W. Elliott (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997), 17–18.

34. For a biographical overview of Vos's contribution to twentieth-century biblical scholarship, see Ransom L. Webster, "Geerhardus Vos (1862–1949): A Biographical Sketch," *Westminster Theological Journal* 40, no. 2 (Spring 1978): 304–317. In addition to Cullman, Ladd attributes much of his thinking on inaugurated eschatology to the insights of Vos. See Ladd's *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 44–45, 66–67. Richard B. Gaffin also is much indebted to the thinking of Vos. See Gaffin's introductory essay in Vos, *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2001).

and his bestowal of the Spirit commenced the eschatological age. Vos establishes this correspondence first by arguing that the resurrection means nothing less in NT, and particularly in Pauline thought, than the initiation of the eschatological resurrection program.[35]

Inasmuch as the resurrection program's commencement heralds the coming eschatological age, the bestowal of the Spirit equally announces its beginning, for the Spirit is part of the unfolding resurrection program for the believer.[36] The Spirit marks the eschatological age in four ways: by marking the near approach of the future world (Joel 2:28 [Heb. 3:1]), by his close association with the Messiah (Isa 11:2), by his heralding of the future new life for Isarel (Isa 32:15–17), and by his transcendental and supernatural work which signals the incursion of the heavenly order (John 3:6–7, 31).[37]

Vos coalesces this thinking by contending not only that the Spirit is indicative of the eschatological age, but that this Spirit-inclusive eschatological age is specified in Scripture as the entrance of the kingdom of God. Thus, the manifestation of the Spirit signals the present reality of the kingdom of God as much as it does the inauguration of the eschatological age.[38] Insofar as the Spirit and the kingdom of God were linked in the present age but did not constitute the consummation of the spiritual state, Vos could speak in terms of a proto-already/not yet framework between the stages of the present kingdom of God and the consummative kingdom of God.[39] He posits a current form of the kingdom of God as springing from the eschatological tone of the present era and the initiation of the resurrection program together with the granting of the messianic Spirit, along with a future instantiated kingdom to come. In furnishing these insights, Vos may be viewed as a pioneer of inaugurated eschatology.

Later Reformed Interpreters

While traditional Reformed theology defined the kingdom of God in spiritualistic terms as Christ's reign in the hearts of his people through salvation,[40] Anthony Hoekema incorporated inaugurated eschatology within Reformed theology to establish the kingdom of God as an eschatological manifestation of the unfolding reign of Jesus Christ over the cosmos.[41] He summarized NT eschatology with three

35. Geerhardus Vos, "The Eschatological Aspect of the Pauline Conception of the Spirit," in Gaffin, Jr., ed., *Redemptive History*, 92–93.

36. Vos, "Eschatological Aspect," 101.

37. Vos, "Eschatological Aspect," 95–97.

38. Vos, "Eschatological Aspect," 110.

39. Vos, "The Kingdom of God," in Gaffin, Jr., ed. *Redemptive History,* 109–110.

40. Louis Berkhof, *The Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 167; Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 1941 ed. (reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1958), 410–11.

41. Moore observes that while the shift in kingdom thinking within Reformed theology has enjoyed less fanfare than the advent of progressive dispensationalism within traditional dispensationalism, the groundbreaking work of Hoekema and others has had a jarring impact on

pivotal observations: (1) the grand eschatological event predicted in the Old Testament has occurred, (2) the occurrence which the OT authors appeared to describe as one movement is now understood to involve two stages: the present age and the future, and (3) the relationship between these two stages is that the blessings of the present age are the pledge and guarantee of greater blessings to come, directed ultimately to the renovation of the cosmos.[42] Hoekema set a new tone within Reformed theology by utilizing an already/not yet framework to argue that the kingdom of God in two stages involves the enjoyment of present blessings which are indissolubly linked and serve as a precursor to the consummate blessings of the future age.

Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. likewise has been of key importance in developing the implications of inaugurated eschatology upon kingdom formulation.[43] He argues for evidence of biblical corroboration for an expanded NT eschatology along three lines. First, the holistic eschatological hope of the Old Testament with its single focus on the Day of the Lord, inaugurated by the Messiah's coming, presents an organically unified understanding in which the two advents of Christ are to be viewed as two episodes of one eschatological coming.[44] Second, this broadened eschatology coincides with renewed attention at the close of the nineteenth century to the Gospel writers' central theme of Jesus's proclamation, viz., the kingdom of God. This fresh understanding of the kingdom came to be divested of its older, liberal conception of a timeless, always present moral order and understood to mean "the arrival now, at last, of the final rule of God in creation, present in and through [Jesus's] person and work."[45]Third, Paul's teaching on the manifestly eschatological event of the resurrection of Christ must be viewed as the "firstfruits," or actual beginning of the momentous resurrection-harvest at the end of history. Furthermore, the entirety of Paul's teaching on the Spirit as the Spirit of the resurrected Christ, the certain down-payment on the eschatological inheritance of the saints, belongs within this eschatological paradigm.[46] Gaffin clearly preserves the essence of Vos's insights while further clarifying their bearing upon the (eschatological) kingdom of God exercised through the person and work of the exalted Messiah Jesus Christ.

traditional Reformed formulations of the kingdom of God. Moore, *Kingdom of Christ*, 45–46.

42. Moore, *Kingdom of Christ*, 21–22.

43. Sinclair Ferguson compares the work of Gaffin to that of John Murray and credits Gaffin with synthesizing the insights of Princeton (Alexander, the Hodges, Warfield, Vos) with those of Amsterdam (Kuyper and Bavinck) so as to build upon the thought of Murray ("The Whole Counsel of God: Fifty Years of Theological Studies," *WTJ* 50 [Fall 1988]: 261). Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ*, 209, n135, notes that "the importance of Gaffin for understanding the role of inaugurated eschatology within Reformed evangelicalism would be difficult to overestimate."

44. Gaffin, "Usefulness of the Cross," 230.

45. Gaffin, "Usefulness of the Cross," 231.

46. Gaffin, "Usefulness of the Cross," 231. Compare with Gaffin, "The Holy Spirit," *Westminster Theological Journal* 43, no. 1 (Fall 1980): 58–78; Gaffin, "'Life-Giving Spirit': Probing the Center of Paul's Pneumatology," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41, no. 4 (December 1998): 573–89.

Implications of Inaugurated Eschatology for the Kingdom of God

Inaugurated eschatology offers three primary benefits for a fuller understanding of the nature of the kingdom of God. First, it underscores the importance of what Blaising terms "new creation eschatology."[47] That is, emphasizing the continuity between the present eschatological experience of the believer and future consummative blessings correctly portrays the scope of redemption as embracing the whole cosmos. Second, inaugurated eschatology recognizes that the kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus and preached by the apostles is one eschatological kingdom program.[48] This formulation may incite initial discomfort for the traditional dispensationalist. Yet, the careful student must observe that when Jesus discloses the mysteries (Matt 13:11; Luke 8:10) or mystery (singular, Mark 4:11) of the kingdom of God, he addresses the prophesied (and already rejected) Messianic kingdom, as nearly every traditional dispensationalist would affirm. Thus, he furnishes a precedent for unity between the church age (that is, the mystery of the kingdom) and the prophesied Davidic kingdom. The present, so-called mystery form of the kingdom is a form of *the* kingdom, not a wholly discrete kingdom program.[49] Furthermore, the distinction between the present form of kingdom for which I am arguing and the future Davidic kingdom remains clear as the distinction between a Melchizedekian, high-priestly kingdom (Ps 110:4) and a Davidic, geo-political kingdom (Ps 132:11). The latter fulfills OT promises given to the nation of Israel; the former does not. The latter views Christ as reigning from the terrestrial throne of David, while the former views Christ as reigning from the celestial throne at the Father's right hand. The two kingdoms, while both grounded in the Messiah's inherent right to rule, involve different purposes. Their unity is founded on the fact that the exalted Christ is the instated monarch over both realms, as implied in the phrase "inaugurated eschatology."

Third, inaugurated eschatology maintains an essentially Christological focus. Although Ryrie criticizes this element in progressive dispensationalism,[50] the Christological fulcrum of NT eschatology cannot be dismissed. The eschatology of the resurrected and exalted Christ forms the centerpiece of NT hope.[51] Jesus's incarnation, death, resurrection, and exaltation infused eschatology into every aspect of Christianity. Therefore, to speak of inaugurated eschatology is to speak of the Christ event.

47. Blaising, "Premillennialism," 157–227.

48. Gaffin argues "for Jesus it is a matter of one (eschatological) kingdom that is both present and future in its coming." Gaffin, "Usefulness of the Cross," 231.

49. McClain and Toussaint do not see the mystery of the kingdom as pertaining to the present age. See Mark L. Bailey, "Doctrine of the Kingdom," 443-451.

50. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 94.

51. Elliott Johnson recognizes as well that a "Christological unity" ties together the various phases of the dispensations in his essay, "Hermeneutics and Dispensationalism," *Walvoord: A Tribute*, ed. Donald K. Campbell (Chicago: Moody, 1982), 252.

With these emphases in mind, inaugurated eschatology has contributed much to the understanding of the kingdom of God in its dual stages. We may speak legitimately of an already/not yet framework with reference to the kingdom of God. Having traced the understanding of contemporary dispensationalism regarding the kingdom as well as the nearly solidified consensus concerning the NT outlook as that of inaugurated eschatology, I turn now to examine in more detail the initial textual basis in the NT for this understanding of the present Melchizedekian kingdom of Christ.

The Kingdom of God in Matthew

Those who wish to assimilate Jesus's conception of the kingdom must begin with the Gospel of Matthew, for here shines most illustriously the motif of the coming kingdom.[52] Given Matthew's eagerness to develop the theme of the kingdom, the following study will concentrate on his account with the other Synoptic Gospels adding details to provide a full purview of the kingdom of God motif. Particularly, I survey the structure of Matthew to determine the significance of the kingdom in the Gospel together with the manner in which his elucidation of the kingdom fits his overall strategy. Following this I will examine the significance of Jesus's opening proclamation of the imminence of the kingdom and Jesus's development of the kingdom as an approaching reality for his disciples, focusing on the mystery parables of the kingdom in Matthew 13.

The Place of the Kingdom in the Structure of Matthew's Gospel

Although the Gospel of Matthew is notoriously difficult to outline in its basic structure because of the author's use of multiple structural features,[53] Kingsbury has identified a crucial key for discerning transitions among the major movements of the work. The phrase ἀπὸ τότε ἤρξατο ὁ Ἰησοῦς ("from that time Jesus began") functions as a transitional phrase denoting the three sections of the book. The phrase appears at 4:17 and 16:21, demarcating the movements of the book roughly as the

52. Ned B. Stonehouse, *The Witness of Matthew and Mark* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian Guardian, 1944), 228, observes that Matthew is unique with fifty references to the kingdom, while a combined Mark and Luke offer scarcely more with fifty-four references (John only has five). Most Matthean scholars recognize his paramount concern for the motif of fulfillment, particularly with respect to the kingdom of heaven. See, Jack D. Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 128; Rudolph Schnackenburg, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 40; Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 43–47; R. T. France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1989), 197–205; Alan H. McNeile, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (London: MacMillan, 1938), xix– xxiv; Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1993), lx; John F. Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come* (Chicago: Moody, 1974), 30–31.

53. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, li. Robert H. Gundry warns: "We should avoid imposing an outline on Matthew." Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 10.

following: (1) the person of Jesus the Messiah (1:1–4:16), (2) the proclamation of Jesus the Messiah (4:17–16:20), and (3) the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah (16:21–28:20).[54]

However, not all Matthean scholars are satisfied with this simple arrangement. Others have recognized another prominent structural feature of the book, the five discourses contained in Jesus's great teaching orations: (1) the Sermon on the Mount (chaps. 5–7), (2) the address to the disciples on mission and martyrdom (chap. 10), (3) the exposition on the kingdom of heaven (chap. 13), (4) the discourse on community regulations (chap. 18), and (5) the discourse on eschatology (chaps. 24–25).[55] Stonehouse notes that each of the five discourses concludes with the identical formula: καὶ ἐγένετο ὅτε ἐτέλεσεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς ("and so it was when Jesus had finished" [Matt 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1]).[56] The five discourses, while not providing a seamless structure for the book, do furnish major panels around which the book is constructed. Focusing the structural coherence of Matthew around the five discourses has the advantage of supporting the dispensational interpretation that chapter 11 serves as a pivotal point in the development of Matthew's argument.

Here Matthew begins to delineate the rejection of the messianic kingdom by the Jewish people.[57] In keeping with the first structural schema, Jesus's initial proclamation of the kingdom of heaven is the commencement of the second major movement of the Gospel, the proclamation of Jesus the Messiah (4:17–16:20). Coinciding with the theme of Matthew as the presentation of the king and his kingdom the nation of Israel,[58] much of Jesus's kingdom proclamation to his Jewish contemporaries is to be found in this section. The following will focus on this portion, with particular reference to one of its features, the third of Jesus's five great discourses (Matthew 13), concerning his unveiling of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus's Proclamation of the Imminence of the Kingdom

By repeating verbatim John's opening public proclamation, Jesus inaugurated his ministry in Matthew's account by enjoining repentance in light of the imminently approaching kingdom of heaven (Matt 4:17). With such a terse yet elusive statement,

54. "The Structure of Matthew's Gospel and His Concept of Salvation-History," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 73 (October 1973): 453–54. See also D. R. Bauer, *The Structure of Matthew's Gospel* (Sheffield: Almond, 1988); Hagner, *Matthew 1– 13*, li; Stonehouse, *Matthew and Mark*, 129.

55. W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 1:59, 61, following B. W. Bacon, *Studies in Matthew* (London: Constable, 1930). Davies and Allison make much of triads in the structure of Matthew (1:62–72).

56. Stonehouse, *Matthew and Mark*, 130–31.

57. S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., "The Argument of Matthew," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 112, no. 446 (April-June 1955): 148; see also Verseput, *Rejection*, 55–56; Barry Gridley, "The Offer of the Kingdom: A Defense of the Dispensational Interpretation" (Th.M. thesis, Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, 1984), 21.

58. Johnson, "Argument of Matthew," 144.

questions confront the reader. How did Jesus himself understand or expect his audience to understand his announcement of the kingdom of heaven? Did Jesus intend for his Jewish audience to understand his kingdom of heaven as the prophesied messianic kingdom of the Hebrew Scriptures or did he intend to imbue his proclamation of the kingdom with new revelation concerning its content and meaning? Moreover, what did Jesus mean by the pronouncement that the kingdom of heaven is "at hand"? Had the kingdom arrived in some sense in his person and work (actually or proleptically) or was it merely from their vantage point imminent? If so, upon what was its imminence contingent? Clues are furnished from a careful analysis of the context.

The Meaning of βασιλεία in Jesus's Proclamation

In solving the original question of Jesus's and his contemporaries' understanding of the kingdom of heaven, diverse suggestions have been offered. Several have observed in Jesus's teaching on the kingdom a dynamic quality, centering principally upon salvific redemption and allegedly loosed from the confinements of its overtly physical connotations in OT prophecy. Peter Toon, for example, contends that for Jesus the kingdom differed from the understanding of his contemporaries because it was a living, dynamic reality which made an abrupt demand on the people and at the same time offered them immediate salvation and wholeness.[59]

Partly this understanding follows from Gustaf Dalman's landmark work, *The Words of Jesus*, in which he argues that βασιλεία refers to the "sovereignty of the transcendent God," alluding to the "kingly rule" of God primarily and only tangentially to the realm or territory governed by him.[60] Numerous scholars have built their understanding of the kingdom of God on this proposition,[61] such that Marshall pointed to this understanding as one of five points of consensus which emerged in kingdom discussion in the latter half of the twentieth century.[62] Since then, however, the scholarly trend has moved away from this understanding of βασιλεία toward a recognition of "realm" as part of its core meaning.[63]

59. Peter Toon, *God's Kingdom for Today* (Westchester: Cornerstone Books, 1980), 44–45.

60. Dalman, *Words of Jesus*, 92–94.

61. Vincent Taylor, *The Life and Ministry of Jesus* (London: MacMillan, 1954), 66; Rudolph Schnackenburg, *Matthew*, 40; Jack D. Kingsbury, *Matthew*, Proclamation Commentaries (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 58; Palmer, *Kingdom of God*, 44–45; George R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 74; George Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament*, 117; Robert Recker, "The Redemptive Focus of the Kingdom of God," *Calvin Theological Journal* 14, no. 2 (November 1979): 157; Joel Marcus, "Entering into the Kingly Power of God," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107, no. 4 (December 1988): 663–75; James L. Mays, "The Language of the Reign of God," *Interpretation* 47, no. 2 (April 1993): 117–26; Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Scribner's, 1971), 96–102.

62. I. Howard Marshall, "The Hope of a New Age: The Kingdom of God in the New Testament," *Themelios* 11, no. 1 (September 1985): 5.

63. J. C. O'Neill, "The Kingdom of God," *Novum Testamentum* 35, no. 2 (April 1993): 130–41; Robert K. McIver, "The Parable of the Weeds Among the Wheat (Matt 13:24–30, 36–43) and

O'Neill and Kvalbein have argued persuasively against Dalman's understanding. O'Neill posits that while מַלְכוּת in the OT can refer to "royal power," as for instance in referring to David's "royal rule" (1 Chron 29:30), this meaning does not correspond unilaterally to βασιλεία.[64] Rather, only a handful of NT texts carry the connotation for βασιλεία of "right to reign as king" (Luke 1:33; Rev 17:12, 17), for "rule" cannot operate without a correlative "realm" over which to exercise the rule.[65] Kvalbein concurs with this understanding, contending that βασιλεία carries concrete connotations, with spatial/locative nuances primary as the realm over which rule is exercised.[66] This understanding has long been advocated by dispensationalists.[67]

With an understanding of βασιλεία as incorporating ruler, rule, and realm, does this conclusion necessitate that the kingdom proclaimed by Jesus was in fact the messianic reign and realm prophesied in the Hebrew Scriptures? Scholars have often dismissed this correlation, arguing instead that Jesus introduces a wholly new concept of kingdom in his teaching that applies exclusively to rule, not realm.[68] Such a view, however, falls short at the very least in that it fails to take into account that Jesus's revelation of the kingdom changed over the course of his ministry as his initial offer of the kingdom predicated upon national repentance was rejected by the Jewish people and consequently withdrawn (a point evident from a careful analysis of the structural progression of the Gospel, seen in a comparison of Matt 10:5–7 with Matt 13:1–7 culminating in Matt 21:43).[69] Such a view falls short in comprehending how Jewish audiences would have discerned the phrase "kingdom of God" because it

the Relationship Between the Kingdom and the Church as Portrayed in the Gospel of Matthew," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114 (Winter 1995): 654n32; Hans Kvalbein, "The Kingdom of God and the Kingship of Christ in the Fourth Gospel," in *Neotestamentica et Philonica: Studies in Honor of Peder Borgen*, ed. David E. Aune, Torrey Seland, and Jarl H. Ulrichsen (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 216–18.

64. O'Neill, "Kingdom of God," 131.

65. O'Neill, "Kingdom of God," 131.

66. Karl Ludwig Schmidt, "βασιλεία," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, transl., Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1964), 1:579; Rudolf Otto, *The Kingdom of God and the Son of Man*, trans. Floyd V. Filson and Bertram Lee-Woolf (revised ed., London: Lutterworth, 1943), 54.

67. McClain, *Greatness of the Kingdom*, 17.

68. Sverre Aalen, "'Reign' and 'House' in the Kingdom of God in the Gospels," *New Testament Studies* 8, no. 3 (1962): 216; Rudolph Otto, *The Kingdom of God and the Son of Man*, trans. Floyd V. Filson and Bertram Lee-Woolf, revised ed. (London: Lutterworth Press, 1943), 72; Norman Perrin, *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 184–85.

69. Mark Saucy points to Matthew 13 as the turning point for Jesus's explication of the nature of the kingdom of God. Subsequent to Matthew 13 the kingdom of God is far rather than near, nonracial rather than ethnic, related to suffering rather than overtly powerful, and secretly disclosed to insiders rather than open to all. See Saucy, "The Kingdom-of-God Sayings in Matthew," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 151, no. 602 (April–June 1994): 196.

neglects to give sufficient attention to Second Temple Judaism of the first century.[70] A more compelling rationale can be garnered to support the traditional dispensational conclusion that the kingdom Jesus preached was firmly rooted in OT prophecies concerning the messianic kingdom.

Stanley Toussaint champions the traditional dispensational interpretation that Jesus's proclamation of the kingdom of heaven could have been no other kingdom than that prophesied in the Old Testament. This follows from several factors: (1) Jesus offers no definition of the kingdom but simply assumes that his listeners possess sufficient background understanding that no precise classification is provided; (2) Jesus's message is restricted to the nation of Israel (Matt 10:5–6), the kingdom was theirs initially to gain or to lose; (3) the disciples to the very end of Jesus's earthly career anticipated a literal kingdom on earth in keeping with OT prophecy (Matt 20:20–21; Acts 1:6); (4) the kingdom in view cannot viably be the church because the church is a heretofore undisclosed mystery, while the kingdom cannot be the universal kingdom of God, for such is an eternal kingdom which has always existed. Furthermore, his proclaimed kingdom cannot be a spiritual kingdom because such a reign would hold no special importance for Israel.[71]

Barry Gridley adds several reasons to conclude that Jesus was proclaiming the prophesied, messianic kingdom. First, Jewish expectations focused upon this kingdom.[72] Several synoptic texts reveal that the Jews related their understanding of the kingdom to the impending eschatological reign of the Messiah.[73] Second, Jesus must be charged with duplicity if the kingdom he proclaimed was not the prophesied kingdom, inasmuch as he did not seek to clarify or correct the people's misunderstanding had he intended otherwise. Third, Jesus frequently appeals to the Hebrew Scriptures for his concept of the kingdom. Fourth, Jesus's preaching concerning the kingdom includes all the elements of the messianic reign: spiritual,

70. *TDNT*, s.v. "βασιλεία," 1:584.

71. Touissaint, *Behold the King*, 62.

72. Gridley, "Offer of the Kingdom," 6. D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, *Matthew, Mark, Luke,* ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 100. Carson contends that in the first century there was little agreement among the Jews as to what the messianic kingdom would be like. However, James D. G. Dunn has identified fourteen common, contemporary expectations from Second Temple Judaism of what the kingdom would entail, nearly all observations in keeping with what traditional dispensationalism has delineated as the current expectations of the day. Dunn, "Jesus and the Kingdom: How Would His Message Have Been Heard?" in *Neotestamentica et Philonica*, *Studies in Honor of Peder Borgen,* Novum Testamentum Supplements, 106 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 7–13.

73. For example, Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, pronounces the following: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David" (Luke 1:68–69). Simeon likewise waited expectantly for "the Lord's Christ" (Luke 2:26). In addition, the scribes and chief priests fully expected the Messiah's birth to be born in Bethlehem in keeping with Micah's prophecy (Matt 2:4–6). Furthermore, at the Triumphal Entry the crowd shouted: "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!" (Mark 11:10).

moral, social, ecclesiastical, political, and physical aspects.[74] Based upon these observations we must conclude that when Jesus inaugurated his public ministry by proclaiming that the kingdom of heaven was at hand, he intended to convey nothing less than that the messianic kingdom prophesied in the OT was imminent. I turn now to examine several passages that elucidate this coming kingdom, following the Jews' rejection of Jesus as Messiah and his ethical demands.[75]

Jesus's Shift to the Mysteries of the Kingdom in Matthew 13

From Matthew 13 onward a three-fold alteration is evident in Jesus's teaching on the kingdom of God, following his rejection by the Jewish people, including a shift to instructing the disciples specifically, an introduction of the concept of "mystery," and a change to teaching about the kingdom through parables.[76] A visible shift transforms the kingdom from being "at hand" in Jesus's pronouncements to being a veiled phenomenon disclosed only by means of parables with the full meaning kept obscure to outsiders. The disciples ask Jesus privately why he speaks to the masses in parables. Jesus replies: "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given" (Matt 13:11).[77] Jesus here points out the basis for his shift to speaking in parables: he has turned to parables chiefly because God has determined to grant this new revelation to Jesus's disciples. Davies and Allison observe that this statement does not merely ostracize outsiders but emphasizes God's gracious bestowal to the disciples: "Eschatological knowledge is the gift of God."[78]

The Mystery of the Kingdom

As part of the shift to kingdom teaching in parables a keyword distilling this new approach is the pivotal term μυστήριον, which pertains to two basic semantic categories: God's unmanifested, private counsel or that which transcends normal human understanding as an ultimate reality or secret.[79] Matthew 13:11 falls under

74. Gridley, "Offer of the Kingdom," 7–13.

75. Full development of the thesis of the Jewish rejection of Jesus's offer of the kingdom lies beyond the scope of the present essay. Readers are referred to my upcoming monograph on the kingdom of God for more details, SCS Press (forthcoming).

76. Rogers, "Davidic Covenant," 472.

77. All Scriptural citations, unless otherwise noted, are from the English Standard Version (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016).

78. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 2:390.

79. BDAG, s.v. "μυστήριον," 661–62. Compare with Raymond Brown, "The Pre-Christian Semitic Concept of 'Mystery'," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (October 1958): 417–43; also, Brown, *The Semitic Background to the Term "Mystery" in the New Testament*, Biblical Series, ed. John Reumann, vol. 21 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 426–48; Werner Bieder, "Das Geheimnis des Christus nach dem Epheserbrief," *Theologische Zeitschrift* 11 (September/Oktober 1955): 329–43; Andreas J. Köstenberger, "The Mystery of Christ and the Church: Head and Body,

the first category, involving as BDAG denotes, "The secret thoughts, plans, and dispensations of God which are hidden from human reason, as well as from all other comprehension below the divine level, and await either fulfillment or revelation to those for whom they are intended."[80] The use of the word in Matthew 13:11 and its parallels (Mark 4:11; Luke 8:10) is the only occurrence of the term in the synoptic Gospels. Here, μυστήριον pertains to the secret counsel of God concerning the kingdom now revealed to humans. What does this new disclosure entail? Likely the mystery relates not singularly to new content about the kingdom but rather fresh revelation of the manner and time of the kingdom's coming. Rather than a distant phenomenon for the prophesied future, the mystery kingdom is a present (though eschatological) reality. The term μυστήριον involves not only the timing of the coming kingdom but also its nature. In contrast to the vivid and dramatic inauguration of the messianic Davidic kingdom as foretold in the OT, the mystery kingdom comes as unobtrusively as crops growing in a field. The overtly tranquil manner of the coming of the kingdom underscores its nature as a present manifestation of Christ's rule in this age rather than the abrupt advent of the Davidic kingdom at the end of the age. Revelation of this mystery entails divinely-given knowledge of the kingdom's origin, timing, and mediation.[81]

Jesus employs parables to distinguish genuine disciples from outsiders. Beyond the purpose of parables, I turn now to examine the content of the parables. Jesus's parables deal almost exclusively with the kingdom of God.[82] The parables of Matthew 13 serve as an important insight into the nature of the eschatological kingdom in its mystery phase.

Mystery Parables as a Present Manifestation of the Kingdom

Some dispensationalists contend that the parables of Matthew 13 have no relation to the course of the kingdom of God in the present age. Toussaint, for example, argues that the kingdom parables of Matthew 13 merely provide additional information relative to the present postponement of the future millennial kingdom (that is, the interregnum) rather than revealing a presently active phase of the kingdom.[83] Toussaint suggests that in view of the Jewish rejection of the rightful King, the parables cannot

'One Flesh'," *Trinity Journal* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 79–94; A. E. Harvey, "The Use of Mystery Language in the Bible," *Journal of Theological Studies* 31, no. 2 (April 1980): 320–36.

80. BDAG, s.v. "μυστήριον," 661–62.

81. *TDNT*, s.v. "μυστήριον," 4:818–19.

82. Archibald M. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 39; Mark L. Bailey, "Guidelines for Interpreting Jesus' Parables," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155, no. 617 (January–March 1998): 37; J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 17; Floyd V. Filson, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Black's New Testament Commentaries, 2nd ed. (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1971), 159.

83. Toussaint, *Behold the King*, 171. Compare with McClain, *Greatness of the Kingdom*, 325.

reveal any form of present kingdom. There is no kingdom activity in the current age prior to the *parousia*.

Despite Toussaint's arguments, the nature of kingdom revelation in Matthew 13 is difficult to square with an exclusively future kingdom. For example, the parable of the mustard seed can only refer to a present age. The kingdom of this parable cannot be the Davidic kingdom since Jesus is emphasizing the inconspicuous beginning of the kingdom, in distinction to the majestic inauguration of the future millennial reign. Further, the kingdom cannot be the monophyletic Jewish kingdom of David because it embraces Jews and Gentile alike, as the symbolism of the birds vividly portrays.[84] Other parables which emphasize organic growth and development, such as the parables of the leavening process or of the weeds and the wheat, must pertain also to the present age rather than to the future Davidic kingdom. These parables portray Jesus's present lordship and exaltation, which began rather inconspicuously with eleven disciples in the upper room rather than with the fanfare of a typical coronation.[85] Rather, the parables of Matthew 13 disclose a phase of kingdom operative in the present age. Each parable will be examined briefly with respect to its development of the kingdom motif.

The Parable of the Sower and the Soils (Matt 13:1–9, 18–23)

Jesus's first parable in chapter 13, which concerns the sower and the soils, often has been interpreted popularly as dealing with general evangelism rather than with the kingdom of God. Nevertheless, this parable along with the others pertains to Jesus's instruction on the kingdom of God in its mystery stage. It is placed strategically on the heels of the episode in chapters 11–12 of Jesus's rejection at the hands of his Jewish people. Thus the parable underscores the truth that the apparent failure of the kingdom to come victoriously as Jesus had indicated originally is no failure at all. Instead, those who welcome Jesus's word and bear fruit are the perpetuators of the kingdom in its present, mystery form. The parable deals not so much with the identity of the sower or even with the seed itself but rather with the outcome of the seed's insemination, a success dependent directly upon the type of soil receiving the seed.[86] Although the kingdom of God is beset with difficulty and apparent loss in certain areas of its yield, the sown seed results ultimately in a stunning harvest.[87]

The essential point is that this parable concerns the church-age progress of God's work on earth as a development of Jesus's present reign. The reasons for this conclusion are several. First, the parable is tied directly by Jesus to the fresh revelation he is granting the disciples about the kingdom of heaven. Jesus shares

84. Bailey, "Parable of the Mustard Seed," 458.
85. Pentecost, *Parables of Jesus*, 57.
86. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 369.
87. Bailey, "Parable of the Sower," 184–86.

this parable immediately prior to explaining the purpose of parables in general. The disciples have asked Jesus after the giving of the parable why he speaks to the people in this way. His reply is that the disciples have been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, whereas the throngs of people have not. Jesus thus links the parable of the sower and the soils along with the purpose of parables in general to his provision of fresh revelation concerning the nature of the kingdom of heaven.

Second, insofar as the parable concerns the kingdom of heaven, the organic nature of the parable demands a present significance. The concept of seeds being sown, gradually growing, and ultimately bearing fruit does not square with Old Testament imagery of the inauguration of the Davidic kingdom as one that will "break in pieces all these [other] kingdoms and bring them to an end" (Dan 2:44). The kingdom described in the parable grows and develops commensurate with typical agricultural processes instead of the spectacular appearance the OT prophets expected of the end-time Davidic kingdom (compare Zech 9:14–17; Zeph 1:7–18; Amos 9:11–15; Isa 34–35).

Third, the imagery of the parable demands a present fulfillment. Thorns and thistles crowd out some of the shoots, while birds plunder the misplaced seeds. These images do not harmonize readily with the foretold binding of Satan to take place during Christ's millennial reign (Rev 20:2–3). Furthermore, in Jesus's explanation of the parable (vv. 18–23), the complex of events including Satan's threatening to eradicate the blades, the ominous tribulation and persecution foretold, and the imminent peril of the suffocating cares of the world smothering the shoots, all relate to trials believers face in the present age. If the parable of the sower and the soils in fact develops the mystery kingdom of heaven, this mystery kingdom can only relate to the present era of the church age.

The Parable of the Weeds and the Wheat (Matt 13:24–30, 36–43)

The next parable, which pertains to the growth and harvest of weeds and the wheat in a field, including Jesus's explanation of the analogies, is one of the most significant parables to affirm the present vis-à-vis future kingdom of Jesus.[88] The parable is unique to Matthew, although it is viewed by some to be simply Matthew's conflation of the parable of the seed growing spontaneously in Mark 4:26–29.[89]

88. Contra those scholars who see Jesus's explanation of the parable of the weeds and the wheat (vv. 36–43) as exclusively the free-hand work of Matthew (for example, Schnackenburg, *Matthew*, 133; Manson, *Sayings of Jesus*, 488; Joachim Jeremias, *Parables*, 82–85; Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 2:426; Nolland, *Matthew*, 558), I attribute the explanation as well as the parable itself to Jesus.

89. Manson, *Sayings of Jesus*, 192; Gundry, *Matthew*, 262; McNeile, *St. Matthew*, 196. Davies and Allison discredit this hypothesis on the basis of word statistics (a nonetheless tenuous criterion for making textual decisions) (*Matthew*, 2:409).

Though the two parables share some affinity, it is doubtful that literary dependence exists between them.[90]

The parable of the weeds and the wheat ties more explicitly to revelation concerning the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, as Jesus opens with the introductory formula "the kingdom of heaven may be compared to" (ὡμοιώθη ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν) (compare with 18:23; 22:2). The parable is linked to the preceding one of the sower and the soils only in that both utilize the agrarian context of Jesus's listeners in depicting a man planting seed on a piece of land. Here a man sows "good seed" in his field but is thwarted by his enemy who works to destroy the crop by surreptitiously planting weeds alongside the wheat.

The laborers query the master as to whether he wishes them to uproot the weeds, to which the master replies that out of concern for the preservation of the wheat both will be permitted to grow until the harvest at which time the counterfeit grain will be gathered and burned. In vv. 36–43 Matthew records Jesus's explanation of the parable in private to the disciples after they had gone into the house. Here Jesus identifies the meaning of seven of the symbols of the parable: sower equals the Son of Man, the field equals the world, the good seed equals the sons of the kingdom, the weeds equals the sons of the evil one, the enemy equals the devil, the harvest equals judgment, and the harvesters equals the angels. Viewed through the lens of Jesus's explanation, the parable signifies that the Son of Man, who sows the children of the kingdom in the world, is opposed by the devil who plants sons of the evil one alongside the sons of the kingdom. At the end of the age, the angels sort out everyone and everything offensive from the kingdom of the Son of Man and cast them into the fiery furnace to be consumed.

Interpretations of the Parable

The explanation given by Jesus has led to two principal interpretations for the application of the parable. The first application is the universalistic interpretation, which posits that the parable describes the operation of God's kingdom in the world until the end of the present age.[91] This interpretation allegedly accords well with the missiological emphasis in Matthew and with the OT roots of the kingdom of God concept. The second application is the ecclesiastical interpretation, which contends that the parable takes place within the community of faith. That is, the parable describes the situation chiefly of the church until the end of the age.[92] The

90. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 2:409; McNeile, *St. Matthew*, 202; Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 382.

91. So Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 2:428; Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God*, 132–34; Carson, *Matthew*, 8:327; Gundry, *Matthew*, 275; France, *Matthew*, 224–25.

92. So Augustine, *Against Donatists*, chap. 9; Robert K. McIver, "The Parable of the Weeds Among the Wheat (Matt 13:24–30, 36–43) and the Relationship Between the Kingdom and the Church as Portrayed in the Gospel of Matthew," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 643–59; Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 394; William F. Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew*,

latter interpretation claims to align well with themes found elsewhere in the Gospel and with the fact that the interpretation of the parable is provided exclusively for the community of faith—namely, the disciples—rather than for the general population.[93]

Often advocates of the universalistic interpretation dismiss the ecclesiastical reading out of hand because of Jesus's explicit statement that the field is the world, under the assumption that Matthew would have used the term *church* if this is what he meant.[94] A mediating interpretation is preferred, however, due to several factors. First, to mention the concept of church here would be anachronistic in the flow of Matthew's Gospel because Jesus has not yet unfolded the mystery of his church (compare Matt 16:18). Second, the *crop* represents the believing community, not the field. The field instead represents the sphere in which the gospel is proclaimed and believers are won, a gospel with worldwide pervasiveness.[95] Insofar as the "field" (ἀγρός) is the sphere in which kingdom activity takes place, the parable relates universally to the worldwide incursion of the kingdom of the Son of Man in this age. Insofar as the nascent weeds and the wheat look identical to the casual observer and coexist until the end of the age, the kingdom activity has much to do in application to the visible church.[96]

Although the parable may be applied in some respects to the visible church, it in no way suggests the repudiation of the practice of church discipline (again, the field is not the church). Keener, who also recognizes an application in the visible church, observes: "The point is that the kingdom remains obscure in the present world, and only the final day will bring God's true children into their vindicated glory and banish the wicked from among them."[97] Thus, if we posit that the parable applies in some fashion to the visible church, it applies in the context of the church's antithetical relationship to the world in the present age: in the world but not of the world, in Christ while at the same time in the world.

Implications of the Parable

Several observations rising from this parable merit brief notice. First, the kingdom outlined in the parable of the weeds and the wheat must entail a present scheme of kingdom. Here, attention should be given to the use of the aorist passive tense of ὁμοιόω ("to be made like," "be like") in Jesus's opening phrase. Matthew uses the aorist passive of ὁμοιόω twice elsewhere in his Gospel (18:23; 22:2). The future passive (ὁμοιωθήσεται) appears once (25:1). The selective usage underscores

Anchor Bible 26 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971), LXXXVI.

93. See McIver, "Parable," 650–52.
94. Gundry, *Matthew*, 275; cf. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 2:428.
95. McIver, "Parable," 652.
96. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, 394.
97. Keener, *Matthew*, 390.

Matthew's purpose. The aorist appears when focus centers on what the kingdom is becoming, while the future tense relates to the future consummation of the kingdom.[98]

Second, the present mystery kingdom is here portrayed as universal in its operation. The field is the world, in contrast to the promised Davidic territory. This fact differentiates the present universal, multi-ethnic Melchizedekian kingdom from the consummative kingdom of David which centers upon Jewish ethnicity. The kingdom of the Son is not simply a dynamic reign over the church but a veiled regency over the cosmos itself. Jesus declares that the sower plants good seed in *his* field (13:24), which Jesus later identifies as the world. Thus, the Son of Man plants good seed in *his* world: the *cosmos* that belongs to him. The word κόσμος represents "the abode of men, the theater of history, the inhabited world, the earth."[99] Antagonists of the ecclesiastical interpretation often render the term here as "humanity which is hostile to God." However, the word has the neutral connotation of "inhabited world, earth" elsewhere in the Gospel of Matthew (4:8; 6:32; 16:26; 26:13). The kingdom of the Son of Man has a truly universal scope because the world belongs to Jesus inferentially through his extending reign.

Third, we see in this parable for the first time an important key for understanding the kingdom concept in this Gospel as well as in the rest of the NT. Jesus makes a distinction in his explanation of the parable between the kingdom of the Son of Man, out of which every offensive thing is expunged in the judgment at the end of the age, and the kingdom of the Father which is the eternal, luminous reward for the saints. At times exegetes are reluctant to distinguish between the two kingdoms as constituting different referents.[100] A better conclusion is that the kingdoms are distinct for two reasons. First, other passages within the Gospel, such as Matt 11:12; 12:28; and 21:43, show the kingdom of God as pertaining to clearly present or future reigns. Second, the two kingdoms correlate while remaining distinct, as the elastic phrase "kingdom of heaven (God)" may stand in both for the present kingdom of the Son of Man as well as for the future kingdom of the Father in the synoptic Gospels (compare Matt 26:29 with Luke 22:18).

Legitimate Kingdom Distinctions within the Parable?

It is now asked, is a distinction between the kingdom of the Son of Man and the kingdom of the Father exegetically defensible? Several observations confirm that it is. First, the texts that mention the Father in conjunction with the kingdom in Matthew are consistently related to the future, consummative kingdom (6:10; 13:43; 20:23; 25:34; 26:29; also see Luke 22:29). On the other hand, the kingdom of the Son of Man (compare with the Pauline expression "kingdom of his beloved Son," Col 1:13) points inevitably to the present age as outlined above (compare with Matt 16:28,

98. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 2:411.

99. *TDNT*, s.v. "κόσμος," 3:890.

100. Gundry, *Matthew*, 275; Carson, *Matthew*, 8:327.

"Some standing here will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in *his* kingdom").[101] Second, the prophecy in Matt 13:43 that the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father is a clear allusion to Daniel 12:3. Jesus's allusion to the prophecy of Daniel establishes that the kingdom of the Father is to be identified with the consummative messianic kingdom of David in Daniel 12, the kingdom which Daniel's prophecy consistently unfolds. The consummative kingdom of glory stands in visible contrast to the present kingdom of the Son of Man, marked by its unobtrusiveness. The book of Daniel stands out as an important background source for the kingdom motif in Jesus's teaching, "including most notably the prophet's depiction in Dan 7:13–14 of the culminant eschatological event in which the Ancient of Days delivers the kingdom to "one like a son of man."[102] This act is the eschatological bequeathal of the reign of God which will establish the millennial kingdom as a subsequent phase of Christ's mediated rule in the age to come (see "my throne" Rev 3:21; "his [equals the Son of Man's] throne" Matt 25:31).

Finally, the kingdom of the Son of Man and the kingdom of the Father while chronologically distinct are not disparate realms. Rather, structurally the two realms stand connected vitally and systemically. The dual realms are essentially one eschatological kingdom bifurcated into distinguishable phases. Christ's present kingdom is connected to and preparatory for, while at the same time discernibly distinct from, the definitive, consummative Father's kingdom. Both kingdoms are in the ultimate sense stages of Christ's eschatological reign, although they serve varied purposes. The kingdom of the Son is the indispensable precursor for the outfitting and populating of Matthew's crucial eschatological objective, the Father's kingdom. The Son of Man's kingdom is present though inconspicuous, universal though clandestine, and marked by latent turmoil (for example, the similarity of the plants elicits concern from the laborers, and the crops are exposed to the potentially harsh elements of weather as they grow [vis-à-vis their future safekeeping in the barn). The Father's kingdom on the other hand is dramatically clear, resplendent, peaceful, and perpetual. This two-age thinking serves to contrast the present, invisible reign of the Son from the future, manifest reign of the Father (which in actuality will take place through the agency of the Son).

While the kingdom of the Son of Man certainly is present in this age, its actual inauguration relative to the context lay in the proximate future, as the Son of Man

101. As for the disciples' mention of "your kingdom" in 20:21 (*your* equals *Jesus's*), this is best understood to refer loosely to the future kingdom, principally because the Father bequeaths the future kingdom to the Son (Luke 22:29 "I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom"). This is illustrated in the fact that following the *parousia* Jesus sits upon *his* throne because he as the faithful Davidic descendent and rightful heir to the Davidic Covenant has legitimate claim to the throne (Matt 25:31; Rev 3:21). Only Jesus exhausts the promises of the Davidic covenant.

102. Eugene H. Merrill, "Daniel as a Contribution to Kingdom Theology," in *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost*, ed. Stanley D. Toussaint and Charles H. Dyer (Chicago: Moody, 1986), 212.

still had yet to plant the good seed in the (sphere of the) world. This would take place only by means of the universal proclamation of the gospel after all authority had been given to Christ (compare Matt 28:18–20; Acts 1:8), conjoined with the promised outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost and its aftermath (Acts 1:8; 2:1–4; 11:15–18). Thus, the parable of the weeds and the wheat implies that the kingdom of the Son is a sure reality, however inconspicuous it may appear during the present age. Therefore, a legitimate distinction (not estrangement) is to be made between the kingdoms of the Son of Man and of the Father.

The Parable of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven (Matt 13:31–33)

Jesus continues in Matthew 13 to describe the kingdom of heaven by two additional parables. The first parable likens the kingdom of heaven to a mustard seed which, although proverbially minuscule and seemingly insignificant, flourishes to become a large shrub.[103] Matthew's version appears to be based loosely upon the Marcan rendering (Mark 4:30–32).[104] The point of the parable is to emphasize both contrast (the tiny seed paradoxically becomes a large shrub)[105] and extent of growth (the smallest of seeds naturally develops into a sizeable garden plant).[106] These twin themes emphasize both the inconspicuous commencement of the kingdom in Jesus and the magnitude of the kingdom in its culmination.[107] The parable derives a portion of its kingdom imagery from the book of Daniel, where Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom is likened to a large tree (Dan 4:10–12) in which the birds of heaven perch, representative of the nations of the earth (Dan 4:20–22). If the book of Daniel is the key for discerning the meaning of the symbols, the imagery of the parable insinuates the multi-ethnic inclusion of Gentiles in the present kingdom of the Son.[108]

The next parable compares the mystery of the kingdom of heaven to a woman who hides leaven in three measures of flour until the entire batch of dough is leavened. The parable has no Marcan parallel but is found likewise in Luke 13:20–21. An interesting detail in the parable is that three measures of flour is roughly equivalent to forty liters, a meal sufficient to feed some one hundred people, an imposing task

103. The minute size of the mustard seed was proverbial in the rabbinical and talmudic writings. See Keener, *Matthew*, 387–88; McNeile, *St. Matthew*, 198; Hill, *Matthew*, 233.

104. Matthew uses 45 words in the parable; Mark uses 55 words. Luke follows Mark more carefully in certain points (namely, the introduction) than does Matthew (compare with Luke 13:18–19).

105. Jeremias, *Parables*, 148–49; Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. Irene and Fraser McLuskey with James M. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 71–72; McNeile, *St. Matthew*, 198.

106. Bailey, "Parable of the Mustard Seed," 458; Dodd, *Parables*, 153; Otto, *Kingdom of God*, 124; Kingsbury, *Matthew*, 147; Hunter, *Parables*, 50. Davies and Allison see both motifs in the parable. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 2:419.

107. Gundry, *Matthew*, 266–67.

108. France, *Matthew*, 227; T. W. Manson, *Teachings of Jesus*, 133; Bailey, "Parable of the Mustard Seed," 458.

for the single female baker.[109] Some have suggested from this that Jesus is hinting at the lavish eschatological banquet.[110] The unusual verb which depicts the woman concealing (ἐγκρύπτω, "to hide") the leaven in the flour reinforces that the secret beginnings of the kingdom are revealed only to privileged disciples.[111] Often leaven symbolizes the spread of evil in Scripture (Exod 12:15–20; 23:18; 34:25; Lev 2:11; Matt 16:5–12; 1 Cor 5:6–8; Gal 5:9). This connection has led some to see leaven as indicating evil within the kingdom.[112] However, ζύμη occasionally carries a neutral connotation (compare with Lev 7:13), and it is doubtful the term possesses a negative sense here. The leaven cannot represent evil, for the parable would be depicting a situation in which the leaven is completely victorious in permeating the dough.[113] Rather, the pervasiveness of the leaven rather than its metaphorical connotations is the pressing point of the parable.[114] The purpose of the picture is rather to illustrate that the leaven represents a kind of power which, although present only in small measure, is divinely ordained and able to penetrate the whole earth. This is likely a reference to the efficacy of the gospel of the kingdom Due to the thorough diffusion of the yeast it may represent the Holy Spirit's work in bringing salvation to the nations.[115]

The three preceding "growth" parables, concerning the weeds and the wheat, the mustard seed, and the leaven, all portray the mystery scheme of the kingdom as that which has become a present reality during this age. Collectively, the parables picture expansive growth from paradoxically small or hidden beginnings, leading toward a triumphant climax.[116] The hidden, inconspicuous beginning of the kingdom of the Son gives way to the dramatically inaugurated, resplendent kingdom of the Father at the *parousia*.

The Parables of the Hidden Treasure and of the Pearl Merchant (Matt 13:44–46)

Two more parables in Matt 13:44–46 are used by Jesus as a point of comparison with the kingdom of heaven. In the first parable of the hidden treasure, the kingdom is represented by a hidden treasure in a field, discovered by a laboring excavator who in turn covers up the treasure again and sells everything he has to purchase the field. The vivid imagery of the parable has lent itself to some strange interpretations of its significance. However, the point is clear: the kingdom of heaven is inherently of

109. France, *Matthew*, 227; Jeremias, *Parables*, 147.

110. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 2:423; Gundry, *Matthew*, 268.

111. *TDNT*, s.v. "κρύπτω," 3:973.

112. Walvoord, *Matthew*, 103.

113. McNeile, *St. Matthew*, 199; Hill, *Matthew*, 234.

114. France, *Matthew*, 228.

115. Bailey, "The Parable of the Leavening Process," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156, no. 621 (January–March 1999): 70.

116. France, *Matthew*, 228.

such value as to be worth risking all to obtain it.[117] The second parable in this section corroborates this interpretation. In this parable a wealthy merchant discovers a pearl of tremendous value and consequently liquidates his assets to purchase the jewel. The point of both parables is to emphasize the value of obtaining the kingdom. This view of the kingdom coincides with the present kingdom phase or namely with the sphere of salvation itself which is depicted elsewhere in the Gospels as something of great worth requiring strenuous yet rewardable effort to obtain (compare Matt 16:24; 19:23–24; Luke 14:26; 18:24–27).

The Parable of the Net (Matt 13:47–50)

Another parable which emphasizes the operation of the kingdom in the current age is the parable of the dragnet. Here Jesus underscores kingdom activity as comparable to a net which draws in fish of every kind and which in turn must be sorted upon returning to shore to conserve the good fish while discarding the refuse. Jesus then in an unusual move offers a formal explanation of the parable immediately after telling it. He places the activity of sorting the fish in the judgment event at the close of the age. Thus, the kingdom activity taking place pertains to the present age and the inconspicuous kingdom of the Son. In its focus and motif the parable is quite similar to the parable of the weeds and the wheat.[118] Fishing is the responsibility of Christ's followers, while sorting is the prerogative of Christ and his angels, indicating thus present and future aspects.[119] The parable consequently reinforces the present nature of the kingdom of Christ.

The Parable of the Householder (Matt 13:52)

Jesus concludes his discourse on the mystery kingdom with a terse parable concerning the kingdom of heaven as comparable to a householder who furnishes out of his treasure trove what is new and what is old. Since Jesus offers in this account no formal explanation of the parable, scholars are divided as to its significance.[120] One of the noteworthy elements to discern first is the identification of the scribes whom Jesus mentions in his introduction. The scribes mentioned here must refer to Jesus's disciples since they have been addressed directly by Jesus in the preceding question (v. 51) and since the verb μαθητεύω (ESV, "trained") describes their preparation for the role (v. 52).[121] What exactly they are expounding that is new, however, is unclear. The motif of the kingdom is the principal thought of the entire discourse, so it must be

117. Green, *Matthew*, 160; Nolland, *Matthew*, 564; Keener, *Matthew*, 390–91.

118. France, *Matthew*, 230.

119. Bailey, "The Parables of the Dragnet and of the Householder," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156, no. 623 (July–Sept 1999): 288.

120. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 2:44, list nine prominent suggestions for what was intended to be the new and the old.

121. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 2:444; France, *Matthew*, 231; Gundry, *Matthew*, 281.

the governing concept here as well. Since the disciples have been granted insight into the kingdom of heaven they will serve as the scribes who correlate the new kingdom understanding (from Jesus's parables) with the old kingdom concepts (from the OT Scriptures). The mention of "new" things substantiates again that the preceding discourse has disclosed new revelation concerning the kingdom of heaven and that this is the purpose of the parables.[122] Jesus has, by relating the parables concerning the mystery phase of the kingdom of heaven, revealed for the first time a prelude and interval prior to the establishment of the Davidic kingdom in which the kingdom of the Son develops and pervades the world until the *parousia* of Jesus. This process is consonant with the Melchizedekian kingdom of the present age.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have suggested that traditional dispensationalism has at times faltered in its insufficient clarity and development of the kingdom of God theme in Scripture, especially vis-à-vis the church. A more consistent explanation is needed that provides greater clarity to the discrete kingdom programs. To this, a seminal insight of biblical theology helps to correlate kingdom passages, as evident in the perspective of inaugurated eschatology. Christ Jesus has initiated the eschatological age, of which the kingdom of God is an integral part. Yet the prophesied Davidic kingdom has not yet come to fruition, as evident in the mystery form of the kingdom explicated by Christ in the parables of Matthew 13. In these parables a dichotomy is discernible between a present, mystery form of kingdom, called the kingdom of the Son of Man, and a future, consummative kingdom, called the Father's kingdom.

As argued throughout, the best understanding of this distinction is that it entails one kingdom program in *two distinct stages*. The first stage of this kingdom program encompasses the present church age and is identified specifically in Matthew as the kingdom of the Son. The current stage entails Christ's Melchizedekian sacral kingship (as expounded in Hebrews) that also subsumes the angelic sphere and the cosmos itself. The reign proceeds from the right hand of the Father and shares in the Father's sovereignty along the lines of co-regencies in the OT. The second stage encompasses the terrestrial and still-future millennial kingdom. This reign entails the dominion of Christ from the Davidic throne on earth for one thousand years, as a fulfillment of OT promises to national Israel and consummation of the Davidic covenant. As such, the current kingship of Christ consists of Melchizedekian kingship, in which Christ reigns over the church and the cosmos as a *royal priest*. His *Davidic kingly rule* still awaits the future at the second advent. I believe that by recognizing these stages, traditional dispensational thought has much to offer in correlating scriptural truth concerning the divine kingdom program.

122. Gundry, *Matthew*, 281.

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Prophets, Priests, and Kings Through Christ: The Two Witnesses in Revelation 11:3–13 and the Regenerate Church[1]

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Abstract: Traditionally Covenant Theology has affirmed that the inaugurated new covenant community is "mixed" in the sense that it contains both regenerate and unregenerate members. This article, which focuses on the identity of the two witnesses in Revelation 11:3–13, challenges this assertion and proposes in its place a "progressive covenantalism" ecclesiology, namely, that the inaugurated new covenant community is entirely and without exception regenerate. In Revelation 11, which relies on the symbol of the OT lampstand and its eschatological vision in Zechariah 4, the two witnesses have a prophetic, priestly, and kingly identity and mission because of their union with Christ. The two witnesses represent the entire church, and through Christ, therefore, the entire new covenant community is faithful as prophets, priests, and kings before God.

Introduction

Traditionally Covenant Theology (CT) has affirmed that the inaugurated new covenant community is "mixed" in the sense that it contains both regenerate and unregenerate members. CT views the ecclesiology of the old covenant as in fundamental continuity with the ecclesiology of the new covenant, at least in its inaugurated form. Just as the old covenant community contained within it a remnant of faithful Israelites coexisting with unbelieving Israelites, so also in the new covenant community there coexists a remnant of true believers with false believers. Such prioritization of ecclesial continuity is aptly stated by Michael Horton: "It is not that there are two covenants of grace or two churches, but that the one covenant of grace and church of Christ exists for now as a 'mixed assembly.' But this is not a new problem for the new covenant people; it has been part and parcel of God's electing prerogative since the beginning, as Paul insists (Rom. 9:6-18)."[2]

1. This article is a revision of a paper presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in San Antonio, TX (November 16, 2016). Many thanks to those who offered feedback on the original paper.

2. Michael S. Horton, *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology* (Louisville: Westminster

This article intends to challenge this assertion regarding the "mixed" nature of the new covenant community and propose in its place that the inaugurated new covenant community is entirely and without exception regenerate. In other words, the membership of the new covenant community is coextensive with the number of the regenerate in that community. Jeremiah's new covenant promise that all the covenant members would savingly know God, even "from the least of them to the greatest" (Jer 31:34),[3] has found expression in the inaugurated new covenant era because of the work of Christ mediated to his church.

While many NT texts support such a proposal, this article will focus on Rev 11:3–13. As a hermeneutically challenging text, Revelation 11 has often been overlooked for its contribution to NT ecclesiology. Nevertheless, a proper understanding of the identity of the two witnesses leads to a conclusion that the inaugurated new covenant community is regenerate. Indeed, the two witnesses, who I will argue represent the entire inaugurated new covenant community on earth, are portrayed as faithful in their witness. The foundation for and the guarantee of the church's faithful witness are located in the church's union with Christ. Unlike old covenant Israel, which possessed a faithful remnant within a broader unbelieving community, the inaugurated new covenant community is given a prophet-priest-king identity and mission, and it experiences the blessings of God's enduring presence and communal purity because of Christ's work on their behalf.

To demonstrate this thesis, I will situate the two witnesses into the immediate context of Revelation; explore the symbolism of the lampstand in the OT and, specifically, in Zechariah 4; and probe the way in which Rev 11:3–13 shows the fulfillment of Zechariah's vision in Christ and his church.

Identifying the Two Witnesses

Revelation 11 is part of an interlude (Rev 10:1–11:13) between the sixth and seventh trumpet judgments (Rev 9:13–21; 11:14–19). The last three trumpets correspond to three woes of judgment on those who dwell on the earth (Rev 8:13; 9:12; 11:14). As with the seven seal judgments (see Rev 7:1–17), the interlude between the sixth and seventh trumpet judgments functions to show the protection of the church in the midst of divine judgment. In Rev 11, such divine protection is described in two ways. First, John is told to measure the temple, the altar, and the worshipers, whereas he is not to measure the temple courtyard (Rev 11:1–2). That which is measured is protected, whereas the unmeasured is trampled by "the nations" (see Jer 31:38–40).[4] Second,

John Knox, 2008), 116. See Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 795.

3. Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are from the English Standard Version.

4. Rightly G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 558–59.

John is told of two witnesses, who will have divine protection until they complete their prophetic ministry (Rev 11:3–6). Even after they succumb to martyrdom, they will receive final protection through their resurrection and ascension to heaven (Rev 11:7–13). Of the two protection accounts—they apparently occur during the same time period, the forty-two months of 11:2 being equivalent to the 1,260 days of 11:3—we will focus on the latter to detect the meaning of the two witnesses for NT ecclesiology.

Regarding the two witnesses, we are told of their life, death, resurrection, and ascension. Their life is described primarily in prophetic terms (Rev 11:3–6). They prophesy for 1,260 days (Rev 11:3), and they preach a message of repentance, as seen from their sackcloth and the torment their message brings (Rev 11:3, 10). They likewise are identified as prophets like Elijah and Moses: like Elijah, they "have the power to shut the sky, that no rain may fall" (Rev 11:6a; compare with 1 Kgs 17:1), and like Moses, they can turn water to blood and inflict plagues on people (Rev 11:6b; compare with Exod 7:14–10:29).

Their death, resurrection, and ascension are recounted in Rev 11:7–13. They are not invincible forever, for after they are finished with their testimony, they are killed by the beast and are refused a proper burial (Rev 11:7–9). Their enemies rejoice, thinking they had finally achieved victory (Rev 11:10), but then, astonishingly, in an allusion to Ezek 37:10, God gives them the final victory by raising them from the dead, bringing them into heaven, and judging their enemies (Rev 11:11–13).

Attempts to identify the two witnesses have elicited a variety of answers. The preterist and futurist interpretative approaches to Revelation commonly see the two witnesses as two individuals in history, whether past or future, respectively.[5] Specifically, some in the early church saw the two individuals as Enoch and Elijah, who would reappear at the end to unmask the deceptions of the Antichrist.[6] Still, it is more likely that the two witnesses are not historical individuals but represent the entire new covenant community. This interpretation finds sufficient warrant in the identification of the two witnesses as the two olive trees and the two lampstands from Zech 4 (Rev 11:4). A close analysis of the symbolism of the lampstand in the OT and its use in Zech 4 will confirm the corporate interpretation of the two witnesses in Rev 11.

5. For a list of individuals put forward in the history of interpretation, see Beale, *Revelation*, 572–73n293; David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, Word Biblical Commentary 52B (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 598–603. For instance, Josephus (*Jewish War* 4.5.2) tells of two godly Jewish high priests named Ananus and Jesus, who were martyred and left unburied in AD 68, and whose martyrdom led to the downfall of Jerusalem.

6. Hippolytus of Rome, *On Daniel* 22; Tertullian, *On the Soul* 50; compare with *Ethiopic Apocalypse of Peter* 2.

The Lampstand's Symbolism of Divine Presence and Communal Purity

The lampstand signified both the enduring presence of God in the community as well as the purity and holiness of the community. The lampstand is closely linked with the bread of the presence, both textually and spatially. Textually, instructions for the lampstand often occur within the Sinai legislation alongside mention of the bread of the presence (e.g., Exod 25:30–31; Lev 24:1–9; compare with Heb 9:2).[7] Spatially, the lampstand appeared within the tabernacle opposite the bread of the presence, drawing together the symbols of light and bread as depicting the divine presence. In Solomon's temple, there were ten lampstands—five on the north and five on the south—suggesting the fullness of God's presence among his people (1 Kgs 7:49; 2 Chr 4:7). Such an interpretation is found in Zechariah's vision, in which the seven lamps on the lampstand symbolize the seven eyes of the Lord, who sees the entire earth, watchful and protective of his people (Zech 4:10). As Carol Meyers notes, since God did not allow himself to be represented with an image, "the presence of such a form in the aniconographic Israelite cult can perhaps be construed as the use of a powerful religious symbol to represent the presence of the unseen God of Israel."[8]

In addition to representing the divine presence, the lampstand also portrayed God's purity and the purity that he summoned his people to pursue. The high value of God's presence among his people and the standard of communal purity are aptly depicted by the substance and sustenance of the lampstand. Its substance was made of pure, hammered gold that weighed approximately seventy-five pounds (Exod 25:31–40; 37:17-24; Num 8:4). Its sustenance came from only the best kind of oil ("pure beaten olive oil"; Exod 27:20; compare with Lev 24:1–4), which was provided regularly for the lighting of the lamps. The continuation of this oil represented the ongoing call for the community's holiness: "The offering of oil…formed part of the service in which Israel sanctified its life and labor to the Lord its God, not only at the appointed festal periods, but every day."[9] A continually lit lampstand by only the finest olive oil was to be symbolic of Israel's commitment to be pure and holy to the Lord, to love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, and might (Deut 6:5).

Unifying the themes of divine presence and communal purity is the resemblance of the lampstand to a flowering almond tree. According to Exod 25:32–35, the lampstand had six branches coming off the central stem, with each branch having three cups that resembled almond blossoms with a calyx and a flower. Before

7. For the complementary use of the bread and the lampstand, see L. Michael Morales, *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord? A Biblical Theology of the Book of Leviticus*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 37 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 187–90.

8. Carol Meyers, "Lampstand," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:142.

9. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament: The Pentateuch*, trans. James Martin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 2:451.

winter officially ends, the almond tree produces snow-white blossoms, marking the beginning of spring.[10] The whiteness of the blossoms and the blossoms' heralding of the onset of spring made the tree an apt symbol for the life and purity the lampstand was to represent—the purity of the people, the priesthood, and the God who dwelt among his people. In this sense the lampstand was a tree-like symbol reminiscent of the tree of life planted in the Garden of Eden.[11] Like the tree of life, the lampstand was to represent the abiding fellowship between God and his people and the continual holiness of his people before him.

Against the backdrop of the lampstand and what it symbolized is the story of Israel's remarkable impurity and faithlessness. While many stories in Israel's long history could be proffered to support this point, two are especially powerful because they occur immediately after Israel received the command about the lampstand: the golden calf episode (Exod 32) and a blasphemer (Lev 24:10–23). In the former, the story of Israel's idolatry comes immediately after the narrative brings to a conclusion God's instructions for the building of the tabernacle and its furnishings, and God's commissioning of Bezalel and Oholiab to do the work (Exod 25–31). Israel's failure is set in stark contrast to the holiness they were called to pursue within God's presence. Similarly, the story of an Israelite woman's son who blasphemes the name of the Lord comes immediately after God gave Moses commands regarding the lampstand and the bread (see Lev 24:1–9). While on the one hand, the story illustrates how Israel was to maintain their purity in light of the sojourners among them—they stoned to death the blasphemer—it also provides a stark commentary on the nature of the Israelite community as a mixed community.[12] Even the man himself portrays this: his father was an Egyptian and his mother an Israelite. In a sense, his presence in the community illustrates the nature of that community as mixed with believers and unbelievers. Not everyone in the community was holy and faithful to the Lord. Both the story of the golden calf and the blasphemer insert dissonance into the narrative. The ideal of purity was not actualized or realized throughout Israel. Within Israel was a faithful remnant, but on the whole the community's behavior was not consonant with the symbol of the lampstand. Such dissonance embedded within

10. Michael Zohary, *Plants of the Bible: A Complete Handbook* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 66.

11. R. E. Averbeck labels the lampstand "a stylized 'tree of life'" Averbeck, "Tabernacle," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 815. similarly Meyers, "Lampstand," 4:142; G. J. Wenham, "Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story," in *Proceedings of the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1986), 19–24.

12. Leigh Trevaskis convincingly shows that the story of the blasphemer "extends the ideal of a sanctified Israelite community living under God's rule, symbolized within Lev 24:1–9, to everyday life within the Israelite community." While this is so, the fact that Israel had to deal with such a blasphemer within their own community immediately after receiving the Sinai commands shows a bleak outlook for the achievement of such an "ideal." Trevaskis, "The Purpose of Leviticus 24 Within Its Literary Context," *Vetus Testamentum* 59 (2009): 307.

the OT narrative of the pure lampstand set in contrast with the impure community highlights the need for a new covenant that would return God's people to the Garden of Eden, pure and unblemished.

Zechariah's Olive Trees and Lampstand

This eschatological vision for God dwelling with a pure covenant community is the focus of Zech 4.[13] Using the imagery of olive trees, pure oil, and the lampstand, Zech 4 offers a vision of a newly restored people characterized by faithfulness to the Lord. Within the vision, the lampstand is described according to the instructions in the Sinai legislation: it is made entirely of pure gold, and it has seven lamps (Zech 4:2). Further, the lamps are sustained by two olive trees, one on the right side and one on the left (Zech 4:3). Connecting the olive trees to the bowl for the lampstand are two golden pipes that provide a perpetual flow of olive oil (lit. "gold") to the lamps (Zech 4:12). More specifically, the angel speaking to Zechariah clarifies the identity of the two branches of the olive trees: "These are the two anointed ones…who stand by the Lord of the whole earth" (Zech 4:14). In the Hebrew, the phrase "anointed ones" is literally "sons of new oil" (*benê hayyitshār*), with the word for oil (*yitshār*) referring to the newness, freshness, and unblemished sustenance these individuals provide for the lampstand. Given the backdrop of Israel's faithlessness, the rich quality of the oil they provide and the twofold repetition of the word "gold" (*zāhāb*) are indicative of their faithfulness to the Lord. Unlike the previous tabernacle and temple, which were quickly defiled and tainted by Israel's sin, these individuals would maintain the purity and holiness of God's dwelling place.

The two individuals are most likely identified as Joshua and Zerubbabel, who were the leaders of the post-exilic community in Judah.[14] Joshua was the high priest (see Zech 3:1–10; 6:11; Hag 1:1), and Zerubbabel was the governor of Judah who was in the royal lineage of David (see Zech 4:6–10; Hag 2:23; Matt 1:13). Hence, in the

13. The visions in Zech 1–6 establish parameters for the return of Yahweh to Zion. For instance, in the first vision, God has horsemen to patrol the earth to remind the people that he must be recognized as king (Zech 1:7–17; compare with. 6:1–8). Again, the visions of Zech 3 and 5 show that for God to return to Zion, covenant-breaking and sin must be definitively dealt with (Zech 3:1–10; 5:1–11). Finally and positively, God's return to Zion will coincide with a renewed and restored people, whose faithfulness is symbolized in the rebuilding of the temple (Zech 1:18–2:13; 4:1–14).

Now that we have surveyed the meaning of the lampstand in the story of Israel, we are equipped to understand the significance of the vision of the lampstand in Zech 4. Against the backdrop of Israel's faithlessness, Zechariah 4 portrays the lampstand in the hope-filled, eschatological vision.

14. This is the traditional identification of the olive trees. For example, see Carol L. Meyers and Eric M. Meyers, *Haggai, Zechariah 1–8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* Anchor Bible, 25b (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1987), 275–76. More recent suggestions that the figures are prophetic instead of royal and priestly do not adequately take into account the prominence of Zerubbabel and Joshua in the visions of Zech 1–6 and the post-exilic era. For example, see Mark J. Boda, *The Book of Zechariah* New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 313–19.

post-exilic period, Israel was represented by a king-like figure and a priest, who led the people to be faithful to the Lord, as symbolized in the rebuilt temple. Given the lampstand's symbol of God dwelling with a pure people, Zechariah's vision holds forth the eschatological hope that the lampstand's symbol would one day be realized through a king and priest and pure community. The symbol was fulfilled in an interim way in the rebuilt temple through the efforts of Zerubbabel and Joshua, but the symbol awaited a final and climactic fulfillment, since in the post-exilic period Israel remained tainted and defiled (see Hag 1:4–6; 2:14; Mal 1:6–14). The efforts of Joshua and Zerubbabel to rebuild and sustain a pure temple point forward to a day when another king and priest would lead the people of God finally and climactically to be faithful to the Lord, to be pure and pleasing in his sight.[15]

The Two Prophet-King-Priest Witnesses in Revelation 11

Our analysis of the symbolism of the lampstand and Zechariah's eschatological vision for its renewal provides a foundation for understanding the identity of the two witnesses in Rev 11.

As indicated above, the "two witnesses," first mentioned in Rev 11:3, fulfill a prophetic role, since they "prophesy" (Rev 11:3, 6), perform miracles like Moses and Elijah (Rev 11:6), and are called "prophets" (Rev 11:10). That there are "two" witnesses evokes the OT lawcourt motif, in which an accusation could stand only on the evidence of two or three witnesses (see Deut 17:6; 19:15; Matt 18:16). Like Moses and Elijah, these figures thus appear on the side of truth and prophetically herald that truth to the world, even if the world does not want to hear it (Rev 11:7–10).

In addition to being prophets, the two witnesses also occupy the roles of kings and priests, since John identifies them as "the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth" (Rev 11:4). In this clear allusion to Zech 4, the two witnesses are identified as a king and priest, since the two olive trees in Zechariah's vision represented the anointed figures of Zerubbabel and Joshua.[16] Further, since the lampstand was temple furniture that symbolized God's presence among a pure people, the identification of the two witnesses as two lampstands shows they are the dwelling place of God and are characterized by purity, faithfulness, and truth. Since the lampstand in Israel represented the entire covenant community, the identification of the two witnesses as lampstands strongly suggests that these figures

15. All the visions of Zech 1–6 run along these eschatological lines. For instance, God promised Joshua to send "my servant the Branch" and "remove the iniquity of this land in a single day" (Zech 3:8–9; compare with 6:12). Again, in Zech 5:1-11 God promises to do away with all those who break the covenant. Finally, in Zech 6:9–15, the crown and priesthood conjoin, and people from "far off" would come and help build the temple of the Lord (Zech 6:13–15). None of these visions found final fulfillment in the time of Zechariah.

16. Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 421.

are not to be identified as two historical individuals but represent the entire church. Indeed, elsewhere in Revelation John already labelled the churches as lampstands (see Rev 1:20).[17] The church is portrayed as the faithful and pure people of God, share fellowship with God and one another, and shine the light of truth in the midst of a dark world.

Such a portrayal stands in stark contrast from the reality of Israel's experience in the OT. Far from worshiping the golden calf—in Revelation it takes the form of worshiping the beast (Rev 13:4)—the two witnesses hold fast to the Lord amidst trial. Far from blaspheming the name of the Lord—in Revelation this is what unbelievers do (Rev 16:9, 11, 21)—the two witnesses remain faithful to the Lord even unto death.

To what can we explain the difference between Israel's experience in the OT and the church's in the NT? The difference is a salvation-historical one: at this stage in redemptive history, Christ has already come and inaugurated the new covenant. The people of God are created and identified by virtue of their union with Christ. While this is not explicit in Rev 11, it is implied by the way in which the two witnesses most resemble Jesus. While they resemble Moses and Elijah in their prophetic ministries, they *most closely* resemble Jesus himself, as seen from the following table.

Event	**Jesus**	**Two Witnesses**
Prophetic ministry	Luke 4:24	Rev 11:3, 5–6
Invincibility until appointed death	John 7:30	Rev 11:5
Finished the task	John 19:30	Rev 11:7a
Martyred and shamed in Jerusalem	John 19:16–37	Rev 11:7b–8
Dead for only a short time	Mark 16:1–2	Rev 11:9–11a
Raised to life	Matt 28:1–10	Rev 11:11b
Fear on those who saw	Matt 28:4	Rev 11:11c
Ascension into clouds	Acts 1:9	Rev 11:12

The two witnesses resemble Jesus in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. Like Jesus, they prophetically herald the truth of God to the world, despite all opposition. Like Jesus, they cannot die until they finish their divinely-given task of testifying. Like Jesus, they are faithful unto death, even when their death is brought about by the beast and leads to public scorn and shame. Indeed, the phrase "where their Lord was crucified" (Rev 11:8) shows the close identification in death between the witnesses and Jesus.[18] Further, like Jesus, the two witnesses remain dead for only

17. Beale, *Revelation*, 574; Brian J. Tabb, *All Things New: Revelation as Canonical Capstone*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 48 (Downers Grove, IL: 2019), 96. John's shift from Zechariah's single lampstand to two lampstands in Rev 11:4 fits with the multiplicity of lampstands as multiple churches earlier in Rev 1–3.

18. The adverbial *kai* ("also"), though occasionally omitted from English translations of Rev

a short period of time—three and a half days[19]—and then are raised from the dead, to the fear and astonishment of the onlookers. Finally, like Jesus, they ascend to heaven in a cloud, God vindicating their righteousness. Thus, everything that happens to the two witnesses does so because it happened first to Jesus. They walk in his footsteps (1 John 2:6), and they share in his sufferings, death, and resurrection (Phil 3:10–11). More so than Moses or Elijah, they resemble Jesus and derive their identity and mission by virtue of their union with him.

The identity of the two witnesses as king-priests also derives from their union with Christ. Elsewhere in Revelation Jesus makes his people kings and priests by virtue of his death for them. Revelation 1:5–6 and 5:9–10 recount how Jesus died for his people, ransoming them from their sins by his sacrificial death, and made his people a "kingdom" and "priests" to God. The status of God's people as king-priests is the benefit of their union with him within the new covenant. Like the old covenant, which was inaugurated through covenant sacrifice (Exod 24:3–8), Jesus has inaugurated the new covenant through his blood. But unlike the old covenant, which contained the promise of God's people as kings and priests within a conditional framework (Exod 19:5–6), Jesus' covenant sacrifice brought into effect a new and better covenant, which assures for all its covenant members the identity of king-priests before God. Hence, the church receives and fulfills Zechariah's vision of the two king-priest olive trees that support and sustain the temple, but it does so not apart from but only on the basis of Christ and his covenant sacrifice. In Jesus we see the union of the crown and the priesthood; Jesus is the final and climactic fulfillment of the offices held by Zerubbabel and Joshua; he is both olive trees, both anointed ones, who builds and sustains the eschatological temple. Moreover, in Jesus we also see the lampstand, the light of the world (John 8:12), who mediates God's presence to God's people and, through his sacrificial work on their behalf, ensures their inviolable purity before God forever.

Ramifications for NT Ecclesiology

As a result of our analysis of Rev 11:3–13, the church fulfills the identity and mission of Israel, and it does so through Christ. Unlike a strict supercessionism that sees the church as the replacement of Israel, Rev 11 and its use of Zechariah's vision shows that Jesus fulfilled the identity and mission of Israel, particularly in his roles

11:8, highlights this close identification.

19. While technically Jesus was not dead for three and a half days, the number "three and a half," a form of which occurs throughout Rev 11–13 and derives from Dan 7:25, signifies a time of brief duration, especially the brevity of the power of evil (e.g., forty-two months [Rev 11:2; 13:5], 1,260 days [Rev 11:3; 12:6]). In this sense, it aptly parallels the brevity of Jesus' time in the grave.

as prophet, priest, and king, and through him the church shares in his victory by faith. The following diagram portrays this Israel-Christ-Church relationship.[20]



If this diagram is accurate, then the church in its entirety—by definition—is identified with Christ and lives out the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. As it does so, the church is preserved through faith in Christ. The church as a whole, despite its trials and temptations, remains faithful to the Lord and will finish its prophetic, priestly, and kingly task because of its union with Christ within the new covenant. Since Christ is our great Prophet, Priest, and King, all those in covenant with him in the new covenant era share in this identity and mission. This is not to diminish the difficulty the church faces while it is the church militant, nor is it to deny the need for Christ's discipline of his church (see Rev 2:1–3:22). But it is to say that Christ will ultimately and finally preserve his church—that is to say, all the members of the new covenant without exception.

From a practical standpoint, this ecclesiology entails that Christians should not baptize and admit into the membership of their churches those who make no profession of faith. Due to the shortcomings of human knowledge at this juncture in redemptive history (see 1 Cor 13:12), churches sometimes err in baptizing and receiving those into membership who do not truly belong to Christ. Indeed, sometimes those who appeared to be Christians fall away and definitively reject the faith. Still, in such cases, they were never members of the new covenant—they did not belong to the "two witnesses" with its prophetic-priestly-kingly identity and mission, and they will hear Jesus' eschatological denouncement, "I never knew you" (Matt 7:23). Hence, this is fundamentally different from CT since adherents of CT, committed to paedobaptism, knowingly baptize and admit into covenant membership those who do not profess faith in Christ. A better ecclesiological way forward in the inaugurated new covenant era will seek to align the visible (baptism and church membership) with the invisible (circumcision of the heart and faith). This approach better accounts for the way in which Christ brings redemptive-historical fulfillment to his people, and it better highlights the church's identity and mission as prophets, priests, and kings through Christ.[21]

20. For a defense of this biblical-theological ecclesiology, see Brent E. Parker, "The Israel-Christ-Church Relationship," in *Progressive Covenantalism*, ed. Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E. Parker (Nashville, B&H, 2016), 39–68.

21. For a more detailed systematic-theological exposition of new covenant ecclesiology, see Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 683–703.

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The Fulfillment of the Land Promise in the Epistle to the Hebrews: A Critique of Dispensationalism

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Abstract: Dispensationalism argues that the New Testament does not overturn the unconditional land promise made to Abraham and his offspring, therefore the land promise must be fulfilled to national Israel in the millennium. This paper argues that the dispensational view of the fulfillment of the land promise is inconsistent with the theology of the epistle to the Hebrews. Hebrews indicates that the land promise to Abraham is fulfilled typologically in the heavenly realm that Christ entered at his ascension but awaits consummation in the new creation when heaven and earth are united forever. Now that Christ has entered the heavenly realm, if he were to restore the territorial land to national Israel, it would be a move backwards from substance to shadow and from a superior inheritance to inferior inheritance.

Introduction

Among the disagreements between dispensational and covenant theological systems,[1] the fulfillment of the land promise stands out as one of the most prominent points of contention.[2] How we interpret the fulfillment of the land promise within the scope of redemptive history depends on our fundamental hermeneutical assumptions. While covenant theology (and its varieties) and progressive dispensationalists both affirm that the Bible presents a unified story of redemption where God redeems his people in one way—by grace alone through faith alone—dispensationalism in all of its forms is a theological system characterized by the belief that the unfulfilled Old Testament promises to Israel must still be fulfilled to Israel.[3] According to John Feinberg, even

1. By "covenant theological systems," I intend to include classic covenantal theology associated with the Westminster Confession, 1689 Federalism, Progressive Covenantalism, and New Covenant Theology.

2. Cockerill notes the importance of the land promise as it relates to the Abrahamic covenant: The land-theme in Scripture gives, as Cockerill says, "substance and shape to the entire complex of Abrahamic promises." It is like a "basket that holds the other promises until final fulfillment." Gareth Lee Cockerill, "From Deuteronomy to Hebrews: The Promised Land and the Unity of Scripture," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 24, no. 1 (2020): 84.

3. According to John Feinberg, "If an OT prophecy or promise is made unconditionally to a given people and is still unfulfilled to them even in the NT era, then the prophecy must still be fulfilled

if the New Testament applies an Old Testament unconditional prophecy to the church, it must be still be fulfilled to national Israel at some point yet future.[4]

The land promise in the Abrahamic covenant is, according to dispensationalism, one of the unconditional promises that awaits a future fulfillment. Since the New Testament does not explicitly or implicitly overturn the unconditional promises to Israel, we should expect a historical and territorial fulfillment of the land promise to Israel in the future.[5] God unconditionally promised Abraham and his offspring the land of Canaan, therefore, God will give this territory to Israel in the millennial kingdom. Even if some dispensationalists were to grant that the land promise has a spiritual fulfillment with Christ's ascension to heaven and a typological fulfillment in the new creation, the land promise, they argue, must also be literally fulfilled to national Israel.[6] Bruce Ware's position, however, seems representative of the dispensational perspective on the land promise when he writes that it is incorrect to say that the political and territorial aspects of the new covenant are "fulfilled in some spiritual manner in the church."[7] While some Old Testament promises have a double fulfillment—first to the church then to ethnic Israel in the future—the land promise, according to Ware, is not one of them. The future fulfillment of the land promise to a restored national Israel is essential to dispensationalism.

Argument

The purpose of this paper is to critique dispensationalism's belief that the land promise made to Abraham still awaits a historical future fulfillment to national Israel. Granted, a thorough critique would require an exhaustive analysis of the land theme in the canon of Scripture while also addressing the hermeneutical issues involved in

to them." Feinberg, "Systems of Discontinuity," in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Wheaton, 1988), 76. Darrell Bock similarly writes, "It is crucial to understand that promises made to Israel are to be fulfilled by Israel and not in something reconstituted to take its place." Bock, "The Reign of The Lord Christ," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 392.

4. Feinberg writes, "While a prophecy given unconditionally to Israel has a fulfillment for the church if the NT *applies* it to the church, it must also be fulfilled to Israel. Progress of revelation cannot cancel unconditional promises." Feinberg, "Systems of Discontinuity," 76.

5. Feinberg, "Systems of Discontinuity," 76.

6. Feinberg suggests in "Systems of Discontinuity" that Scripture uses four different senses when referring to terms to describe Israel: (1) biological, ethnic, national; (2) political; (3) spiritual; and (4) typological (76). A distinctive of dispensational thinking, according to Feinberg, is that all of these senses are "operative in both Testaments" and "no sense (spiritual especially) is more important than any other, and no sense cancels out the meaning and implications of the other senses" (73).

7. Bruce A. Ware, "The New Covenant and the People(s) of God," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 93. He also writes, "Only the spiritual aspects of the new-covenant promise are now inaugurated in this age; the territorial and political aspects, though part of God's new-covenant promise, await future fulfillment" (94–95).

the debate. Oren Martin's book *Bound for the Promised Land* is an excellent example of such a study.[8] The aim of this paper is smaller in scope and more nuanced. Using Hebrews 11:8–10 as a launching point into the theology of the rest of the epistle, I will argue that dispensationalism's belief that national Israel will receive the biblical land of Canaan in fulfillment of the unconditional promise made to Abraham is inconsistent with the argument of Hebrews.[9]

To defend this thesis, I will first evaluate Hebrews' inheritance motif and use **οἰκουμένη** as they pertain to the land promise. Second, I will consider the epistle's cosmological argument to demonstrate that Christ's heavenly session is not merely a spiritual fulfillment of the land promise while we still await the literal fulfillment to national Israel. Instead, Christ's heavenly session in the "world to come" is the typological fulfillment of the land promise that awaits the not-yet consummation in a new creation. Third, I will demonstrate that the exhortation to enter God's rest in Hebrews 3:1–4:16 precludes the possibility of a future restoration of national Israel to the land because the exhortation is built on the typological connection between Jesus and Joshua and the land and the heavenly realm of God's rest. To restore Israel to the land not only makes Jesus repeat the work of the first Joshua, but it also requires him to leave the true heavenly homeland and ultimate place of rest to return the land where rest was only temporarily typified.

Inheritance and οἰκουμένη in the Argument of Hebrews

Inheritance of a Better Country

Hebrews 11:8 says that Abraham obeyed when God called him to go out to a "place" (**τόπος**) that he would soon receive as an "inheritance" (**κληρονομία**). That place of Abraham's inheritance was the "land of promise" (Heb. 11:9), a clear reference to Canaan. These indirect references to Canaan—"place" and Land of promise"—do not, however, imply that Abraham must still receive this particular land as an inheritance during the millennium. Abraham lived in Canaan as in a "foreign land" (Heb. 11:9), wandering around in tents because he was looking for a city with foundations whose designer and builder is God (Heb. 11:10). Abraham and the rest of the patriarchs did not want Canaan, but a "better country, that is a heavenly one" (Heb. 11:16).

8. Oren Martin, *Bound for the Promised Land: The Land Promise in God's Redemptive Plan*, New Studies in Biblical Theology, ed. D. A. Carson, vol. 34 (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2015). For Martin's shorter treatment of the land promise in redemptive history, see Oren R. Martin, "The Land Promise Biblically and Theologically Understood," in *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course Between Dispensational and Covenantal Theologies*, ed. Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E. Parker (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 255–74.

9. Nelson Hsieh admits that Hebrews 11:8–16 (among others) is a text that dispensationalists "have largely ignored." Nelson S. Hsieh, "Matthew 5:5 and the Old Testament Land Promises: An Inheritance of the Earth, or the Land of Israel?" *The Master's Seminary Journal* 28, no. 1 (2017): 74.

Dispensationalists affirm that the object of Abraham's hope in Hebrews 11:9–10 is the heavenly Jerusalem that will one day come from heaven to earth—a "city which is to come" (Heb. 13:14; compare with Heb. 2:5). In his book, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, Robert Saucy writes, "To describe Jerusalem and the country as heavenly is simply to speak of them in their final eternal state, which is a result of God's salvation."[10] For Saucy, this final eternal state is his way of referring to the new creation.[11] He believes that the "city" and "heavenly" country of Hebrews 11:8–16 corresponds to the eternal state of a new heavens and new earth in the prophetic literature.[12] Saucy, however, argues that the "final goal of such a 'heavenly' land … does not negate the prophecies of a historical restoration of the nation of Israel to the land before the final regenerative action."[13] In what follows in this section, I will argue that Saucy's claim about the heavenly land not negating the possibility of a historical restoration of Israel to the land is inconsistent with Hebrews' inheritance motif and its relationship to the "world to come" that Christ entered at his ascension. In other words, taken together, these two themes—inheritance and "world to come"—are best understood as an inaugurated fulfillment of the land promise that awaits consummation in the new creation as the next stage of God's plan of redemption.

Through an extensive analysis of the inheritance theme in Hebrews, Dana Harris has demonstrated that Hebrews uses inheritance language to connect the believer's future salvation to the promises of the Abrahamic covenant. In her words,

> The inheritance motif in Hebrews must be understood in terms of the Abrahamic promises, which became interwoven with a rich cluster of related themes, such as covenant, the tabernacle, and God's holy mountain… Moreover, inheritance is an inherently future-oriented concept, which is

10. Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface Between Dispensational and Non-Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 55.

11. Saucy quotes Edward Lohse who says, "On the one hand Jerusalem at the end of the days is the city of David built again with glory and magnificence. On the other the new Jerusalem is thought of as a pre-existent city which is built by God in heaven and which comes down to earth with the dawn of a new world." The dawn of the new world when heaven and earth meet is what Saucy refers to as the final state. See Saucy, *Case for Progressive Dispensationalism,* 54. Blaising takes the same view arguing that "Abraham's search for a heavenly city is to be understood as his seeking not a heavenly *land* as opposed to an earthly one, but a *city* that will come from heaven to the land of promise." Craig Blaising, "Biblical Hermeneutics: How Are We to Interpret the Relation Between the Tanak and the New Testament on This Question?" in *The New Christian Zionism: Fresh Perspectives on Israel and The Land*, ed. Gerald R. McDermott (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2016), 86. When this city comes from heaven to earth, the land is, according to Blaising, "secured as an everlasting possession!" Blaising, "Biblical Hermeneutics," 87.

12. Saucy, *Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 55–56.

13. Saucy, *Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 55. Saucy also says that the references to the final country and city in the book of Hebrews, "do not negate the reality of the historical before their ultimate arrival" (56).

> indicated by the several typological trajectories, such as the Sabbath rest and God's presence in Zion, that are developed significantly with the OT.[14]

Harris rightly understands Hebrews' inheritance motif against the backdrop of the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant. God promised to give Abraham and his offspring the inheritance of the land of Canaan (Gen. 12:7; 13:5; 17:8). The Old Testament frequently refers to the land of Canaan as Israel's "inheritance" (Exod. 32:13; Num. 33:54; 34:2, 13; Deut. 4:21, 38; 12:9–10; 15:4; 19:10, 14; 21:23; 24:4; 26:1; 1 Chron. 16:18). The author of Hebrews certainly has the land promise in mind as one of the "rich cluster of themes" related to his inheritance motif because he specifically referred to the land of promise as Abraham's "inheritance" (**κληρονομία**) in Hebrews 11:8.

As already noted, the author's point in Hebrews 11:8–10 is not to suggest that the biblical land promise awaits a future fulfillment to national Israel. Instead, Abraham looked beyond the land of Canaan to a city with foundations. This city with foundations is the better country (Heb. 11:16), the heavenly homeland (Heb. 11:14–16), the world to come (Heb. 2:5), and the unshakeable kingdom where God's people experience lasting rest (Heb. 12:28, compare with Heb. 4:11). Each of these images depicts the believer's inheritance as permanent and enduring—what Hebrews 9:15 refers to as the "promised eternal inheritance." The land that God promised to Abraham and his offspring forever (Gen. 13:15; Exod. 32:13) pointed beyond itself to a better possession and an abiding one (Heb. 10:34).

Craig Blaising brings together the permanent nature of the inheritance motif in Hebrews and the dispensational belief in the restoration of ethnic Israel to the land by arguing that the permanent "city to come" in Hebrews descends to the land of promise (after the millennium) and thus secures for Israel the territorial land as an "everlasting possession."[15] Blaising's interpretation of Abraham's hope in a heavenly city implies that Israel's identity and possession of the land during the millennium carries forward into the new creation since they secure the land as an everlasting inheritance. Darrell Bock also seems to suggest that the eternal consummate state retains the millennial distinction between the restored Israel in the land and the gentile nations:

> In fact, consummation ultimately unifies heaven and earth, so that the fulfillment occurs throughout the entire creation…Days are coming when Jesus will consummate the promise with earthly rule and vindication. Both of the hopes of present believers and the promises made to Israel come to fruition then.[16]

14. Dana M. Harris, "The Eternal Inheritance in Hebrews: The Appropriation of the Old Testament Inheritance Motif by the Author of Hebrews" (PhD diss. Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2009), iv–v.

15. Blaising, "Biblical Hermeneutics" 86–87.

16. Bock, "Reign of The Lord Christ," 63. I am interpreting Bock's statement about a unified

The problem with limiting the heavenly city to the geographical borders of the biblical land of Canaan in order to preserve the land promise for national Israel is that the permanent heavenly city is an inheritance that belongs to all of God's people, not just national Israel. Hebrews will simply not allow us to associate the fulfillment of the land promise with the restoration of Israel because the inheritance of the Abrahamic promises (including the land promise) is for every believer in Christ—the "offspring of Abraham" (Heb. 2:16).

Even if some would counter that the prophets anticipated a day when gentiles would worship with restored Israel from an earthly Zion, Hebrews clearly does not limit the hope of gentiles to participation in Israel's worship in Israel's land. Abraham's inheritance actually belongs to all of God's people (including gentiles) as their inheritance. (Heb. 1:14; 2:5; 9:15; 13:14).[17] The author of Hebrews carefully crafted his description of Abraham's understanding of the land promise in order to draw his readers into Abraham's experience. He wanted his readers to identify with Abraham's hope in a future city to encourage them to remain faithful to the end. The term **μέλλω** used to describe Abraham's inheritance in Hebrews 11:8 appears often in Hebrews in contexts pertaining to eschatological salvation. Jesus presently reigns from the world "to come" (**μέλλω**, Heb. 2:5); new covenant Christians have tasted the powers of the age "to come" (**μέλλω**, Heb. 6:5); the law is a shadow of the good things "to come" (**μέλλω**, Heb. 10:1); God's eschatological wrath is "about to" (**μέλλω**) consume God's adversaries (Heb. 10:27); the city that believers will receive is the "city that is to come" (**μέλλω**, Heb. 13:14). Hebrews 11:8 most closely parallels Hebrews 1:14 where the author describes angels as those sent out to serve "those who are about to inherit salvation" (τοὺς μέλλοντας κληρονομεῖν σωτηρίαν).

The point is that Abraham desired the same eschatological salvation that new covenant believers stand to inherit. The author holds up Abraham not just as an exemplar of persevering faith, but as an example of an Old Testament saint who persevered while waiting for the same inheritance that new covenant believers will receive. Bockmuehl says that Hebrews presents "a continuous narrative timeline along which God's one pilgrim people undertake the same journey to the same goal by the same faith in the same life-giving God."[18] If the original readers of Hebrews

heaven and earth in the consummation as referring to the new creation. If Bock's distinction between the hopes of present believers and the promises made to Israel come to fruition in the consummate state, then these distinctions would remain in the new creation.

17. Gary M. Burge, *Whose Land? Whose Promise? What Christians Are Not Being Told about Israel and the Palestinians* (Cleveland: OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2013), 180.

18. Markus Bockmuehl, "Abraham's Faith in Hebrews 11," in *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology*, ed. Richard Bauckham, Trevor A. Hart, and Nathan MacDonald (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 369. Bockmuehl also writes, "Old and New Covenant saints *alike* are believers in an *anticipatory* sense; neither reaches their destination without the other just as both are equally part of the people of God (3:1; 11:40; 12:22–24; 13:14). The heavenly city and homeland which Abraham sees and greets from afar is clearly not just *analogous* but *identical* with the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem in 12:22" (369).

were on the verge of going back to old covenant forms of worship, then Abraham's example reminds them that even Old Testament saints were patiently waiting for the same inheritance that has now been secured by Christ.[19] The paraenetic function of Hebrews 11, and indeed the epistle as a whole, loses its theological force if there are territorial aspects of the new covenant promises that are applicable only to Israel and not the church.[20] Hebrews will not allow us to make such distinctions.

Every member of the new covenant should expect to receive the fullness of every blessing of the new covenant when Christ returns because Christ has already been appointed "heir of all things" (κληρονόμον πάντων) in fulfillment of Psalm 2:8. The nations are his heritage and the ends of the earth his possession (Ps. 2:8).[21] Jesus's present reign from heaven in fulfillment of the Davidic covenant and messianic psalms is not a spiritual fulfillment awaiting a national fulfillment in the millennial kingdom. His appointment as Davidic king is the inaugurated fulfillment that has ushered in the last days before the final consummation (Heb. 1:2).[22] Jesus's reign has already begun, and, as a result, the blessing of Abraham already extends to the ends of the earth apart from a national restoration of ethnic Israel. If Jesus has already been appointed the heir of all things including the ends of the earth, why should some of his new covenant people expect an inheritance that is smaller than what he has already won for all his people? Abraham's offspring (all believers) are "about to inherit" (τοὺς μέλλοντας κληρονομεῖν) everything Christ secured for them when he took his seat at the right hand of God (Heb. 1:13–14). All members of the new

19. According to Ardel Caneday, "Thus, from the vantage point of fulfillment we, 'on whom the ends of the ages have come,' see more clearly than OT saints did concerning how all the heavenly good things to come with Messiah were shadowed on earth among the patriarchs while prophetically presaging those good things 'so that only together with us would they be made perfect' (Heb 11:40 NIV)." Caneday, "God's Parabolic Design for Israel's Tabernacle: A Cluster of Earthly Shadows of Heavenly Realities," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 24, no. 1 (2020): 106.

20. As already noted, Bruce Ware argues that even though Israel and the church both participate in the new covenant, their identities remain separate and distinct. Thus, "Israel is given territorial and political aspects of the new-covenant promise not applicable to the church." Ware, "New Covenant," 96–97.

21. The Pentateuch regularly referred to the land of Canaan as Israel's "inheritance" (Exod. 32:13; Num. 33:54; 34:2, 13; Deut. 4:21, 38; 12:9–10; 15:4; 19:10, 14; 21:23; 24:4; 26:1) and "possession" (Gen. 17:8; 48:4; Lev. 14:34; Numb. 32:32; Deut. 32:49), but in Psalm 2:8 the inheritance and possession of the land promise gets expanded to the ends of the earth. In Psalm 2, the Messiah rules from Zion, but his inheritance is not limited to the land of Israel. The nations are his "heritage" and the ends of the earth on his "possession." Dispensationalists argue that Old Testament passages like Psalm 2 indicate that the universal rule of the Messiah will coincide with Israel's restoration to the land. Saucy says that the universal blessing of the Abrahamic covenant is "concomitant and vitally related to the restoration of Israel according to the prophets." Saucy, *Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 52–53.

22. Hebrews 1 presents Jesus's enthronement in heaven as the fulfillment of multiple Davidic Old Testament passages. Jesus is presently seated at God's right hand in fulfillment of Psalm 110:1 (Heb. 1:3, 13). He is the Davidic "firstborn," the highest of the kings of the earth in fulfillment of Psalm 89:27 (Heb. 1:6). He is the Davidic Son promised in 2 Samuel 7:14 (Heb. 1:5) and the righteous king of Psalm 45 (Heb. 1:8–9).

covenant will receive Abraham's inheritance of a better country and unshakeable kingdom when heaven and earth are rolled up like a scroll to make way for the new creation (Heb. 1:10–14, compare with Heb. 12:28).

The οἰκουμένη as Eschatological Inheritance

The salvation that believers are about to inherit must be understood in relation to the meaning of **οἰκουμένη** in Hebrews 1:6 and 2:5. Ardel Caneday has persuasively argued that the **οἰκουμένη** of Hebrews 1:6 refers to "the habitable realm yet to come" where Christ has been enthroned at God's right hand.[23] The **οἰκουμένη** in Hebrews 1:6 is the same οἰκουμένην τὴν μέλλουσαν ("world to come") that has already been subjected to the reign of Christ (Heb. 2:5). The **οἰκουμένη** in Hebrews is not the earth that Christ entered as his incarnation nor the present world that will receive him at his *Parousia*. The **οἰκουμένη** over which Christ presently reigns is an eschatological world—a world already inhabited by Christ in heaven and coming to earth when Christ returns (compare with Heb. 9:28).

The author of Hebrews closely ties the **οἰκουμένη** to his theme of eschatological inheritance. The inheritance believers are "about to" (**μέλλω**, Heb. 1:14) receive is, in part, the world that is "about to come" (**μέλλω**, Heb. 2:5). This eschatological world belongs to the offspring of Abraham. The sentence structure of Hebrews 2:5 and 2:16 and their shared references to angels tethers the **οἰκουμένη** to the promises of the Abrahamic covenant:

> Hebrews 2:5a: Οὐ γὰρ ἀγγέλοις ὑπέταξεν τὴν οἰκουμένην τὴν μέλλουσαν
> *For he did not subject the world to come to angels*
> Hebrews 2:16: οὐ γὰρ δήπου ἀγγέλων ἐπιλαμβάνεται ἀλλὰ σπέρματος Ἀβραὰμ ἐπιλαμβάνεται
> *For surely, he did not come to help angels but the seed of Abraham he came to help*

Abraham's offspring will inherit this habitable eschatological world because God subjected it to human beings, not angels (Heb. 2:5), and Christ came to help the human offspring of Abraham, not angels (Heb. 2:16). Though believers wait for the fullness of their inheritance, they already participate in the world to come as those who have already come to the heavenly Jerusalem and share in Christ's reign (Heb. 12:22–24; compare with Eph. 2:5–6). David Moffit suggests that the **οἰκουμένη** in Hebrews is the "ultimate inheritance that God's people stand to gain if they hold

23. Ardel B. Caneday, "The Eschatological World Already Subjected to The Son: The Οἰκουμένη of Hebrews 1:6 and The Son's Enthronement," in *A Cloud of Witnesses: The Theology of Hebrews in Its Ancient Contexts*, Library of New Testament Studies (New York: Clark, 2008), 29.

fast to the word they heard about the Son."[24] The **οἰκουμένη** is, in his words, "the inheritance of the promised land *par excellence*."[25]

What it means for the **οἰκουμένη** to be the "promised land par excellence" will receive further clarification in the next section. For now, if Hebrews perceives Christ's heavenly session into the **οἰκουμένη** as the inaugurated fulfillment of the land promise, then we should not view the territorial aspect of the land promise as a future-future reality—restoration of Israel to the land (historical fulfillment) that carries forward into the new creation after the descent of the heavenly city to come (consummate fulfillment). Instead, the fulfillment of the land promise in Hebrews is an already-not yet reality. Christ has already entered the earthly land's true and heavenly counterpart when he entered the world to come. He has already begun his work of new creation (compare with 2 Cor. 5:17) and has obtained the rest intended for humanity at the beginning of creation (Heb. 4:3–4; compare with Gen. 2:1–3). Now that Christ has secured the "ultimate inheritance that God's people stand to gain," and has even already, in some sense, brought them to it to share in its new covenant blessings (Heb. 12:22; compare with Eph. 2:5–6), it makes no sense for him to give the less than ultimate inheritance to Israel—a land that Abraham himself did not want. In the logic of Hebrews, to return Israel to the land is a step backwards in redemptive history.

Turning now to a consideration of Hebrews cosmology, we must further clarify two related issues: First, does Hebrews present Christ's heavenly session as merely a spiritual fulfillment of the land promise without negating the physical fulfillment to national Israel? Second, does Hebrews leave open the possibility that Christ will leave the heavenly city in heaven to return to earth during the millennium before ushering in the new creation.

The Land Promise and the Cosmological Argument of Hebrews

Christ's Heavenly Session: Spiritual or Typological Fulfillment?

Cosmology, eschatology, and soteriology are all interconnected in the epistle's argument of the supremacy of Christ's salvation. Hebrews operates within an eschatological framework of two ages (this age and age to come) that correspond to

24. David M. Moffitt, "A New and Living Way: Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews" (Duke University, 2010), 100.

25. Moffitt, "New and Living Way," 101. Moffit has also demonstrated that the Greek Psalter occasionally uses **οἰκουμένη** to refer to heaven, the temple, and the promised land and how these same themes converge around the term **οἰκουμένη** in Hebrews. See pages 90–105.

two covenants (old and new),[26] which relate to two realms (earthly and heavenly).[27] The epistle's spatial dualism between heaven and earth is not a platonic or antithetical dualism,[28] but, as Edward Adams argues, a hierarchical one. That is, heaven is the better country, earth is the inferior realm. The heaven-earth duality is not oppositional because the earth is the place of Christ's incarnation (Heb. 2:5–10; 5:7–10), the location of his second coming (Heb. 9:28), and the final destination of God's people when the earth is transformed under the reign of Christ (Heb. 1:10–12; 12:28).[29] Even though Hebrews never explicitly mentions a new creation that will follow the destruction of the present heavens and earth (Heb. 1:10–12), we can infer that Hebrews envisions the final state to be an unshakeable new creation where heaven and earth are united forever.[30]

How does Hebrew's cosmology inform the debate over the fulfillment of the land promise? Could one argue that Christ's entry into the heavenly realm is a spiritual fulfillment of the land promise that does not negate a historical fulfillment to national Israel?[31] Hebrews will not allow us to speak of Christ's heavenly session as merely a spiritual fulfillment of Old Testament promises. Jesus entered into heaven with a resurrected body. The world to come over which Christ presently reigns is a world not subjected to angels, but to Christ as the one who has restored dominion to humanity in himself as the incarnate Son (compare with Heb. 2:5–9; Ps. 8). Upon his resurrection and ascension, the eternal Son of God was enthroned in heaven as the messianic incarnate Son in fulfillment of God's original intent for Adam, Israel, and

26. This does not deny that the author of Hebrews alludes to or assumes the other biblical covenants in the development of his argument.

27. See the discussions by Kenneth Schenck, *Understanding the Book of Hebrews: The Story Behind the Sermon* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 8–12; Caneday, "Eschatological World," 37. For a thorough treatment of eschatology and cosmology, see Kenneth L. Schenck, *Cosmology and Eschatology in Hebrews: The Settings of the Sacrifice*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 143 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). We should not limit Hebrews' use of "heavenly" language to spatial realities. The author's use of "heavenly" language has a spatial component but is also eschatological. God's rule has come in Christ and the powers of the age to come are presently at work through Christ's reign from heaven.

28. James W. Thompson argued that Hebrews presented a platonic worldview. See Thompson, *The Beginnings of Christian Philosophy: The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series 13 (Washington: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1982). For studies that refute a platonic interpretation of Hebrews, see Edward Adams, "The Cosmology of Hebrews," in *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology*, ed. Richard Bauckham et al. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans , 2009), 122–39; Lincoln D. Hurst, "Eschatology and 'Platonism' in the Epistle to the Hebrews," *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* 23 (1984): 41–74; Lincoln D. Hurst, "How 'Platonic' Are Heb 8:5 and Heb 9:23f," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 34, no. 1 (1983): 156–68.

29. Adams, "Cosmology of Hebrews," 134.

30. Adams, "Cosmology of Hebrews," 135–38.

31. As mentioned earlier, Ware argues that the territorial aspects of the new covenant have not been inaugurated in a spiritual manner but await a future fulfillment. Nevertheless, it is important to address the spiritual versus literal distinction that is often used by dispensationalists to articulate their view of the fulfillment of Old Testament promises as they pertain to Israel and the Church.

the Davidic messiah.[32] Dominion has been restored to a human Son who mediates God's rule as the perfect expression of the image of God in man. Though deceased saints presently dwell in the heavenly realm as "spirits" (Heb. 12:23), Hebrews 2:5–9 implies that they will inhabit the world to come in the new creation when the "present" (**νῦν**, Heb. 2:8) age gives way to the eternal state. Christ is at present crowned with the "glory and honor" (*δόξῃ καὶ τιμῇ*) that belonged to humanity at creation (Heb. 2:7; compare with LXX Ps. 8:6) because he tasted death for everyone. Through Christ, God brings many sons to "glory" (**δόξα**, Heb. 2:10), conforming them to Christ's image. One day death will be subjected to them as they share in Christ's reign over a new creation (compare with Heb. 2:8–9).[33]

The **οἰκουμένη**, as the location of the incarnate and risen Son's enthronement, is not merely a spiritual realm in contrast to a material world, but, as Moffit argues, a habitable world fit for human beings.[34] Based on his analysis of **οἰκουμένη** in the Greek Psalter and its influence on Hebrews, Moffit rejects a material-spiritual dualism in Hebrews:

> In these psalms the references to the **οἰκουμένη** well accord with a cosmology that views the earth as the realm of humanity and the heavens as the realm of God. A vertical and spatial cosmological stratification is evident, but this does not necessarily imply a material/spiritual dualism…The evidence from these psalms suggests that the realm where God dwells is to be understood as the realm that God promised to give to his people. As such, this is a place intended for human habitation (compare with Heb 2:5).[35]

Moffit is correct that the cosmological dualism in Hebrews is not a material/spiritual dualism. It is, rather, hierarchical and typological. Caneday has demonstrated that biblical typology has both a temporal-historical axis and a revelatory-spatial axis.[36] Biblical types are revelatory because they are earthly copies and shadows of heavenly

32. See R. B. Jamieson, *The Paradox of Sonship: Christology in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021).

33. Caneday says the world to come "will be subject to humans but only because the Son will restore its dominion to humans." Ardel B. Caneday, "Eschatological World," 34. Caneday also writes, "Thus, there is an implied continuity between the present world and the world to come. The present world, in which not all things have been put into subjection to humans, will yet be brought into subjection to them but not through their own labors but through Jesus' triumph over death, but not yet" (36).

34. Moffitt, "New and Living Way," 90.

35. Moffitt, "New and Living Way," 104. Moffit similarly writes, "Before turning to examine notions of the world to come in other Second Temple texts, I note further that while these Greek Psalter texts allow for a dichotomy between the shakable earth and the unshakable **οἰκουμένη**, the implicit cosmology seems to suggest that the earth is to be viewed as the realm of humanity, while the heavens are the realm of God and his hosts. The earth and its inhabitants are the things able to be shaken, while heaven remains stable. This plainly implies a distinction between heaven and earth, but the nature of that distinction is not obviously spiritual" (103).

36. Caneday, "God's Parabolic Design." 103–123.

realities.[37] For example, the heavenly tabernacle is superior to the earthly tabernacle because the heavenly tabernacle is the "model" (**τύπος**, Heb. 8:5) while the earthly tabernacle is the "copy" (**ἀντίτυπος**, Heb. 9:24) of its heavenly counterpart. Christ's entry into heaven is not an entry into a spiritual tabernacle, but into the "true" (**ἀληθινός**, Heb. 8:2; 9:24) tabernacle. Heavenly realities are "true," "greater" (**μέγας**), and "more perfect" (**τέλειος**, Heb. 9:11) than their earthly "copies" (**ὑπόδειγμα**, Heb. 8:5; 9:23) and "shadows" (**σκιά**, Heb. 8:5) because heavenly realities are original and enduring.[38]

The land of promise, as a biblical type, has both a temporal-historical axis and a revelatory-spatial axis. The land of Canaan is a type of Eden and the new creation (temporal-historical) because it is a type of the heavenly country where God dwells (revelatory-spatial). Under the administration of the old covenant, the land promised to Abraham and Israel is prophetic and predictive of the enduring new creation precisely because it is patterned after God's purpose in creation (Eden as God's abode on earth) and functions as an Old Testament shadow of a heavenly homeland (God's abode in heaven). Like the earthly tabernacle, the land of Canaan was a shadow of something greater; it was an earthly copy of the better heavenly country (Heb. 11:16). As a better priest, Jesus entered the true tabernacle, and as a better Joshua, Jesus passed through the heavens into the better promised land.[39]

Christ's heavenly session is, thus, not merely a spiritual fulfillment of the land promise, but, for the author of Hebrews, a historical, typological, and inaugurated fulfillment. The land of promise was a type of the world to come. Abraham seems to have known that the land he was to receive as his inheritance pointed beyond itself to the heavenly realm of God's habitation that would one day come to earth (Heb. 11:8–10). Canaan was, after all, the place where Abraham built altars and where God met with Abraham and the patriarchs on earth (Gen. 12:7–8; 13:4; 13:18; 22:9; 26:25; 33:20; 35:1, 3, 7). In the storyline of Scripture, Canaan looks back to Eden and forward to the new creation because the land of Canaan was type of the realm that God inhabits, namely heaven itself. O. Palmer Robertson's comments on this point are worth quoting at length,

> According to the writer to the Hebrews, Abraham and the patriarchs longed for a 'better country – a *heavenly* one' (11:16, my emphasis). They understood,

37. Caneday, "God's Parabolic Design."119.

38. Caneday writes, "Thus, it is the spatial axis that has priority over the temporal axis because the heavenly original imbues the earthly copy or shadow with symbolic representation which serves as God's earthly habitation both for the Israelites to whom the earthly tabernacle was given but also for the instruction of all on whom the ends of the ages have come with the presence of Messiah. So, it is the revelatory spatial axis that infuses the temporal axis with meaningful significance of prophetic anticipation to foreshadow the latter days of fulfillment when Messiah would emerge from the heavenly tabernacle and come to the earthly one to put an end to sacrifices and open fully the way of access to God." Caneday, "God's Parabolic Design." 109.

39. See my discussion below of the typological connection between Joshua and Jesus.

> though only dimly, that the land promised them actually had its origins in the heavenly, eternal reality that yet remained before them. As a consequence, it is unthinkable that once the people of God have tasted of these eternal, heavenly realities they should somehow be thrust back into living with the old-covenant forms that could only foreshadow the realities of new-covenant fulfilments. Instead of moving toward a worship centre localized in modern-day Jerusalem, the new-covenant believer joins with the angels to worship at the 'heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God' (12:22).[40]

If the land promise had its origin in the heavenly reality, then it is not accurate to suggest that the land promise has no inaugurated fulfillment in Christ's heavenly session, nor is it accurate to speak of Christ's entry into the **οἰκουμένη** as a spiritual fulfillment of the land promise. The **οἰκουμένη** is the heavenly original; the earthly land is the shadow. The **οἰκουμένη** is a world fit for embodied human beings and indeed a world where the creation mandate has been fulfilled (Heb. 2:5–9).

"If He Were on Earth, He Would Not Be a Priest at All"

The discussion above challenges the belief in a millennial kingdom that is historically prior to the descent of the heavenly city in the new creation. As mentioned above, Saucy and Blaising both agree that the "city to come" in Hebrews is the heavenly city that descends to the new earth for an everlasting possession in the new creation.[41] Before the descent of the heavenly city and the inauguration of the new creation, Jesus will first return to earth to reign for a thousand years from Jerusalem. Separating the return of Christ from the descent of the heavenly city raises a question for dispensational and other premillennial views: Can Jesus leave heaven to return to earth without bringing heaven with him? More specifically, is it consistent with the argument of Hebrews to divide Christ's new covenant priestly mediation from his location in heavenly realm and true tabernacle? If we suggest that Jesus will leave the heavenly tabernacle in heaven to return to an earthly Jerusalem, have we torn asunder what God has joined together?

Hebrews closely ties Jesus's heavenly session to his priestly work of new covenant mediation. Hebrews 8:1–2 summarizes the argument of the entire epistle:

> Now this is the main point concerning the things we have been saying: We have such a high priest who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the

40. O. Palmer Robertson, "A New-Covenant Perspective on the Land," in *The Land of Promise: Biblical, Theological and Contemporary Perspectives* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 123.

41. Blaising, "Biblical Hermeneutics," 86. He also writes, "Since this is the city 'that is to come' (Heb. 13:14), it is better to interpret Abraham's sojourn as anticipating the establishment in the land of that permanent city. That would certainly establish his hope for an everlasting in heritance 'in the land he had been promised' (Heb. 11:9)" (86n11).

> Majesty in heaven, a minister in the holy places and the true tent which the Lord built, not man.

Christ's priestly work in the new covenant is superior, in part, because he has entered the true sanctuary in heaven. Hebrews 8:4 builds on the logic of 8:1–2 arguing that if Christ "were on earth, he would not be a priest at all because there are those who offer gifts according to the law." In other words, the old covenant law established the Levites as priests to minister in the earthly sanctuary. The Levites served in the copy and shadow of the heavenly things because God instructed Moses to make the earthly sanctuary after the model of the heavenly tabernacle (Heb. 8:4–5).[42] Now that Christ has ascended to the true tent, he has been vindicated as a better priest mediating the better blessings of a better covenant which is enacted on better promises (Heb. 8:6, compare with Heb. 7:20–27). Adams comments, "It is only in heaven that he can perform his role as high priest. In this regard, the earthly sphere is inferior to the heavenly realm."[43] Jesus did not qualify to serve as a priest of the old covenant because he was not from the tribe of Levi. He has qualified for a better priesthood, however, on the basis of his perfect sacrifice and resurrection from the dead—what Hebrews calls an "indestructible life" (Heb. 7:16). He has entered the better tent making the old covenant and its priesthood obsolete. If he were dwelling in the earthly realm of impermanent shadows under the administration of the old covenant, he would not be a priest at all.[44]

In Hebrews, the earth is associated with the old covenant, while heaven is associated with the new covenant. According to Caneday, "The first covenant entails the world of earthly *shadows* or *copies*. The New Covenant entails the world of

42. Tom Schreiner suggests that the NIV most clearly captures the meaning of Hebrews 8:5: "They serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven." The word "sanctuary" is absent in the Greek, but, according to Schreiner, "It is clearly implied by the reference to Exod 25:40 and by the flow of the argument." Thomas R. Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 244.

43. Adams, "Cosmology of Hebrews," 133.

44. Against Moffit, I am not suggesting that Jesus had no priestly ministry during his earthly career. David M. Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Supplements to Novum Testamentum 141 (Boston: Brill, 2011), 198–99. I favor the view that Hebrews presents Jesus's earthly ministry as a priestly ministry, but he is formally installed into the office of the permanent Melchizedekian priesthood after his resurrection and ascension. Christopher Richardson writes, "The epistle carefully distinguishes Jesus' high priesthood on earth from his eternal service in heaven; and, while he recapitulates the actions of the Day of Atonement, insofar as the slaying of the victim was followed by the high priest's entrance into the Most Holy Place . . . his actions are both distinct *and analogous* to those performed by former high priests, revealing the author's concern to illustrate continuity and discontinuity in redemptive history." Richardson, *Pioneer and Perfecter of Faith: Jesus' Faith as the Climax of Israel's History in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament II 338 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 32–33. Koester thinks that there is no clear indication in Hebrews on when Christ became a high priest. Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with Commentary*, Anchor Bible 36 (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 109–10.

heavenly things or *true things*, that is, *original things*, things unshakeable."[45] The copies and earthly shadows are, like the earth, passing away (Heb. 8:13). Hebrews 8:13 twice refers to the old covenant as **παλαιόω** (obsolete). The term **παλαιόω** is the same word the author used in Hebrews 1 to describe the temporariness of the present earth in comparison to the eternality of the Son, "They will perish, but you remain; they all will wear out (**παλαιόω**) like a garment" (Heb. 1:11). The heavenly realm, however, is associated with the new covenant and what is permanent and lasting. The people of God are "strangers and exiles on the earth" (Heb. 11:13) because their true and abiding abode is the habitable world to come (**οἰκουμένη**) where Christ took his seat in fulfillment of Psalm 110:1 and Psalm 8.[46] The "things that cannot be shaken" are new covenant blessings and heavenly realities. The "things that have been made" (Heb. 12:27), on the other hand, will be shaken and removed (Heb. 12:27). The earth will be rolled up like a scroll, it will perish and change (Heb. 1:11–12). Only the heavenly world to come associated with the new covenant blessings and Christ's permanent priesthood will endure forever.

To suggest that Christ will come a second time without bringing heaven with him seems to tear apart what God has inseparably bound together. If the land must be given to national Israel before heaven comes to earth, then Jesus leaves behind the true tent, the archetypal sanctuary, the heavenly Jerusalem, and city of the living God to come to an earthly Jerusalem where he would continue to mediate the blessings of the new covenant to sinful people without occupying the sacred space of the heavenly tabernacle. Contrary to dispensational and other premillennial views, Hebrews implies that Christ's return to earth will coincide with the descent of the heavenly city and the new creation. "Yet once more" God will shake the heavens and the earth (Heb. 12:26–27) because the next stage of God's redemptive plan is to give his people the unshakeable kingdom in a new creation. Hebrews 10:12–13 indicates that Christ's second coming will coincide with the eschatological judgment. Jesus took his seat in heaven "waiting from then on until his enemies be made a footstool for his feet" (Heb. 10:13). Jesus will remain in heaven until the final judgment when his enemies are all finally made his footstool. At his coming, he will not continue to call people to himself and mediate the blessings of the new covenant during an earthly millennial "intermediate transitional stage" of his kingdom while sinful people continue to rebel against his commands and the heavenly tabernacle remains in heaven.[47] Instead, he will make all of his enemies his footstool and save those who are eagerly waiting for him (Heb. 9:28). At his coming, they will receive the

45. Caneday, "Eschatological World," 37.

46. Caneday, "Eschatological World," 35.

47. David Turner refers to the millennium as an "intermediate transitional stage" characterized by the continuing presence of sinners who form the rebellion described in Revelation 20:7–9. David L. Turner, "The New Jerusalem in Revelation 21:1–22:5: Consummation of a Biblical Continuum," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 291.

salvation they stand to inherit, which is nothing less than life in a heavenly country, the city of the living God, the promised eternal inheritance. To leave heaven behind to return to the earthly Jerusalem is to move from better to worse, from superior to inferior, from substance to shadow. When Christ returns a second time, the "world to come," in which believers presently participate, will come with him in the fullness of the new creation.

The Land Promise and Entering God's Rest

David Allen and Matthew Thiessen have both demonstrated that Hebrews uses descriptions of Israel's wilderness wandering to portray its audience as on the verge of entering the promised land.[48] Like Israel at Kadesh Barnea, believers now find themselves on the edge of their heavenly homeland about to enter God's rest. Allen likens the sermonic style of Hebrews to the paraenetic purpose of Deuteronomy. Both biblical books spur their audiences on to action and faithfulness and warn them of the dangers of rejecting God's covenant at a time when they are poised to enter their respective promised lands (Canaan and the heavenly realm).[49]

Hebrews 3:7-11 consists of a long quotation from Psalm 95:7–11 which describes Israel's perpetual unbelief and disobedience in the wilderness. While in the wilderness, they refused to enter the land of Canaan in obedience to God's command (Num. 13–14). As a result of their disobedience, God swore in his wrath that they would not enter his rest (Ps. 95:11; compare with Num. 14:30; Heb. 3:11). Hebrews, thus, warns its readers not to fall by the same sort of disobedience as the people of Israel (Heb. 4:11). As believers in Christ waiting to receive their inheritance, they must persevere in faith to enter the place of ultimate rest, namely heaven itself (4:1, 11, 14).

Even the Israelites that entered the land of Canaan under Joshua did not obtain ultimate rest: "For if Joshua had given them rest, he would not have spoken of another day after these things" (Heb. 4:8). There remains, then, a sabbath rest for the people of God (Heb. 4:9). In Hebrews 4:8–14, the author makes a typological connection between Joshua and Jesus—both Joshua and Jesus are translations of the Greek **Ἰησοῦς** (Heb. 4:8; 14). The typological connection between Joshua and Jesus is more apparent in the flow of the argument if we juxtapose 4:8 with 4:14:

> For if Ἰησοῦς (Joshua) had given them rest, he would not have spoken of another day after these things…Therefore (οὖν) having a great high priest

48. David M. Allen, *Deuteronomy and Exhortation in Hebrews: A Study in Narrative Re-Presentation*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament II 238 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008); Matthew Thiessen, "Hebrews and the End of the Exodus," *Novum Testamentum* 49, no. 4 (2007): 353–69.

49. Allen, *Deuteronomy and Exhortation*, 156–98.

> who has passed through the heavens, Ἰησοῦν (Jesus) the Son of God, let us hold fast the confession." (4:8, 14)[50]

Joshua led the people over the border of the promised land but failed to give them lasting rest. Jesus, however, has "passed through" (διέρχομαι) heaven's borders obtaining rest for God's people in the realm that God inhabits.[51] The logic of the argument of Hebrews 4 depends, in part, on the typology between Joshua and Jesus and the typology between the promised land and heaven. The land that Joshua entered was not the true place of lasting rest. Though Psalm 132:13–14 identifies Jerusalem as the place of God's rest, the earthly Jerusalem (Zion) is a place of rest only because of its relationship to the heavenly Zion. The land and its earthly Jerusalem are a revelatory-spatial type of heaven and the heavenly Zion, the true realm of God's rest (compare with Isa. 66:1). Under the administration of the Old Covenant, the first Joshua led the people into the shadowy type of rest in the land of Canaan. Thus, the people of Israel never obtained permanent rest. The second Joshua, however, leads his people into the true promised land, the realm of permanent rest, namely heaven itself. As a better ἀρχηγός than Joshua (compare with Num. 13:2–3; Heb. 2:10; 12:2), Jesus completed the conquest of heaven on the basis of his cross, resurrection, and cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary (Heb. 9:12–14; 23–24).[52] He is the ἀρχηγός for his people—their "founder" (ESV), their "pioneer" (NRSV), their "captain" (KJV).[53] He has not only blazed a trail for them to follow but guarantees their safe arrival (compare with Heb. 4:14–16; 6:9). Even now he dispenses the blessings of the age to come, including rest, to those who have already come to Mount Zion and already participate in heavenly worship (Heb. 2:4; 4:14–16; 6:4–5; 12:22).[54] To abandon Christ for old covenant forms of worship is to forsake rest both now and into eternity.

If Jesus has already blazed a trail into the place of consummate rest, then why leave that world behind to restore Israel to the place where they did not receive lasting rest. Why would the second Joshua give Israel the same land the first Joshua already gave them if he has obtained a better and more permanent promised land? Why leave heaven to retrace his steps back to the land that Joshua already conquered

50. On the typology between Joshua and Jesus, see Richard Ounsworth, *Joshua Typology in the New Testament*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament 328 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012); Bryan J. Whitfield, "A Cloud of Witnesses: The Theology of Hebrews in Its Ancient Contexts," in *Pioneer and Perfecter: Joshua Traditions and the Christology of Hebrews*, ed. Richard Bauckham et al., Library of New Testament Studies 387 (New York: T & T Clark, 2008), 80–87; Bryan J. Whitfield, *Joshua Traditions and the Argument of Hebrews 3 and 4* (Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2013).

51. The verb διέρχομαι appears 13 times in Joshua almost always in contexts describing the boundaries of the Promised Land. It also appears in Psalm 66:6 [LXX 65:6], which references Israel's passage through the Jordan River before occupying the land (compare with Josh. 3:14–17).

52. Joshua is among the ἀρχηγοί sent out to spy the land in Numbers 13.

53. See George Johnston, "Christ as Archegos," *New Testament Studies* 27, no. 3 (April 1981): 381–85.

54. Moffitt, "New and Living Way," 104n80.

in fulfillment of God's promises (Josh. 21:43–45)? If the land promise still awaits a territorial fulfillment to national Israel, then we must conclude that Jesus, in a real sense, will repeat the work of the first Joshua all over again. In the progress of redemptive history, we cannot move backwards from substance of the second Joshua's heavenly realm and rest to its earthly shadow. Entrance into God's rest is, as Gareth Cockerill observes, a present experience for God's people.[55] "By persevering in faithful obedience 'We' (inclusive of author and hearers) are in the process of entering that ultimate rest."[56] Hebrews will not allow us to interrupt the journey of those who are entering permanent and ultimate rest to detour back through the land where rest is fleeting.

Conclusion

The lack of any mention of a restored Israel to the land is striking given the parenetic purpose of Hebrews. If the epistle to the Hebrews is written to Hebrew Christians, why not encourage them with the fact that God still has a plan for restoring national Israel? Why not remind them that God will give them the land of promise yet again? At the critical point where the author appeals to Abraham's faith in the land promise (Heb. 11:8–10), why does he dismiss the biblical land of Canaan entirely and instead point them to the heavenly city that belongs to all of God's people? Why is the entire epistle entirely void of a single reference to God's plan to restore his people back to the land under the reign of the Messiah? Is it not because in these last days, the next stage of fulfillment is not the restoration of Israel to the land, but the descent of the heavenly Zion to earth so that the city with foundations might be the believer's eternal rest forever? Is it not because the biblical land of Canaan was part of the shadow of the Old Testament era pointing to a greater and more permanent resting place for the people of God? Is it not because Israel and the church do not retain two separate and distinct identities under the new covenant, but are all the offspring of Abraham (Heb. 2:16) that will receive the fullness of the same inheritance? Hebrews simply never encourages Jewish believers to persevere by grounding their hope in a restoration of national Israel.[57]

Dispensationalism claims that no New Testament material negates the fulfillment of the land promise to national Israel in the future. This paper has tried to demonstrate otherwise by appealing to the theology of Hebrews. Cockerill's statement that "Hebrews has no interest in ethnic Israel inhabiting Palestine," resonates with

55. Note the present tense of **εἰσέρχομαι** in Hebrews 4:3.

56. Cockerill, "Deuteronomy to Hebrews," 89.

57. Under intense persecution, the original readers joyfully accepted the plundering of their property because they knew they were on the verge of obtaining a "better possession" (κρείττονα ὕπαρξιν) and "abiding" (**μένω**) one (Heb. 10:34). Therefore, the author exhorted them to endure knowing the coming one will not delay, and they will receive what was promised (Heb. 10:36–37).

the evidence presented here.[58] Yet I have gone a step further arguing that not only does Hebrews have "no interest" in ethnic Israel inhabiting Palestine, but that it is actually contrary to the theology of Hebrews to suggest that Israel must be restored to the land in a millennial kingdom in fulfillment of Old Testament promises. To be biblical is not to adopt a hermeneutic that neither Abraham nor the apostles were able to bear. Hebrews envisions God's one pilgrim people on the border of their heavenly country. They have already come in Christ to the city of the living God and tasted the powers of the age to come. They must, nevertheless, persevere in faith like Abraham and the saints of old as they journey towards Abraham's inheritance and theirs in the city with foundations. When Christ entered the world to come, he secured the guarantee of their inheritance until they obtain possession of it. He acquired the better and more permanent promised land for his people. There is now no going back to the shadow. He has obtained the true realm of God's abode as the place where God's people will experience rest forever. When he comes again, he will bring heaven with him to unite heaven and earth in a new creation. The church now stands on the edge of the promised land that they will obtain as an eternal inheritance. We have every reason to persevere in faith knowing that here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.[59]

58. Cockerill, "Deuteronomy to Hebrews," 88.

59. I am grateful to Steve Wellum for reading this paper. He provided insightful and challenging feedback and meaningful suggestions.

PART 3:

Continuing the Conversation—A Follow-Up to Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture

JBTS 9 (2025): 149 – 160

Traditional Dispensationalism: Continuing the Conversation

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Introduction

I want to begin by thanking the editors of *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies* for their vision in conceiving this project, for the care with which the other contributors have made their arguments, and for the efforts of the editors of *JBTS* to keep the conversation going.[1] I've felt a bit bruised at points, but am grateful for a place at the table. I feel the weight of being something of a junior contributor here—the other contributors have published substantial defenses of their positions and I have not. I am in the company of scholars and I am humbled by that. I also want to offer an olive branch to any who found my tone snide or harsh—I'll chalk up some of that to the difficulty of communicating tone in writing essays of this nature, but I also confess that I might have been more aggressive than was wont.

Unity of the Scriptures

As a traditional dispensationalist, I was encouraged by the fact that the editors cast this dialogue as one between alternative approaches to biblical theology and the unity of the Scriptures. It is often supposed that traditional dispensationalism simply denies the Bible's unity, offering a jumble of curious thoughts about end times, divisions in the people of God, multiple ways of salvation, and changing moral standards. It was refreshing to see the editors acknowledge that the traditional dispensationalist is committed to the Bible's unity, but according to a rubric other than a covenantal one.

1. Editor's Note: This essay was originally delivered in a session dedicated to Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies as part of the 2022 annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Denver, CO. The session was a follow up discussion between the contributors to *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture*, eds. Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022). Due to health-related reasons Michael Horton was not able to participate, so the Covenant Theology view was represented by Richard Belcher in this session.

But dispensationalism does more than replace the covenantal chapters *of redemptive history* with corresponding dispensational chapters *of redemptive history*. And this, I fear, is an observation not so carefully made in the book's introduction. The third of Charles Ryrie's *sine qua non* of dispensationalism is that subsuming all of God's purposes under a redemptive motif is too reductionist to account for the whole biblical storyline. It does not account for the vast throng of the unredeemed, the irredeemable (angels and such), the spheres of politics, science, industry, economics (etc.) that exist prior to any named covenants, nor for the continuing purpose for humanity after the story of redemption concludes. Rather than seeing the biblical storyline as a history of the redeeming work of God, Ryrie recognized the biblical storyline as being also, even principally a history of the rule of God. That's what a "dispensation" is—an administration of God's manifold government.

Dr. Horton has objected to my quest for a unifying motif for the Bible, a fact I find somewhat puzzling in that the Reformed seem to do the same thing, identifying the biblical storyline as a history of redemption organized around a covenantal motif. By viewing the biblical storyline as a history of divine rule organized around the motif of divine government, dispensationalists are not doing something different in principle, much less something *avant garde*. I'd like to think that dispensationalists are using a procedure not unlike that used by Reformed for centuries—we've simply identified different unifying/structural motifs. I feel confident that this identification constitutes a substantial part of our differences.

Getting into the weeds on this issue, the question of Noah's Covenant remains of particular interest for further discussion. I have suggested that Noah's Covenant features little or no redemptive advance (and Dr. Wellum objected). Ironically, much of my thought on the Noahic Covenant is not unique to dispensationalism—I lean heavily on Meredith Kline and especially Dave VanDrunen for my understanding, both of whom see Noah's Covenant, especially as viewed narrowly in Genesis 9, as a civic covenant.[2] I warm especially to VanDrunen's understanding that the Noahic Covenant formalizes God's expectations for the civic sphere (which God introduced informally in Genesis 1–2), and that the Abrahamic Covenant formalizes God's plans in the redemptive sphere (which God introduced in seed form in Genesis 3). I have been quite enthusiastic about this explanation ever since I read his treatment, and I find his treatment of two kingdoms to be largely compatible with the dispensational approach. But as a dispensationalist, I stress that Noah's Covenant does more than establish a stable society so that redemptive history has a path forward; it establishes a framework for bringing glory to God *independently of a redemptive concern* through advances in all the spheres introduced in the Dominion Mandate—science, industry,

2. Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006); David VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

politics, and so forth—not as the unique mission of God's redeemed people, but as the collective mission of all God's image-bearers, redeemed and unredeemed alike.[3]

When I speak, then, of dispensations of the governing (not the redemptive) grace of God, what this means, and I stress this with great firmness, is that when the dispensationalist speaks of distinctions between Israel and the Church he is in no sense suggesting distinct ways of redemption. Every believer in every age is justified, apart from the Law, by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.[4] What changes is not our means of salvation, but the relationship of believers in each age to their respective religious and socio-political communities. Israel was an ethnically homogenous, theocratic state of which one may be a citizen irrespective of spiritual status; the Christian Church is a redeemed community in an era where the State is administered severally. Saying this does not "wrongly divide the people of God"; it simply recognizes that Christ "has sheep in multiple sheep pens" (John 10:16).

The idea that God has two governments (civic and redemptive) variously related in the history of mankind has a storied pedigree: Boniface spoke of two swords, Aquinas of two laws, Luther of two kingdoms, and Calvin of two governments. There are wrinkles of difference between these, and I would not by any means suggest that any of these figures were proto-dispensational, but they did observe (before the rise of federal theology) that civic and redemptive responsibilities must be distinguished in mankind's bid to glorify God. Reformed Baptists have long recognized this fact with their firm insistence on the separation of Church and state; additionally, they recognize, in degree much greater than the Reformed, differences in the spiritual status and entry rites of the Jewish and Christian communities, respectively. I appreciate this feature in 1689 Federalism[5] and also in progressive covenantalism, which has substantial Baptist representation. I do not agree, of course, with the specific means by which each group relates Israel with the Church, but I do appreciate their recognition that strict continuity is not possible.

Incidentally, it was the discontinuity of Israel and the Church *with respect to culture/politics* that led, more than any other factor, to the birth of dispensational theology:

A. John N. Darby, often regarded as the father of dispensationalism, was an Anglican missionary to Irish Catholic miners, and after some success in that role, was informed that his converts could not join the Church without an oath

3. In this matter the dispensationalist and the 2K amillennialist, with his commitment to the spirituality of the church) become curious allies in demurring from postmillennialism (which likely deserved a place in our initial volume) and to a lesser degree historic premillennialism. Both of the latter approaches (and especially the former), operate from a vantage where the church has a prominent *institutional* role in influencing the civic sphere of the divine government.

4. We might be more precise and say that the earliest OT saints believed in divine promises that would ultimately by fulfilled in Christ alone, but this is a caveat that all must make at some level—progressive revelation touches us all.

5. Which, like postmillennialism, deserved a place in our original publication.

of fealty to the British Crown. Darby responded that such a measure would have been appropriate in the OT economy—there, to be rightly related to God, one needed to bless Israel, respect her law, and acknowledge her King; but in the Christian era, one performs civil obligations to Caesar quite apart from one's ecclesiastical obligations (Matt 22:21). It was on this basis, then, that Darby sympathized with the political reservations of his converts and proposed the formation of an independent church of a purely spiritual character, that is, one that rejected, institutionally at least, any specific political or socio-cultural loyalties.

B. James Hall Brookes, the father of American dispensationalism, likewise came under great pressure, in the crucible of the Civil War, to declare his Presbyterian assembly in St. Louis to be either for the Union or for the Confederacy. Arguing as Darby had decades earlier, he and other likeminded churches formed an independent presbytery that recognized the pure spirituality of the church: unlike the Israelite assembly, the Christian Church could worship together without sharing political sympathies or socio-cultural norms.

This is the crucible in which dispensationalism was born. It is an unfortunate reality that in both contexts, populism won the day, and attention was drawn relentlessly to the disparate destinies of Israel and the Church, rendering dispensationalism excessively attentive, at times, to eschatology; but eschatological infatuation was neither the historical *raison d'etre* for the development of dispensational theology, nor must it be dispensationalism's singular legacy.

Hermeneutics

The advantage of structuring the biblical storyline according to the relationship of the two governments of God as they are disparately related throughout history leads to several other features of the dispensational model that are routinely misunderstood:

A. By viewing the whole Mosaic Law as a political/administrative instrument for Israel uniquely, the dispensationalist is relieved of hermeneutical intrigue in explaining Paul's shrugging attitude toward circumcision and Sabbaths and sacrifices. Specifically, the dispensationalist does not need to recast these Mosaic devices after the fact as types of greater realities, but can see them as they stand as ethnic/national symbols, civic holidays, labor arrangements, and features of their system of crime and punishment. Viewed as such, the dispensationalist can offer ready explanations for reinstating some of these elements (even certain of the sacrifices—Ezek 40–48) when the theocracy is restored during the

Millennium.[6] The dispensationalist *does not by this stance diminish the work of Christ*, on the one hand, *nor reject the principle of law on the other*; rather, we uphold the manifold purposes of the Law, and with Paul affirm that (1) while no believer is ever free from God's Law, (2) Christian believers are not under the Mosaic Law; rather, (3) they are under the Law of Christ (1 Cor 9:20ff).

The dispensationalist finds no urgency laid upon him to find strict continuity between the peoples, the laws, the customs, socio-political responsibilities, and other structures laced throughout the Scriptures. That is not to say that there are no unifying features, but the dispensationalist, if I may, is not obsessed with them. We delight in seeing nuance and diversity in the unfolding government of God. There is one way of salvation, but it is enjoyed by believers in a diversity of civic and cultic settings.

B. This brings us to a matter of great difference between the essays in terms of our hermeneutic. I do not find compelling Dr. Horton's statement that Luke 24 gives license to NT interpreters to read the OT with an immediate view to Christ's redemptive work. Jesus *did* iteratively walk through the OT to identify iteratively in "all the Scriptures" things concerning himself, but this is not the same as saying that he established a hermeneutical method (much less a homiletical one) that connects every OT text to Christ and the Christian Gospel. Of course, in that all truth is connected, this may occur in the most general of senses, but I believe much harm has been done to our churches by preachers finding artificial connections of OT texts to Christ when, in fact, *the OT authors could never have made these connections*. Much of Deuteronomic history stands, I would argue, as a story of God receiving glory in the political schemings and civil accomplishments of those who have by-and-large rejected the Gospel, Jew and Gentile alike. These stories all relate to God in Christ as the source of common grace and Lord of history, but this connection is often indirect and unstated. As a dispensationalist, I find myself equally concerned about the problem of *finding Christ where he is not as I am about not finding him where he is.*

C. More than one contributor expressed shock with my inattention to types, so I want to explain my understanding further. I tend to see the majority of hermeneutical connectors between the testaments in somewhat binary terms: those prospectively intended by the author and those retrospectively initiated by the interpreter. The former are prophetic; the latter a montage of analogies, implications, instances of *corpus linguistics* (the tendency of

6. On this point I am indebted especially to John Whitcomb's work on millennial sacrifices, "Christ's Atonement and Animal Sacrifices in Israel," *Grace Theological Journal* 6 (Fall 1985): 201–17.

literate societies to use phrases and imagery from their respective bodies of literature in everyday conversation), etc. What dispensationalists have long treated with suspicion is any definition of types that sees them, to use Greg Beale's words, as "restrospectively prospective." I don't want to be snide here, but this seems to suggest that certain OT statements were secretly prospective, and that no one recognized this until after the fact. This suggests, then, that there are hidden *meanings* in earlier literature that were not intended by the human author. I grant of course, that the Bible has two authors—human and divine; but as a firm believer in inspiration, I believe that this means that what stands written is not a mixture of two meanings (divine and human), but one shared meaning. So in answer to Dr. Horton, I *do* recognize the divine author; but if I may turn a phrase made popular by Fee and Stuart, the *divine* author can never mean what the *human* author never meant (or vice versa).[7]

Now this is not to say that God, as the orchestrator of all history, did not deliberately drop elements into the story line for use by later authors as ready points of analogy. If one wishes to call these types I am not distressed by this. But two things: (1) We really can't identify as types anything other than what the Scriptures clearly identify as types (in other words, there is no license for typological interpretation) and (2) the later identification of types can never cancel out the original intention.

For instance, one might correctly recognize that God orchestrated elements of the bronze serpent story (Num 21:4–9) to supply a ready point of analogy upon which Jesus seizes in John 3. But to make that analogy part of the OT text's *meaning* is, I believe, an error, and to make it the *whole* of its meaning is a grievous error. Paul confirms this in 1 Corinthians 10 when he reminds his readers that the continuing reason for this story (i.e., its principal intent and persistent application) is to provide "an example and warning for us, upon whom the end of the ages has come," not to "grumble" or to "test God." This rather mundane moral lesson, necessary to lasting civility in God's civic order, has only oblique reference to Christ, but Paul informs us that this lesson has always supplied and continues to supply an appropriate homiletical "big idea" for the story. Making connections with Christ or the Christian Gospel in a sermon on this OT story is surely appropriate, but that it is *necessary* is not in evidence.

7. I find most troubling Dr. Horton's statement on p.185 of *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies* that "whatever our interpretation of Genesis 12 and 15, it needs to be determined by the NT." My immediate question is this: Does this mean that prior to the writing of the NT the meaning of Genesis 12/15 could not be determined? This approach seems to say too much.

D. This does not mean (and I labored to emphasize this in my essay) that a dispensationalist must discover among possible interpretations the simplest, most wooden interpretations of the Scriptures. This caricature persists, in part—and I admit this—from the choice of the term *literalism* to describe the dispensational hermeneutic. The term *literal* can suggest a suppression of rhetorical devices and figures of speech; but this is not what dispensationalists have generally intended by it. What we mean is that the OT author's plain intention can never be usurped by new ones, much less be reduced to patterns of divine behavior.

So, for instance, if the OT author makes precise land promises or predicts the future construction and operation of a temple, with incredibly specific detail that has never, ever been fulfilled, those promises must be fulfilled with detail equally precise. I have no problem observing divine patterns of establishing "places" for his people to dwell, and patterns of "tabernacling" with his people. The patterns are real and observable, but we can't use them to cancel the specifics of the OT accounts.

That is why I suggested as a replacement for the term *literal* a more accurate label—*originalist*—a label that did not exist before 1980 and thus does not appear in any early dispensationalist literature. By it I mean that the original public meaning—established by the original text and accepted by the original readers—must prevail: a text can never mean today what it did not mean when it was originally written and read. That's the governing rubric for dispensationalists: we are not obsessed with finding the "most literal" or the "least figurative" reading; we are looking for original authorial intent, as captured in the words of the text. So to borrow an old rubric, "When the plain sense makes sense, we seek no other sense."

Of course, there *are* times when the plain sense makes no sense, and so we *do* opt for another sense. This is not inconsistent with "literalism." Two passages raised in the various responses are in order:

1. In Acts 15, James makes an appeal to the Amos 9 in the Jerusalem Counsel:

> "After these things I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the remnant of the Gentiles who bear my name may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things' that have been known for ages" (Acts 15:16-18).
>
> Then he adds, crucially, "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for Gentiles to turn to God" (Acts 15:19).

At first blush, it appears that James is plainly announcing the restoration of David's tent and the commencement of Messiah's reign. But the details do not fit this "plain sense." Both James and Amos assert that the restoration of David's tent will occur "after these things" (in context, after God regathers the Jewish people from all over the world, destroys all of their enemies, and purges by the sword every single unbelieving Israelite from her number). Only then will he restore the Davidide, establish Israel in her land, and provide a designated place of worship for an unprecedented number of Gentiles who have come to bear God's name.

Is James saying that all of this occurred in the early chapters of Acts? Maybe, but this seems a bit of a stretch. Instead, it appears that he is drawing attention to the fact that the reestablishment of David's tent, when it occurs, will be precipitated by a great many Gentile conversions. Based on this prophetic concern, "*therefore*, we should not make it difficult for Gentiles to turn to God." This, I would suggest, is James's primary point of emphasis.

2. Likewise, when Peter responds in Acts 2:16 to questions about the wonders of Pentecost by saying, "This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel," the plainest meaning is that the events of Pentecost inaugurated the new covenant era described in Joel 2. But then one starts reading the details:

    a. "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh" (Acts 2:17). *But that didn't happen at Pentecost.* The Spirit is poured out, true, but not on all flesh, as is promised through the Prophets as the indicator that the new covenant has commenced—*everyone* will convert: "You will turn to your neighbor and say 'Know the Lord,' but they will already all know me, from the greatest to the least" (Jer 31:31–34).[8]

    b. Peter continues: "Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy" (Acts 2:17). The case might be made, based on one's definition of prophecy, that a few men prophesied at Pentecost. But none of the other elements of this prophecy occurred.

8. And if I may, respond specifically to Dr. Wellum, it seems to me that Jeremiah offers here more than a statement that new covenant communities are regenerate communities; he seems rather to be saying something on the order that every surviving member of the human race, in order to enter the Kingdom, will convert.

c. "I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, fire, and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord" (Acts 2:19-20). I concede that the "wonder" of tongues occurred at Pentecost. But the blood? The smoke? The obfuscation of sun and moon? These represent battle imagery emblematic of our Lord's conquest of the nations and his rule of iron. This is a problem, I think, for all realized and inaugurated approaches to the new covenant and Kingdom. These things simply haven't happened.

d. "And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Acts 2:21). Of course *this* is true at Pentecost, I concede, but this is scarcely something new. This promise has been true since the fall of Adam.

After reading those details (and details are important), the traditional dispensationalist looks at Peter's statement, "This is that," and acknowledges the plainest sense of those words, but also notes that the plain sense doesn't make sense of the details. One possible solution is to think in terms of analogical fulfillment.[9] My solution to this thorny text is not the same as Dr. Bock's of course, but I am happy to share agreement with him that a simple point-for-point fulfillment of Joel's whole prophecy on the Day of Pentecost is not on the table.[10]

9. Much as we do commonly, say, when we sing, "Here I raise mine Ebenezer," or make a stock historical analogy like "He met his Waterloo."

10. A third passage that might be addressed here was something of an aside, but a long one, so I find it needful to answer it. Dr. Horton's complained that dispensationalists are not faithful to their hermeneutic when interpreting the use of "Gog and Magog" in Ezekiel. My opinion on the precise identity of Gog and Magog is not a strident one. It may reference a specific ethnic group or inhabitants of a geographic region, but it may also be a simple point on the compass (for a similar usage, note that Habakkuk, writing in proximity to Ezekiel, refences the "tents of Paran/Teman"—Edomite communities—to point southward the Sinai Peninsula and the Mountain of God. I'm inclined to think that this is a rhetorical method used by Hebrew writers of the day, and that the *original authorial intent* was demonstrably imprecise. Ezekiel was likely pointing in a generally northerly direction by his words, just as Habakkuk points generally to the south. This idea is confirmed, I believe, when the author of Revelation identifies Gog and Magog as one of the "four corners of the earth," and I accept that. What is critical here, to me, is authorial intent and original public meaning.

Covenants

That brings us to the question of the covenants, which the editors requested that we treat prominently in our essays. I mentioned earlier that, with the exception of the Noahic Covenant, all of the named covenants in the Scriptures belong uniquely to Israel. That is, I believe, what Paul says in Romans 9:3, where he carefully defines the named party in all the covenants as "his kinsmen according to the flesh." As such, the covenants provide the structural organization for the *Israelite chapter of the Bible's storyline*, but are not intended to provide, in the traditional dispensational understanding, a comprehensive structuring for the whole biblical storyline. We admit, of course, that there are implications of Israel's covenants for the rest of the world, but all the covenant blessings that transcend Israel are mediated by Israel—and not merely by the "true Israelite" as an *individual*, but by the whole Israelite community.

Of particular interest here is the new covenant, on which topic dispensationalists have been less than unanimous. All dispensationalists (traditional and progressive alike) agree that the Christian Church cannot be the *only* recipient of NC promises, or even the *principal* recipient of those promises. The NC is detailed relentlessly in the OT as the property of the House of Judah and the House of Israel, which together constitute the historic 12 tribes of ethnic Israel. The predominantly Gentile Church cannot (to use a lightning-rod term) *replace* Israel so defined, because "Israel" and "Church" have fundamentally different meanings. The OT authors would never concede that they intended, by their relentless use of the ethnically-specific term "Israel" to mean the ethnically homogenous Christian Church. Nor, further, will the dispensationalist allow Israel to reduce in status to an "unbelieving shadow" of a new and better community.

The earliest dispensationalists (e.g., Darby) saw nothing of the new covenant in the Christian Church. In the early twentieth century there developed within dispensationalism a preference for the idea that there were two new covenants—one each for Israel and the Church, respectively (e.g., Chafer and Ryrie, though the latter inconsistently). The surge of influence on inaugurated eschatology in American evangelicalism after WW2 influenced dispensational eschatology as well. First to develop, even before WW2, was a mystery "form" of the *kingdom* in the Church; then, in the 1960s, the idea that the *new covenant* had been inaugurated at the death of Christ with limited benefits for the Church, but with the caveat that the new covenant could not be *completely* fulfilled until the eschatological restoration of Israel's theocracy. The trajectory of this idea led ultimately, even directly, to the formal birth of progressive dispensationalism in the early 1990s. Since that development, traditional dispensationalists have remained of less than one mind on the matter of the new covenant,[11] though personal observation leads me to suggest

11. For a detailing of three separate *traditional* dispensational views of the new covenant, see *Dispensational Understanding of the New Covenant: Three Views* (Schaumburg, IL; Regular Baptist Press, 2012). In the interest of full disclosure, I embrace Roy Beacham's approach ("The

that the approach that has seen greatest growth in the last thirty years is Darby's view (i.e., that the Church has no formal relationship at all to the new covenant). For these (and I find myself in their number) the new covenant has yet to be inaugurated, since it must be enacted by (1) the formal swearing of an oath (so Jer 50:5; Hos 2:18–23; Zech 13:9) (2) by the named parties without emendation (whether by replacement or by addition)—an event that has never occurred. As such, the new covenant awaits implementation as the principal administrative instrument for a *future* administration of God: the Millennial Kingdom.

Naturally, this places me at odds with all three contributors, who adhere either to realized or, to a greater or lesser degree, to inaugurated understandings of the new covenant and kingdom that feature, at a minimum, the complementary inclusion of Church saints. I do, of course, need to answer some NT objections, but if I may reiterate the original emphasis in my essay, the burden of proof lies much more heavily upon those who, e.g., *equate* the provisions of Joel 2 with the events of Acts 2; *equate* the provisions of Amos 9 with the events of Acts 15; *suppress* the relentless emphasis on ethnic Israel in scores of OT prophecies and regard Gentile Christians gathered in Christian churches as "the" new covenant people of God, etc. But to specific objections.

1. I am prepared, with Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:6, to speak of the church anarthrously as "a" new covenant community, but the intent of this curiously anarthrous construction is not easily established. It may speak only to similarity and not to identity.

2. More difficult is the book of Hebrews, with its lengthy discussions of the new covenant. I find the traditional dispensational position poorly represented among the commentators, and I recognize this weakness; still, I'm of a mind that the assumption, made by most, that the author is speaking of a covenant *now in effect*, much less *fully in effect*, is not strong. He *is* speaking to Israelites (Hebrews) who are discouraged by the absence of new covenant blessings that they were expecting; but rather than viewing the new covenant as canceled or enacted without these blessings, I see the author as defending the original terms of the new covenant, just not their immediate realization.

3. Dr. Horton's observation that the formula for the Lord's Table introduced by our Lord is likewise difficult. I have oft repeated in answer to this question J. N. Darby's observation that the blood of Christ is bigger than the covenant. That is, while it *is* necessary to the establishment of the new covenant (and thus an appropriate appeal during a Passover meal that Christ was suspending indefinitely, pending the arrival of the Kingdom), it also serves as an enacting

Church Has No Legal Relationship to or Participation in the New Covenant," 107–44). I am keenly aware that in the response to follow I am speaking not for all traditional dispensationalists, but for a subset of that group only.

> rite for the Christian Church. But what I am unwilling to see Christ doing is (1) conflating these two functions or (2) annulling the need, anticipated in the OT on multiple occasions, for a mutual oath between the parties named in the covenant as the inaugurating instrument of the new covenant. Like Abraham's covenant (though not, incidentally, David's), sacrifice is *part* of the covenant inauguration proceedings and even a *necessary* one (assuming, as I do, that the new covenant is a testamentary covenant), but sacrifice never stands as the whole or even the primary enacting instrument of any ANE covenant.[12]

By suggesting that the new covenant and the concomitant Messianic Kingdom are still future, I come to the final and most practical distinction that separates the four approaches under consideration in this project. We are still living in the long shadow of Carl Henry's dilemma between the "kingdom-now" approach of postmillennial modernism (which in his day had lost sight of the *essence* of the Gospel), and the "kingdom-then" approach of the dispensationalism (which Henry believed had forfeited its *apologetic platform* for the Gospel.[13] Inaugurated eschatology was his happy balance, and it dominates (with some variation) the two interior positions in our debate. Unfortunately (and with apologies to Dr. Horton), Henry gave little attention to two-kingdoms amillennialism, which represents a form of realized eschatology, but one with a much more spiritual view of the Church than Henry would have approved.

This concern still rages. And the question reduces, in many ways, to whether Henry was right. Do any of the four approaches represented in this project sabotage the Gospel? Not necessarily, but each one sports specific vulnerabilities of which we need to be aware. Ironically, among the three other contributors, I find myself in closest proximity to Dr. Horton's position in terms of the church's mission, and while we get there by very different means, I'm happy to express broad agreement, practically speaking, with his book *Where in the World Is the Church?*[14] And that is because, as a proponent of the spirituality of the church, Dr. Horton better preserves the distinction, in the present age, between God's two governments. As a Baptist dispensationalist, I resonate with this seminal concern, even though Dr. Horton and I remain apart on other matters.

At the end of the day, however, I am firmly convinced that all four participants in this debate are brothers in Christ, and I am grateful again that we can have this conversation not as enemies, but as fellow-believers.

12. Beacham, "No Legal Relationship to or Participation," 120–27; for a fresh treatment of this issue see Anthony Iorillo, "The New Covenant and the Church," (Th.M. thesis, Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2023), 20–50.

13. See chapter 4 in Carl F. H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947).

14. Michael S. Horton, *Where in the World is the Church? A Christian View of Culture and Your Role in It* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995).

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Progressive Dispensationalism: Continuing the Conversation

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Introduction: Defining Progressive Dispensationalism

Let's begin with a definition of Progressive Dispensationalism.[1] Progressive Dispensationalism is an attempt to specify how the dispensations and covenants commitments advance building on each other as the program of God progresses through them. As such, it articulated more continuity than previous forms of the Dispensational tradition. Let me define the parts: A **dispensation** is an administrative relationship, a stewardship arrangement. (So Israel-church-millennium reflects a movement from promise to initial realization through an ascended Jesus to consummation through a fully present Jesus—Jesus face to face). Israel is not the church nor are either of them the millennium in terms of structural scope and administrative operation. Dispensationalism is the idea that God has managed the structure of his salvific plan in part with different stewardships within that plan as that plan progressively advanced. Covenants come in because the content of the promises are managed through them- Abrahamic- People, land and hope- seed through which the world is blessed. That seed is both corporate (Israel) and singular in Christ. Blessing comes through the singular seed, but hope remains for the corporate entity to whom this promise was originally given. This is why dispensationalism speaks of a future for corporate Israel. And not just for believing Jewish people. The Davidic covenant is a promise of a dynasty from the house of David. The New Covenant involves forgiveness and the law on the hear (or as Ezekiel states it, a washing with the Spirit within). The emphasis on **progressive** highlights how the program builds in continuity as the realization of covenant promises advances. God

1. Editor's Note: This essay was originally delivered in a session dedicated to Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies as part of the 2022 annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Denver, CO. The session was a follow up discussion between the contributors to *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture*, eds. Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022). Due to health-related reasons Michael Horton was not able to participate, so the Covenant Theology view was represented by Richard Belcher in this session.

completes his program in steps, so that initial fulfillment has ties to original promises just as consummation completes the process. The term is neither political in force nor is it a reflection on other views. It is strictly description of how the program of God develops. It progresses to realization through the connecting and developing stewardships in the program. I now turn to the specific questions raised for us.

Differences from Historic Premillennialism

We have spent a great deal of time in recent discussions interacting mostly with historical premillennialism as people often ask how different our approach is to that view, seeing them as similar. So let me develop this now with focus on differences. The main difference is found in how we see Israel in the program of God as a category that continues to have a place in the future plan of God. This is rooted in a belief that God made commitments to her that are rooted in God's promise and faithfulness. This is a reflection of repeated reaffirmations of Israel in the land through the OT and the remarks of Acts 3:18-22, as well as Romans 9-11. This is not separate from an embrace of Christ but foresees that down the road many in Israel will say "Blessed is he who come in the name of the Lord". This includes a view of an earthly millennium with Jesus ruling from Jerusalem on his return where Israel functions not just as an ethnicity but as a nation of people among the nations. This represents an equality among nations, not a Jewish nationalism as God redeems corporate structures in society, not just individuals. It is that which is in view with the peace that comes with Jesus' return and the millennium.

We also reject the idea that dispensationalism requires a disengagement with issues in the world. My own role at Dallas as Executive Director of Cultural Engagement at the Hendricks Center hosting a podcast that deals with issues of life today in culture shows a commitment to engage with issues today and seek the best for people as an outgrowth of a commitment to the gospel and as a missional testimony to God and the gospel that points to God's care for people.

Differences from the Other Three Views

Concerning Traditional Covenantalism (and some points in Progressive Covenantalism)

My remarks about Traditional Covenantalism will be contained in this initial response.

A. I do not embrace a view that sees a covenant of works in the Bible. Both Wellum and Belcher made much of this, so it is a good place to start. I prefer to focus on the covenants of promise (Abraham, David, New). Here is a question for my covenant friends, please tell me where the term covenant is used

with the creation. Best I can tell it is hidden in a "legal" relationship claim. I would argue this is simply the relational dimension for Creator-Creature claims and those elements still remain after the covenant of works became the covenant of grace. What exists is a creator/creature calling that is **always** the responsibility of the creature in response. It is not so much legal but relational. That has always been the case since Genesis 1 and is what makes the fall of Genesis 3 so significant as it represents the breaking of that calling and a rebellion relationally. This calling did not require a covenant, but was inherent in creating humanity in God's image. Adam is about a failure. God begins to deal with that in the Abrahamic covenant of Gen esis12 and the biblical covenantal path. This is where the solution to the failure on the Creator-creature relationship is picked up to restore it but not back to a covenant of works. So to pit Genesis 12 in contrast to Adam is to miss why the OT is so much about Israel, including in the Prophets. Let me say something that is not controversial, Israel is discussed far more than Adam in Scripture. A question is why? Because God has focused on her as the movement toward the solution culminating in Christ as the nations are reconciled to each other as part of the reconciliation God brings, which is why ultimately Israel to must embrace her Messiah. Salvation is both individual and corporate (the individual and peoples or nations). This critique suggests a risk in the covenant of works on making salvation only about the individual, a trait that the West's focus on the individual promotes. It leaves a corporate blind spot. Salvation is bigger than just saving the individual. It addresses peoples and the cosmos.

B. I also reject the idea there is no future millennium (against amillennialism). A close look at Revelation 20 and the genre of Apocalyptic as a theodicy that has a calendar tied to it is against this idea. The earliest Christians were chiliasts. If 1000 years is an idiom for a period of time why does it appear 6 times in the space of a few verses in Revelation 20? One of the features of apocalyptic is the presentation of a calendar of timing that says God has a specific plan to redeem and establish justice. So, a 1000 years fits in with other length markers like 7 years or times, time and half a time. These are specific not vague time markers in the genre.

C. I also disagree that the land promise was fulfilled in Joshua's time or according to Psalm 68. The issue of land remains a point of OT discussion long after this period. It is the basis for the return to the land and the hope of Israel as a national people.

D. In addition, the triumphal entry is *not* the fulfillment of Luke 13:34-35. Luke explicitly has the national leaders rejecting Jesus' entry with the retort of Jesus that creation would speak if the disciples did not speak. This was the

atriumphal entry from the perspective of the Jewish leaders and so that event cannot fulfill that hope.

E. The common covenantal reading of Acts 1:6 that contends the disciples asked the wrong question in querying when the kingdom would be restored to Israel ignores the link I noted with Acts 3:18-22. Here is how Peter put the package together. Jesus returns to restore the kingdom to Israel (or perhaps better, to reclaim Israel's place within it). In Acts 3 Peter says what happens when Jesus returns is already expressed in the Hebrew Scripture. You can read what is to come there. There is with no note to read it differently than the expectation they still had after spending 40 days with Jesus as he had explained the hope of the Scripture to them.

   Having said all of this, I'd want to highlight, we share the centrality of Christ in all of this and the result being an eternal shalom for creation. It is a return to embracing Christ for Israelites that triggers this reinclusion.

F. How do we solve the issue of the book of Hebrews? Is its showing the superiority of the new era and its claim the old era passes away the death knell for a dispensationalists hope for Israel as a corporate entity? The response is simple. We are speaking of realizations tied to the Abrahamic, Davidic and New Covenants. There is much either/or thinking in this response that has plagued eschatological discussion on both sides of the debate for some time. We need to remember that Hebrews is speaking of a return to old way *apart* from *Christ*—Judaism on its own terms *apart* from *Christ* is the target of the shadows remark in Hebrews. That is *not* where Progressives are when they argue for elements of Jewish expression in a post-cross context including in the consummative future. What do we do when we *combine* Christ with elements of Jewish praxis? The NT Testament shows this in its exhortation not to fight over calendars and days. The participation of the Temple with a Messianic belief says the same thing. The reality of being a Jewish believer in Christ in the NT shows one can have continuity and unity alongside distinct praxis at the same time.

Concerning Traditional Dispensationalism

The major difference here is Progressive Dispensationalists do not share the degree of futurism and full discontinuity that exists in Traditional Dispensationalism. The kingdom is seen as already/not yet in Progressive Dispensationalism. Promises connect both in this era and the one to come, not just in the future and not just in ties to Israel. There is one people of God, but Israel is an identifiable part of that

reconciled unity and as a future corporate entity among the reconciled nations in the world in that era to come. That is where its distinctness remains.

The commitment to God's faithfulness, that he keeps his promises to those he makes them to originally, and an insistence that Israel not be forgotten in all of this is what Progressives share with Traditional Dispensationalists.

Concerning Progressive Covenantalism

In many ways, we are closer to Progressive Covenantalism, but its total absorption of Israel into the church misses some of the Israel among the nations elements that are a part of premillennialism. I will elaborate on that more a little later.

What I share with Progressive Covenantalists is a recognition of the centrality of Christ, the hope of a future of shalom, and a recognition of important themes of continuity as the story of Scripture progresses.

Setting the Record Straight

I noted the ethical claims and current issues of life denied to a dispensational view. Though we are futurist in theological expression, we are not calendar nor date setters. We have a priority assignment that is set forth in Acts 1:6-8 that is to be witnesses in the world today. We are to preview what is to come. We are to seek what God desires of humans in the public square and care for people as God did with us, seeking to recapture those who have been lost and to pursue them even as they ignore or reject God. We are to testify to God' scare in and for the world by how the church serves the city, even when that city does not recognize God (Jer. 29).

Here I focus on differences with Progressive Covenantalism as many (often Traditional Dispensationalists) have had trouble seeing any differences between these two approaches. To bypass differences is a mistaken reading of the situation and the conversation around eschatology.

I also see too many engagements with Dispensationalism today even in the most recent present discussions that almost pretend that Progressive Dispensationalism does not exist and then generalizes about Dispensationalism. That is to miss the last thirty plus years of eschatological discussion.

Wellum comes close to doing this in the book by saying his objections against both dispensational views are the same, while also curiously claiming quite a difference in tone and serious differences. The way this is handled by Wellum helps us appreciate there are layers here in the conversation that has been made more complex by more options within dispensationalism. I would argue that the way Progressive Dispensationalists argue for their synthesis is sufficiently different to deserve direct, not indirect treatment that amounts to treating only Traditional Dispensationalist views. The differences in argument within Dispensationalism makes unfair or

insufficient the lumping together of Dispensationalists simply because they land in a similar place with regard to Israel. This approach does not deal clearly enough with the distinctive route taken by Progressive Dispensationalists and the way the texts and Progressive Dispensational synthesis is made. It does not do to simply allude to the side that Progressive Dispensationalists exist (in a footnote or a single sentence or two) and then proceed without engaging the way their synthesis works. Most critiques coming from a covenantal side take this tact. Sometimes the claim is that is not where popular dispensationalism is, but that claim also ignores a potential way forward in our conversations that Progressives offer to our community conversation.

A. I think for me more substantive and problematic is Wellum's objection that Progressive Dispensationalism understates the permanent role of the church. But is this correct or a misunderstanding of what Progressives are claiming? We contend there is ultimately one people of God and that Christ is the key to belonging in this era and in what is to come. The distinction we are after is that the church is a transnational entity distinct from nations vis-a-vis Israel and that God will work with both groupings (Salvation and societal with these primarily in stages of inauguration and consummation). Salvation unifies people at all societal levels and through all of society's structures. We are back to the points I made earlier about individual and corporate structures and the corporate includes the nations, not just the bringing together of races or ethnicities. This is why we talk about the continued existence of Israel in God's program.

   Our contention is that far more than a remnant will one day respond and in a non-nationalistic way Israel has a future in that program among the nations including living in shalom in the land God gave her. (Note how Israel disappeared as a place for fulfillment in his remark on p. 211 of the *Four Views* book as he discusses meta-narratival questions, when he says "they fail to grasp how God's unified plan unfolds through the covenants, starting in creation and reaching its fulfillment in Christ and the church". Our contention is that fulfilment comes through Christ, the church and *with a place for Israel.* The responses and claims that say we do not distinguish how fulfillment comes in the church versus being an illustration of nation-states to come misses the distinction in structures between the entity of salvation and how the rule over all the earth to come that *includes* nation-states in ways the current structure and fulfillment does not. Yes, this is the ultimate, comprehensive form of the kingdom, but it also is a distinct phase (yes, dispensation) of God's rule. So what is trans-national and outside of, or at least among, nation-states now, then will include all of them, including Israel. We are not speaking of an illustration but of a transition into a different administrative arrangement, which is what a dispensational/administrative move is.

As for whether Progressives have a spiritual and a literal reading of the OT and NT. That denies what is gained by seeing the kingdom in dispensational stages (already/not yet) operating through different kinds of social structures (Individual first now as people of faith are gathered into the church, but then including the nations in the consummation). This fits a recognition that to expand along lines announced as blessing for the world as early as Abraham is not a spiritualizing but an inclusion of scope.

B. Progressive Covenantalism is too limiting in how it sees the role of seed in Scripture. That limiting allows Israel to disappear in Christ and the church but it is not so straightforward. This promise is to Abraham and his seed, but that seed is multiple. The whole point is to argue in Genesis and Exodus that the seed is like the starts in the sky or the sand of the sea. Christ and Israel *both* exist in the biblical themes. The OT highlights the national, corporate element and scripture as a whole revealing the singular seed of Christ as the OT covenant promises narrow and point to this focus. Christ is the bearer of that promise but that other seed is still left in play as a reflection of God's faithfulness to original recipients, which is why in part Peter refers in Acts 3 to the God of the patriarchs. My point is that to include such an expansion of focus beyond Israel or the promise's focus on Christ does not take place at the expense of commitments made into the hope for Israel, but as a part of it. I play on one of Wellum's sentences where he says, "The one new man does not morph into distinct nations since the church is the 'chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation' 1 Pt 2:9."[2] The church does not morph into distinct nations in my view (I never said this by the way. It is a characterization of my view). Rather, and here is my reading of this space, the era to come will include the nations within and directly under the kingdom's rule (something that did not previously exist in the way it will). This is the only way to explain OT texts that speak of nations streaming to Jerusalem in the end, texts such as Is 19:23-25.

These two ideas (how we see the church and the seed) tie together to make the difference between us.

C. One more point and question: Are nation-states limited to the Fall and its consequences? I wonder. We were headed to a multiplication of people on the earth from Gen 1. OT consummative eschatological texts seem to suggest not. The nations appear to exist on the other end. Just as gender is designed in us, perhaps also are our varied ethnicities and nation groups to show the scope of

2. Stephen J. Wellum, "A Progressive Covenantalism Response," in *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture*, eds. Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 218.

reconciliation after it is consummated. We are not homogenized, but remain as many tribes and nations as Rev 5 and 7 note. This unity and distinction side by side (a both/and!) is why I would want to make clear that the millennium is part of the journey to the new heavens and earth, so the claim Progressive Dispensationalists focus on the millennium at the expense of the latter eternity is simply wrong. We see it as a stage within consummation in this history in transition to a new Heavens and Earth that will be eternal and the final resting place, dare I say, dispensation, for the display of Gods glory.

D. To claim I do not recognize typology is another overclaim. My dissertation, *Proclamation from Prophecy and Pattern: Lucan Old Testament Christology* argued typological-prophetic fulfillment was more common than directly prophetic texts.[3] The question is not whether typology exists but whether it *cancels* some of the previous elements that seem to be a part of the promise. Does Gentile inclusion mean Israelite exclusion?

A Final Word Concerning Traditional Dispensationalism

As for traditional dispensational claims that our hermeneutic is spiritual or departs from original meaning, I also find this claim misleading because it bypasses where the Progressive Dispensational view lands ultimately. We are dealing with promises realized in stages (across dispensations!). Those stages come in a context, an original context going back to Abraham that included people from outside Israel even as promises were made to Abraham and the corporate seed. Those outside also would experience blessing in the promises made to Israel and the larger seed. Those promises ultimately have Christ at its center and as its trigger. "Expansion" and its capacity is built *literally* into the promise. It does not totally scuttle the original promise (as is claimed as a flaw of mine).[4] This is not a case of scuttling for two reasons: (1) the promise has an open end of inclusion built into it as the promise to Abraham does and (2) we do not lose the original recipient(s) in the process when it is consummated. The former is my response to traditional dispensationalists, while the latter is my response to our covenantal brethren.

Traditional Dispensationalists miss this in a nearsighted reading of Israel alone as the audience for the promise. Another Traditional Dispensational mistake is to limit the idea of fulfillment only for moments of total consummation. However, our salvation rooted as it is in this eschatology, does not work that way nor does the kingdom program. It proceeds over time and builds progressively across it. It works in

3. Darrell L. Bock, *Proclamation from Prophecy and Pattern: Lucan Old Testament Christology* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

4. Mark A. Snoeberger, "A Traditional Dispensational Response," in *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture*, eds. Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 248.

fresh structures (dispensations) as well. The promise of God always foresaw blessing to the world from the time of Abraham, so Gentile blessing was foreseen. So what is needed is a careful articulation of how Israel is distinct in and functions within God's total and larger program. That means recognizing the unity of Gpd's people as well as elements of distinction. I say the former to my Traditionalist Dispensational brothers and sisters and the latter to my Covenantalist brothers and sisters. We are all family here before God. It is why I think seeing progressive dispensations with the covenants reflects the full scope of the Bible's metanarrative. When it comes to eschatology, the believing family needs a both/and, not an either/or.

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Progressive Covenantalism: Continuing the Conversation

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Introduction

It is an honor to participate in this ongoing conversation regarding how best to think through the Bible's metanarrative and covenantal story from creation to Christ.[1] Getting the Bible right is not insignificant. God has given his word so that we would understand it, and properly grasping what he has revealed is our supreme privilege, duty, and delight. Although we agree on much, there are still important differences among us, and continuing the conversation allows us to see where these differences are and how best to adjudicate them in order to bring all of our thought captive to Christ and his word. My presentation will proceed in three steps. First, I will summarize my view in order to contrast it with my interlocutors. Second, I will interact with covenant theology as represented by Michael Horton. Third, I will interact with two variations of dispensational theology represented by Darrell Bock and Mark Snoeberger respectively.

Progressive Covenantalism: A Basic Summary

Progressive covenantalism contends that the Bible presents a *plurality* of covenants that *progressively* reveals God's *one* redemptive plan for his *one* people that reaches its fulfillment in Christ and the new covenant. Each biblical covenant contributes to and reveals God's unified plan, and to comprehend the "whole canon," we must understand each covenant in its own biblical context by locating that covenant in relation to what precedes *and* follows it. By the *progression* of the covenants, we

1. Editor's Note: This essay was originally delivered in a session dedicated to Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies as part of the 2022 annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Denver, CO. The session was a follow up discussion between the contributors to *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture*, eds. Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022). Due to health-related reasons Michael Horton was not able to participate, so the Covenant Theology view was represented by Richard Belcher in this session.

come to know God's plan, how all of God's promises are fulfilled in Christ (Heb 1:1-3; cf. Eph 1:9-10), and how we are to live as God's new covenant people. The *progression* of the covenants, then, is the primary means by which God's *promises* and *typological* patterns unfold and are fulfilled in Christ and his church.

Progressive covenantalism argues that the *covenants* are more than a unifying theme of Scripture; instead, they serve as the *backbone* to Scripture's story similar to covenant theology. But unlike covenant theology, the covenants are not subsumed under the bi-covenantal structure of "the covenant of works" and "the covenant of grace." Rather, God's one plan unfolds through a *plurality* of covenants, first starting with Adam and culminating in Christ. The creation covenant lays the foundation that continues in *all* the covenants and is fulfilled in Christ. God's plan moves from creation in Adam to consummation in Christ.

Concerning the Israel-church relationship, two points are stressed. First, God has *one* people, yet there is an Israel-Church distinction due to their respective covenants. The church is *new* in a redemptive-historical sense since she is the *new covenant* community. Second, we must think of the Israel-church relationship *Christologically*. The church is not *directly* the "new Israel" or her replacement. Rather, in Christ, the church is God's new creation, comprised of *believing* Jews and Gentiles, because *Jesus* is the last Adam and true Israel, the faithful seed of Abraham who inherits the promises by his work. Thus, in union with Christ, the church is God's *new covenant* people in continuity with the elect in all ages, but *different* from Israel in its nature and structure.

This way of viewing *Israel-Christ-Church* differs from dispensational and covenant theology. First, unlike dispensationalism, Jesus is the antitypical fulfillment of Israel and Adam and in him, *all* of God's promises are fulfilled for the church, including the land promise realized in the new creation (Rom 4:13; Eph 6:3; Heb 11:10, 16; cf. Matt 5:5). Second, unlike covenant theology, Jesus' *new* covenant people are different from Israel. Under the old covenant, Israel was constituted as a *mixed* nation of believers and unbelievers (Rom 9:6). The church, however, is constituted by people who are united to Christ by faith, which minimally includes heart circumcision (regeneration), justification, and the gift of the Spirit. In contrast to Israel, the church is constituted as a believing, regenerate people. This is why baptism, the sign of the new covenant, is only applied to those who profess faith, and why circumcision and baptism do *not* signify the same realities due to their respective covenantal differences.

Continuing the Conversation with Covenant Theology

Since my view is more aligned with covenant theology, there is much more agreement. For example, we agree that the biblical covenants function as the backbone of the Bible's story and that the basic plotline of Scripture begins in creation with Adam and

reaches its fulfillment in Christ. We agree that creation is the beginning rather than the goal of human existence and that Adam-Christ function as the two covenantal and legal heads of humanity. We also agree that God's promise, grace, and initiative take priority over human disobedience. The covenant of creation broken in Adam is fulfilled in Christ, our new covenant head and mediator. By Christ's active and passive obedience, we have redemption, and so on.

So where do we disagree? We disagree in the details of how we derive these conclusions. Ultimately, our main point of disagreement is over our understanding of the progression of the covenants *and* the changes that result in Christ's new covenant work. I will focus on two points.

The Bi-Covenantal Structure of Covenant Theology

For covenant theology, the bi-covenantal structure of "the covenant of works" and "the covenant of grace" function as the basis for how we establish the categories of "law" and "grace/gospel." "Law" refers to the *conditional* covenant of works, and "grace" refers to the *unconditional* covenant of grace. The covenant of works was broken by Adam as our federal head, but in Christ, the last Adam, the covenant of works has been fulfilled by his active and passive obedience, thus securing our redemption in the covenant of grace. Regardless of whether the Mosaic is viewed as a republication of the covenant of works, covenant theology insists that the Mosaic covenant has now ended in Christ, at least in terms of its civil and ceremonial aspects.

However, due to the *one* covenant of grace and its substantial unity, the Abrahamic covenant is viewed as eternal and in fact almost one-for-one with the new covenant. Thus, the Abrahamic covenant is subsumed under the larger theological category of "the covenant of grace," that establishes the terms by which people from every nation share in Christ and the church. Given this understanding, covenant theology draws a direct line from the Abrahamic covenant to the new covenant, which establishes the warrant for their view of the church. Presently, the church, like Abraham's seed under the Abrahamic covenant and Israel under the Mosaic covenant, is a "mixed" people constituted by the elect and the non-elect. Both Abraham's seed and Israel receive the objective covenant sign of circumcision which not only distinguishes them as God's people, but also functions as a sign and seal of God's covenant promises. As this is brought over to the church under the *same* covenant of grace, what is true of Abraham's seed and Israel as a nation is also true of the church, except that the sign has undergone an administrative change to baptism. By this overall construction of "the covenant of grace," covenant theology believes it has warranted both a mixed view of Israel-church and its practice of paedobaptism.

Not surprisingly, I reject this bi-covenantal structure of the covenants as not being exactly true to Scripture. Horton thinks that I have mixed "law/gospel" by

denying this bi-covenantal structure for at least two reasons.[2] First, because I don't think that each post-fall covenant can be divided simply into "law" (conditional) or "gospel" (unconditional). Second, because I don't argue for a ratification of *the* covenant of grace in Genesis 3:15. My response to this charge is twofold.

First, I deny that I have mixed law and gospel. I wholeheartedly affirm the *theological* categories of law and gospel *and* in some sense the overall bi-covenantal structure that specifically highlights the two heads of humanity: Adam and Christ. Our disagreement is in *how* covenant theology constructs the biblical covenants to derive these theological truths. After all, one can affirm correct *theological* truths but not sufficiently warrant them from Scripture. Instead, of covenant theology's bi-covenantal structure, which tends to subsume and flatten the post-fall OT covenants under the *one* covenant of grace, Scripture presents God's redemptive plan revealed through a *plurality* of covenants (Eph 2:12). This allows *each* covenant to contribute to God's unified plan as *each* covenant is fulfilled in Christ. This better makes sense of each covenant in its own historical context, which also allows us to think through the intertextual relations between the covenants and how *all* the covenants are fulfilled in Christ.

Covenant theology is right to subsume all people under two covenant heads. In Adam, the category of "law" is established by God's total demand for perfect obedience, which is then given greater specificity through the progression of the covenants. Adam, and all humanity, is created as God's image-son, priest-king to rule over creation. God, as Creator and Lord, demands perfect obedience from us which continues through *all* the post-fall covenants. Our problem is that we do not obey; as such, we stand condemned before God (Rom 3:23). But thankfully God graciously speaks a word of "gospel" promise (Gen 3:15) that ultimately is fulfilled in Christ.

Second, Horton fails to see that I make a clear distinction between *pre-fall* under Adam, tied to the creation covenant, and God's *post-fall* salvific promise centered in Christ (Gen 3:15). By this initial redemptive promise, God's promises to act unilaterally to redeem a people for himself, which then is unveiled in every covenant and finally fulfilled in Christ. But Horton misses this point because I don't see the ratification of *the* covenant of grace in Genesis 3:15, thus resulting in *two* distinct covenants in Genesis 1-3. He argues that I make Genesis 3:15 merely an "appendix to the creation covenant," but this is incorrect.[3]

My reason for the rejection of *the* covenant of grace being ratified in Genesis 3:15 is due to the fact that there is no biblical evidence for such a specific covenant. If you mean by "the covenant of grace" God's redemptive plan unveiled through the covenants, then we would agree. But this is not how the covenant of grace functions

2. Michael S. Horton, "A Covenant Theology Response," in *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture*, eds. Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 196-97.

3. Horton, "A Covenant Theology Response," 197.

for Horton or covenant theology. For them, the covenant of grace is an actual covenant that subsumes all the post-fall historical covenants under it; it does not merely refer to God's one redemptive plan. However, "the covenant of grace" is not a specific historical covenant but an overall *theological* construct. No doubt, there is truth in the fact that since God's first gospel promise (Gen 3:15), humanity is now divided under either Adam or Christ. Since the fall, all humans come into the world "in Adam" and our only hope is to believe God's word and to receive redemption "in Christ." But should we view Genesis 3:15 as the start of the covenant of grace, or better, as God's first salvific promise that despite Adam's sin, God's purpose for humans and creation will stand. From humanity, *God* will graciously provide a Redeemer to undo what Adam did, which ultimately reaches its fulfillment in Christ. In this sense, Genesis 3:15 is a Christological promise that prophetically anticipates and predicts in seed-form the definitive provision of the new covenant—the new covenant which is progressively revealed through the specific biblical covenants.

Is this merely a splitting of theological hairs? *Theologically*, what I am saying is very similar to covenant theology, but it is not exactly the same. Also, the differences are important because they lead to a slightly different way of "putting together" the covenants, which in the end, results in different theological conclusions in some doctrinal areas. Instead of thinking of God's plan progressively revealed through the covenants and fulfilled in the new covenant, covenant theology subsumes the OT covenants under *one* covenant and then draws lines of continuity too quickly from old to new, especially regarding circumcision-baptism and the "mixed" nature of Israel-church. Creation, then, with a *pre-fall* covenant and *post-fall* redemptive promise not only upholds the *theological* categories of "law" and "gospel," but it also allows us to see how God's plan unfolds from Adam, through the covenants to Christ. In my view, this better explains how Scripture actually presents God's unfolding plan and how *each* covenant reveals, predicts, and anticipates the coming of Christ and the new covenant.

The Relationship of the Abrahamic Covenant to the New Covenant

A second area of disagreement is regarding the relationship of the Abrahamic covenant to the new covenant. Horton contends I have separated these two covenants too much largely due to his understanding of "the covenant of grace."[4] For him, the Mosaic covenant is a republication of the covenant of works and thus temporary, in contrast to the eternal Abrahamic covenant. For Horton, the Abrahamic covenant sets the terms by which people from every nation share in Christ and the church, and as such, the Abrahamic covenant is basically one-for-one with the new covenant. This is why, as I noted above, covenant theology can draw a direct line from the Abrahamic to the new covenant, which provides for them the warrant for their mixed

4. Horton, "A Covenant Theology Response," 198.

view of the church and carry over of covenantal signs. Horton appeals to the standard arguments for his view: the parable of the wheat and the tares (Matt 13:28-30); the warning texts; and Acts 2:39. However, none of these arguments prove his view for at least two reasons.

First, Horton doesn't account for how the previous covenants reach their fulfillment in Christ and thus the *newness* of Christ's people. Horton thinks that I make my argument by appealing to only one text (i.e., Jer 31:31-34), but this is incorrect. In the OT, the Prophets anticipated that in the new covenant *all* of God's people will *know* God and that *every* person will be born-indwelt-empowered by the Spirit, and receive the *full* forgiveness of sin (see Ezek 36:25-27; Jer 31:31-34; Joel 2:28-32; cf. Num 11:29). Furthermore, the NT announces that in Christ and his work the new covenant has arrived. This entails that the relationship between Christ and his people has changed; it's not by natural birth but spiritual birth that we enter the new covenant. For this reason, in the new covenant, the redefinition of Christ's people are not "you and your biological children" but people who savingly know God. One is "in Christ" not by circumcision of the flesh but by the Spirit's gracious work in rebirth and granting saving faith.

Second, Horton and covenant theology acknowledges that the new covenant is *now* here, but then they insist that the regenerate nature of the church is still future. But this does not explain how the NT understands inaugurated eschatology. Yes, we await our glorification, but the church *now* is the eschatological, "gathered" people identified with the "age to come." Christians are now citizens of the new Jerusalem (Heb 12:18-29) because we are no longer "in Adam" but "in Christ" (Eph 2:1-10). The church is the "new man" (Eph 2:11-22); the "new temple" in whom the Spirit dwells (1 Cor 6:19; Eph 2:21); the "new creation" (2 Cor 5:17); and presently raised and seated with Christ (Eph 2:5-6). Such a description requires a regenerate, believing people, something covenant theology does not account for given their mixed view of the church.

Why does covenant theology argue for their view of the church, especially given this NT description? It is largely due to the fact that covenant theology has not consistently worked out how God's one plan is revealed through the covenants and how in Christ all the promises, instruction, and typological patterns of the previous covenants are here now even though we await the final consummation. With the ratification of the new covenant change has come, especially regarding the *nature* of Christ's people. The church is no longer constituted as a "mixed" people, but those who are born of the Spirit, united to Christ, and justified before God.

Continuing the Conversation with Dispensational Theology

Darrell Bock and Mark Snoeberger's essays reflect different forms of dispensational theology. Yet, despite their significant differences, they have a similar metanarrative

centered on national Israel. In response, I will focus on three problems that result. First, they don't account for how God's unified plan unfolds through the covenants, starting in creation and reaching its fulfillment in Christ *and* the church. Second, given their dispensational storyline centered on national Israel and their use of either a "literal" and/or "complementary" hermeneutic, a number of conclusions are drawn that are difficult to square with the NT. Third, despite Bock's protestations to the contrary, dispensationalism has a difficult time accounting for the *theological-covenantal* significance of the church. The church is *not* merely a parenthesis in God's plan *or* a present-day illustration of what nation-states will be, but God's new humanity and new creation that are "a royal priesthood, and a holy nation" (1 Pet 2:9), and Christ's bride that is the only community that lasts forever. Let us look at each of these problems in turn.

Problems with Dispensationalism's Covenantal Storyline

Both Bock and Snoeberger affirm the importance of the covenants, but it's in their understanding of the relationships between the covenants that their differences emerge.

First, Snoeberger's application of the "Israel-church" distinction to the covenants results in a canonically indefensible view. For example, he asserts that the Noahic covenant is the first covenant that has no redemptive significance to it. Absent from his discussion is how the Noahic covenant is organically related to creation and Genesis 3:15, and that *through* Noah God's promises to save continue despite God's judgment. Also, he insists that the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenants, along with the new covenant are *only* for Israel and *not* for the church. Gentiles only benefit from Israel's covenants indirectly *via* national Israel, and the church (as a parenthesis in God's plan) is under no specific covenant. In Christ's first coming, the OT covenants were not fulfilled; they are only fulfilled when Israel is restored as a nation in the millennium and beyond. This entails that the promises of the previous covenants don't find their fulfillment in Christ *and* the church because Israel is *not* the church and the covenants are for Israel alone. For Snoeberger, this also means that given the *eternal* nature of circumcision (Gen 17:7), the land (Gen 17:8), Sabbath (Ex 31:17), and the Levites (Jer 33:18), these rites and offices will return to national Israel after the church age is complete.

However, the problem with all of these points is that it is difficult to defend canonically. Instead, a specific view of Israel-church is imposed on the biblical texts, which cannot account for OT and NT teaching (cf. Isa 1:26; 58:12; 60:14; 62:2, 4, 12; 65:15). The NT specifically applies the new covenant to the church (e.g., Luke 22:20; 2 Cor 3:7-18; Eph 2:11-22; Heb 8-10), and the NT teaches that the previous covenants are fulfilled in Christ *and* the church. Snoeberger admits that the NT applies OT Davidic texts to Christ (Ps 2, 45, 110; cf. Matt 1:1; Rom 1:3-4; Heb 1:3), but then insists that this *isn't* the fulfillment of the Davidic covenant. But the NT does teach

that Christ is the Davidic King who is *now* reigning (Rom 1:3-4; Heb 1:4-14), and this is why I contend that Snoeberger's view is difficult to square with the NT.

Significantly, Bock also rejects Snoeberger's version of dispensationalism. Bock, like Horton, divides the covenants into "promise" and "law:" the Abrahamic, Davidic, and the new covenant are "promise," while the Mosaic is "law," although Bock admits that within the Mosaic covenant there are also promises. Bock argues that the Mosaic (as a "law" covenant) has ended as a pedagogue (Gal 3:24) now that Christ has come. In Christ's coming a new dispensation has occurred, tied to the coming of Spirit, which results both in the "circumcision of the heart" (regeneration?) and the indwelling of the Spirit. Bock states: "Even though the OT called for a circumcision of the heart and hoped for such an inner capability, it did not arrive until the Spirit gave the capability to make it happen. This was a Novum in the program of God that stood at the center of the gospel."[5] This understanding raises an important question. If circumcision of the heart is only first realized in the church, then were OT saints ever regenerated or indwelt by the Spirit. If not, how did people come to saving faith by the regenerative work of the Spirit? I will grant that the Spirit's indwelling is unique to the new covenant, but not regeneration. What is different in the new covenant is not regeneration but that the *entire* community is regenerate *and* empowered by the Spirit, unlike "mixed" Israel whose leaders only experienced the empowering work of the Spirit. But given Bock's view, what exactly is his view of human sin and the need for the supernatural work of the Spirit in both the OT and NT people of God?

But leaving that point aside and returning to dispensationalism's understanding of the Bible's covenantal storyline, at least Bock, in contrast to Snoeberger, *rightly* insists that the OT covenants are for Israel *and* the church, which is much more true to the NT. Yet, Bock arrives at this correct conclusion by applying his questionable "complementary" hermeneutic, i.e., there is "literal" application of OT texts to national Israel (Jer 31:31) *and* an inaugurated "spiritual" application to the church. Thus, in the future, Jeremiah's new covenant will reach its fulfillment to national Israel entailing that it is only partially fulfilled in Christ and the church. In the consummation, God's one people (contra traditional dispensationalism's two peoples) consist of Israel *and* Gentile *nations* each receiving their inheritance according to their "structural diversity." Israel *as a nation* receives her land while believing Gentile *nations* receive their inheritance which is *different* than Israel's.

Overall, Bock's construction captures the basic storyline of Scripture and is much better than what Snoeberger offers. However, I am not convinced that his *complementary* hermeneutic is correct, which results in some differences of how we conceive of inaugurated eschatology, and more significantly how *all* of God's

5. Darrell L. Bock, "Progressive Dispensationalism," in *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture*, eds. Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 134.

promises are fulfilled in Christ *and* the church as the "new man." The church as constituted by believing Jews and Gentiles who equally receive all of the promises is the only people who enter the new creation as God's "nation" (1 Pet 2:9). But this biblical understanding of the church stands in contrast to Bock's who views the church as only a present-day illustration of what believing Jewish and Gentile nation-states will be in the future.

Why this dispensational covenantal plotline, which is obviously different from both covenant theology and progressive covenantalism? My answer: Dispensationalism doesn't consistently start with a creation covenant in Adam which culminates in Christ *and* his new covenant people, the church. Let me focus on two points that illustrate my point.

First, unlike Scripture, the dispensational covenantal storyline begins in Genesis 12 and not in Genesis 1, hence one of its main reasons for its rejecting a creation covenant. In fact, Bock admits quite frankly: "The idea of a creation covenant, prominent in covenant theology, has no role in dispensationalism."[6] Although, he admits the Bible's story starts with Adam, Bock is convinced that there is no textual evidence for a creation covenant. In fact, Bock views all covenants as post-fall and the first significant covenant is with Abraham that created a specific nation and a hope that ultimately culminates in Christ. Starting with the Abrahamic covenant, dispensationalism finds warrant to privilege Israel *as a nation*—a nation that is given distinct promises and receives distinct blessings different than Gentile nations. For Bock, the idea of "law" is not grounded in Adam/creation but only introduced in the Mosaic covenant, as a pedagogue coming alongside the Abrahamic covenant to administer the promise until Christ comes. The command in Genesis 2 has nothing to do with a covenant relationship; it is only given to manage the garden of earth before God. The warning of "death" and Adam's disobedience only excluded God from "their formation of moral judgment";[7] it had nothing to do with any notion of a covenant of works. For Bock, this means that "[t]he story of Scripture starts not in a legal connection but a regal, relational one… This relational core is a given for Scripture and it need not be covenantal… Legal appeals only become necessary when the relational link is damaged and needs restoration."[8] Bock also denies that in creation various typological patterns begin and are developed through the covenants such as the patterns of rest, Eden/temple/land, and Adam as a proto-prophet, priest, and king. Why? Because if this point is admitted, dispensationalism would have to tied everything back to creation/Adam and not Israel and the Abrahamic covenant.

6. Bock, "Progressive Dispensationalism," 134.

7. Darrell L. Bock, "A Progressive Dispensational Response," in *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture*, eds. Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 224.

8. Bock, "A Progressive Dispensational Response," 226-27.

However, the problem is that there is little biblical warrant to deny a creation covenant and various problems arise for those who do. Just because the word "covenant" is absent from Genesis 1-2 does not mean there is no covenant. No one denies that marriage or the promises made to David are covenants, but in both cases the word covenant is not found in Genesis 2 or 2 Samuel 7, something that is confirmed by later texts (e.g., Hos 6:7). Also, Bock dismisses the positive evidence for a creation covenant that I offer, which cannot be dismissed so easily especially given that Paul presents Adam and Christ as the two representative heads of humanity (Rom 5:12-21; 1 Cor 15:21-28; cf. Heb 2:5-18). How does Bock and dispensationalism account for this Adam-Christ typological relation (Rom 5:14), along with how Adam's sin is transmitted to all of us? Bock speaks of Adam in "relational" terms but in Scripture "relational" realities are always tied to covenants. Furthermore, Scripture begins in Genesis 1, not Genesis 12, and apart from grasping what is going on in Adam and a creation covenant, we misconstrue how Scripture moves from Adam to the last Adam.

Obviously, dispensational theology does not and cannot deny many of these points if they want to remain true to Scripture. But Bock is off when he does not see how important a creation covenant is to the Bible's entire storyline. By not starting with a creation covenant, the Bible's plotline veers in wrong directions. And by making the Abrahamic covenant *the* covenant by which all the covenants are understood, dispensationalism fails to locate the Abrahamic covenant in terms of its proper location in terms of what precedes and follows it. This is why Bock wrongly argues that *kosmos* in Romans 4:13 refers to "peoples" instead of the fact that Abraham believed that God's promise of land was tied to the inheritance of the new creation (cf. Gen 22:17b; 26:3; Heb 11:16). The latter option (which is true to the text and which does not deny its "literalness") makes the best sense if one locates the Abrahamic promise of land in terms of what precedes it, namely creation, and what follows it in the Bible's storyline, namely the dawning of a new creation. In other words, when properly located in Scripture, the Abrahamic covenant becomes the means by which Adam's sin is reversed and a new creation results. We know this is achieved by Christ, the last Adam who is Abraham's true, literal seed (Gal 3:16). As we walk through the covenants, the land promise is not only realized under the Mosaic covenant; it also becomes a typological pattern that first looks back to creation and what was lost, and forward to the dawning of a new creation, which is why Romans 4:13 refers to more than *peoples*.

Second, dispensationalism's view of the Bible's covenantal unfolding is disjointed which explains why it doesn't see consistently that *all* of God's promises are definitely fulfilled in Christ *and* the church. For example, when Bock discusses the Mosaic covenant he doesn't link it back to creation (although Moses does by putting Genesis before Exodus). Nor does Bock discuss the prophetic aspects of the covenant and their fulfillment in Christ—e.g., Passover, Exodus, Israel as son, Israel as a kingdom of priests who need Levitical priests, etc. All of these features (plus many more)

are emphasized by the Prophets, and find their fulfillment in Christ and the church, not in Israel as a nation in the future. In many ways, much of the richness of divine revelation is lost in the dispensational view.

This last observation is also seen in Bock's discussion of the David covenant and its relation to the previous covenants. Bock fails to discuss how the Davidic king, as son (2 Sam 7:14), becomes the *individual* representative of Israel—"true Israel"—who brings God's rule to the entire world (2 Sam 7:19b). Thus, in *this* Israelite, we discover who the "seed" is (Gen 3:15) and how *he* will reverse the effects of Adam's sin by his sacrificial death (Isaiah 53). But given the failure of the Davidic house, we also discover that it is only in David's *greater Son*—a king-priest (Ps 110)—who will inaugurate God's saving reign by effecting a new covenant. In him, *all* of God's promises to Israel, Abraham, and Adam are realized (Ps 2, 8, 72) *and* applied to the church (Matt 16:18; Eph 1:20-21; 1 Pet 2:9; Rev 21:2). No doubt, Bock and dispensationalists do not deny these truths but for dispensationalism, Christ *and* the church do not receive *all* the promises *in principle* now and then in fullness at Christ's return. Instead, the new covenant promises are divided between a *spiritual* application now for the church and a *literal* application in the future for national Israel. But this dispensational reading fails to start where the Bible starts, namely in Adam and creation and move to Christ and his church in the new creation.

Problems with Dispensationalism's Hermeneutic

In terms of hermeneutics, Snoeberger affirms an "original/literal" hermeneutic while Bock affirms a "literal/complementary" one. They both charge Horton and me with denying a "literal" reading of Scripture, which is simply false.

For example, both insist that my use of progressive revelation leads me to change the meaning of the OT text, especially regarding the promises to Israel. They also charge me with reading the NT back on the OT, instead of what I actually do: read texts in light of their location in canon. In fact, Bock thinks that I trace the progress of revelation through typology alone and this is how I warrant Christological fulfillment, which again is false. I have repeatedly argued that God's plan is unfolded *through the covenants* and that the covenants include *within* them promises, instruction, and patterns that develop and unfold from seed to full bloom. Additionally, both insist that I am a "supersessionist" regarding Israel. Bock says that I embrace a form of Platonism because I privilege the "spiritual" over the "physical," which is simply not true. What he really means is that I disagree with his view of national Israel. "Gentile inclusion does not mean original Israelite exclusion," we are told. But what does this charge amount to? I do not exclude Israel! Instead, I argue that *all* of God's promises are fulfilled in Abraham's literal seed, namely Christ, the true Israelite and last Adam whose people consist of elect Jewish and Gentiles believers. This is *not* "supersessionism"; it is God-intended fulfillment in Christ *and* the church.

Why do I argue this? Because of how the Bible's covenantal storyline unfolds from Adam to Christ. Instead, of these false charges being levied, what must be argued is *whose* understanding of the Bible's storyline is correct and whose hermeneutic is more accurate to Scripture.

In Bock and Snoeberger's discussion of my view of typology, both are fundamentally mistaken. Bock argues that my view of typology changes or cancels the meaning of the original context, which is incorrect. Snoeberger describes my hermeneutical approach as "typological interpretation," something I also reject. He says that I find "symbolic secrets" in the antitype and that I am "dismissive of authorial intent." In fact, he argues that my "Christological/typological" method is "unprecedented in any other known human literature, that wreaks havoc on the original intent of the OT,"[9] which is simply bizarre. The result: I seek "Christ in every single OT text,"[10] which is patently false. Or, I treat with suspicion any other appeal to the OT as "some sort of 'legalist' or 'moralist' reading,"[11] and that in my view, typology as an indirect form of predictive prophecy assumes "the idea of unconscious prophecy—i.e., prospective statements that could not be known to be prospective except retrospectively… without literary precedent." Ultimately, both Bock and Snoeberger charge me (and Horton) with diminishing the character of God because we deny specific promises made to national Israel.

All of these are very serious charges and all of them are simply false. I have repeatedly argued that I hold to *sensus literalis* which requires a grammatical-historical-canonical reading of Scripture. Scripture does not come to us all at once, but as a progress of revelation, and it is crucial that we read Scripture as an unfolding revelation to discover what God is saying through multiple human authors. There is one divine author of Scripture but multiple human authors, and a correct reading of Scripture requires an intertextual and canonical reading.

In terms of typology, it is a feature of divine revelation—an indirect form of predictive prophecy—that is *exegetically* derived *by attending to authorial intention* which also includes the authorial intention of later authors. Under divine inspiration, what later authors do is pick up on the earlier patterns as part of God's unfolding plan, which allows them (and us) to see that these persons, events, and institutions are not one-offs, but God-intended patterns that point forward to Christ. Thus, in light of Christ, we now know in a *warranted* way the referent of the OT types and promises and how God's plan is being fulfilled. "New" meanings are not being created, and we are certainly not reading the Bible typologically as if the Bible is one grand type.

9. Mark A. Snoeberger, "A Traditional Dispensational Response," in *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture*, eds. Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 243-44.

10. Snoeberger, "A Traditional Dispensational Response," 244.

11. Snoeberger, "A Traditional Dispensational Response," 244.

For example, think of how the seed theme develops in Scripture. It starts in Genesis 3:15, tied to the promise of God providing another Adam to reverse the effects of sin and crush Satan's head. By the progression of the covenants, the "seed" is given greater definition so that we learn the "seed" will come through Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Israel, and ultimately culminating in an individual, namely, David's greater Son. None of this requires a reading of "seed" in any way other than a proper meaning of *sensus literalis*. Or, think of Adam, who is presented in Scripture as a type of Christ (Rom 5:14). In the immediate context of Genesis, Adam is presented as the head of humanity, an image/son, priest-king who is to expand the borders of Eden (which is a temple sanctuary) to the entire creation. Through the covenants, the Adamic role continues via Abraham's offspring (Israel), and eventually epitomized in the Davidic king. The Prophets project into the future the promise of a new covenant in a greater David, true Israel, and last Adam, and the NT says that all of this is fulfilled in Christ (Rom 5; 1 Cor 15; Ps 8 in Heb 2; cf. Ps 110). Again, none of this is a "strange" reading of these texts but recognizing the exegetical clues in the immediate context, and then seeing how later authors develop these typological patterns, which all reach their fulfillment in Christ. The same is true about how Melchizedek functions in the OT, or how circumcision becomes typological of circumcision of the heart, or how priests and the entire tabernacle/temple structure points forward to a greater High Priest who becomes both offering and offering for us. We can also make the same point about how the exodus, Passover, David, Israel, and land function in their OT context and the entire canon.

The truth is that dispensationalism, especially progressive dispensationalism agrees with much of this except when it comes to national Israel. Dispensationalists do not deny that Adam leads to the last Adam (Rom 5:12-21; 1 Cor 15:21-23; cf. Heb 2:5-18). They may not call Adam a type that prophetically anticipates Christ to avoid viewing Israel also as typological of Christ. Yet, even Snoeberger has to admit that Adam is a "representative" figure of Christ. So what is denied is brought in the backdoor by another name. Or, Bock agrees that Genesis 3:15 is given greater definition throughout the OT that reaches fulfillment in Christ (Gal 3:16) with application to the church (Gal 3:29), but then demands a both/and hermeneutic to bifurcate "literal" from "spiritual" application. Or, Bock seems to affirm that covenantal figures such as Moses (Deut 18:15-18; Acts 3:12-26), the Levites (Heb 5-10), the Davidic kings (2 Sam 7; Isa 9:6-7; Matt 22:41-46; Acts 2:22-36; Heb 1:4-14), or the entire sacrificial system is fulfilled in Christ, yet they turn around without warrant to insist that they are not completely fulfilled in him.

In other words, in most of these types there is broad agreement, but then dispensationalists place national Israel in a different category. But in doing so, they fail to understand properly "Israel" within the Bible's covenantal storyline, starting with Adam and culminating in Christ. They fail to see that Israel as God's son (Ex 4:22-23; Hos 11:1; cf. Matt 2:15) looks back to Adam by taking on Adam's role in the

world, but also that Israel anticipates the coming of the true Son, the true Israel, the true servant, the true vine, who is Davidic greater Son.

The further problem with the dispensational hermeneutic, especially their failure to see how "Israel" functions in the Bible's metanarrative, is that they must affirm things that are difficult to reconcile with a canonical reading of Scripture. For example, Bock agrees that OT *sacrifices* are fulfilled in Christ but then to preserve the "literal" side of his hermeneutic, he argues that OT sacrifices will return in the future as commemorative (along with perpetual Levites, Jer 33:18, but see Isa 56:4-8). Bock even insists that the Lord's Supper is one such commemorative sacrifice. But the problem is that the Lord's Supper is not a "sacrifice;" it is a meal that celebrates how Christ fulfills the old covenant Passover, achieves a greater exodus-redemption by paying for our sin, and how Christ brings to fulfillment the entire sacrificial system. The only "sacrifice" we offer now is the "sacrifice of praise" (Heb 13:15). Furthermore, to argue that OT sacrifices return, even as commemorative, or that Levites return, doesn't account for how the old covenant was temporary and that Christ has brought *all* sacrifices and the role of the Levitical priests to their God-intended *telos* (see Heb 7:11-12; 8:1-13).

The same applies to Bock's treatment of the *temple*. Bock argues that Jesus fulfills the temple "spiritually" but not "literally" since the temple will return in the future. This is hard to justify canonically. The temple runs from creation to Christ (who is the true temple, John 2:19). In union with Christ, his people (individually and corporately) become temples (1 Cor 6:19; Eph 2:21-22). In the new creation there is no temple because the Lord and the Lamb is the temple (Rev 21:22). However, Bock's view entails that the Bible's storyline of temples is overturned by arguing that in the new creation the "structures" of nations, temples, sacrifices, feasts, and circumcision all return.

Or, given Snoeberger's even stricter Israel-church distinction and hermeneutic, he faces greater challenges. He argues that the new covenant has no application to the church, which is impossible to sustain. Further, he denies that Israel functions as a God-given type, first fulfilled in Christ and then his people. But how do we make sense of Galatians 3:29 and 1 Peter 2:9-10 that applies Israel language to the church? Or, if Abraham's literal seed is Israel, then how is Christ the true "seed" in Galatians 3:16? Or, how does James apply Amos 9 to the church as the temple in Acts 15? How does one explain how Israel's restoration promise in Joel 2 is applied to the church in Acts 2? Snoeberger answers by saying it is analogous, but this is special pleading.

Problems with Dispensationalism's Eccelesiology

In my response to dispensationalism, I contended that both forms of it deny that the church is *not* God's forever people in its present form. This is certainly the case with Snoeberger who views the church as a parenthesis in God's overall plan. But what

about Bock? Progressive dispensationalists affirm that there is only *one* people of God, which is much closer to covenant theology and my view. But the problem is that Bock cannot account for the *forever* reality of the church as God's "new man," "new creation," and "nation" (1 Pet 2:9). Why? Because for progressive dispensationalists, the church is only a present-day illustration of what believing *nations* will be in the future but eventually the church as a *theological-covenantal people* gives way to these distinct nations. Israel as a nation receives promises distinct from Gentile nations and both will co-exist in the new creation but the *church as the church* will not.

Bock pushes back on my charge that for him the church as God's *forever* people disappears or better morphs into Jewish and Gentile *nations*, which is difficult to sustain from the NT.[12] For example, think of how in the vision of the new creation, John sees the bride of the Lamb descend from heaven, which is Christ's church (Rev 21:2, 9). This confirms that it is only the church that lasts forever—the church who is constituted by believing Jews and Gentiles—who are the true eschatological Israel (1 Pet 2:9). Bock thinks that I miss what the "kingdom" is. He defines "kingdom" as the "spiritual communion of Israel and the nations reconciled in Christ and ultimately vindicated and living in shalom together in a new creation."[13] He further contends that the church is the inauguration of this future reality so that it is not correct to say that the church disappears. Instead, the church simply comes into its fulfillment as a phase of the kingdom. Yet, even with this caveat, Bock still has to admit that the church does not continue to exist as *the kingdom of priests and a holy nation*, but ultimately gives way to distinct nations.

Is our disagreement on this matter merely a splitting of theological hairs? After all, *all* of us will be there, and does it really matter if the final state consists of distinct believing nations (dispensationalism) or the church as *the nation comprised of all ethnicities* (my view)? As long as we are all there, what does it matter? It matters in this sense: it is important to get Scripture right on this point, especially since I am convinced that the dispensational vision of the future is not how the NT describes the nature of the church. In fact, to not get this point right affects how we understand the overall covenantal storyline of Scripture, which affects other doctrinal areas. In my view, what partly drives the dispensational vision of the future is that God has made outstanding promises to Israel as a nation, which they believe have never been fulfilled. But the problem with this view is that Scripture does not say there are outstanding promises for Israel since *all* of God's promises are yes and Amen in Christ and realized in his church.

Furthermore, viewing the church, and not national Israel and believing Gentile nations, as the forever, new creation people makes better sense of what the church is in the NT. After all, the NT speaks of the church as God's *new covenant people* (Heb 8-10), which Christ himself builds (Matt 16:18). In addition, as already noted,

12. Bock, "A Progressive Dispensational Response," 229-32.
13. Bock, "A Progressive Dispensational Response," 230.

the NT teaches that the church lasts *forever* as evidenced in Revelation 21 where she is identified as Christ's bride (vv. 2, 9) and she is also identified as the heavenly Jerusalem (cf. Heb 12:22-24). The church is God's *new temple* (1 Cor 6:19; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:21) which entails no further temples. The church (individually and corporately) is God's *new creation-humanity* identified with the "age to come" that lasts forever in its present form. As God's new humanity, the church consists of Jewish and Gentile believers who receive the same salvation and inheritance in Christ (Gal 3:15-4:7; Eph 2:11-22). All of this entails that the church as the *one new man* does not morph into distinct nations since the church is the "chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation" (1 Pet 2:9).

Bock responds by arguing that 1 Peter 2:9 *only* speaks of the church's unity but this is hard to justify, especially when the church is identified as the "Israel of God" (Gal 6:16). Nor, as Bock insists, is Ephesians 2 merely teaching that the church only "points to" the creation of something new "within the incorporation that Jew and Gentile share." No, the church *is* the people of the new creation; it is *not* a mere present-day illustration of what nations will be. Bock's argument bifurcates salvation from new creation structures because it does not properly trace out the Bible's covenantal storyline from creation to new creation. Bock contends that his view alone is holistic because it focuses on nations, while my view is overly individualistic, but this is again incorrect. In Scripture, there is no bifurcation between the individual and the corporate; both are affirmed. Furthermore, the church as a corporate entity consists of the elect from every nation which is now *the* nation and royal priesthood (1 Pet 2:9).

Bock further appeals to Luke-Acts and Romans 9-11 to warrant his view that Israel *as a nation* still must receive distinct promises different than Gentile nations, but the problems is that there is nothing in these texts that require his view. In Acts, for example, Jesus teaches his disciples about the *kingdom* and tells them to wait in Jerusalem for the promised Spirit (which is the OT restoration hope for Israel applied to the church).[14] When asked, "When are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6), Jesus answers their question: Israel's restoration is going to occur at Pentecost (Acts 2; cf. Joel 2) and in Jesus' reign starting in Jerusalem with Jewish believers, extending to Judea and Samaria (Acts 8, thus a reconstituted Israel), *and* to the nations (Acts 10-11). Jesus' response is drawn from Isaiah (32:15; 43:12; 49:6), which anticipates the day when God will save through his Servant, bring about Israel's restoration, and include Gentiles into that restoration program. This is precisely what is going on in the establishment of the church. The restoration begins with Israel and then to the nations (cf. Acts 3:26). In Christ and the church, *all* of God's promises are now being fulfilled; the church *is* the people of the new creation. This does not entail

14. Here are other OT restoration texts given to Israel that the NT applies to Christ and the church. For example, see Isa 42;3, 6b-7, 16; 49:5-6 in Luke 2:32; 26:23; Acts 13:47; 26:18. Amos 9:11-12 in Acts 15:16-18. Joel 2:28-32 in Acts 2:16-21 and Acts 10:44-48, 11:15-18. Isa 32:15, 43:10, 12; 49:6 in Acts 1:8. Isa 52:7; 57:19 in Eph 2:17ff. Jer 31:31-34 in Heb 8, 10. Heb 12:22-24 presents the church as the heavenly Jerusalem.

that God is finished with the Jewish people. I understand Romans 9-11 to teach that many ethnic Jews will come to faith in Christ, but there is nothing in this text that says that the church then morphs into distinct nations who receive different blessings. In Christ and the church, *all* of God's promises are realized (2 Cor 1:20).

Concluding Reflection

It has been an honor to participate in this continuing conversation about how best to understand the Bible's metanarrative and covenantal story from creation to Christ. All of the views represented agree on much, which I am thankful for. And in the times we live, it is necessary for us to work together for the larger cause of gospel proclamation and calling all people to bow to the Lordship of Christ. Yet, this in-house debate is important since God has given us his word in order to know him aright and to think about his glorious redemptive plan correctly. How we "put together" the Bible's covenantal story matters and it has significant theological implications in a whole host of areas, which requires our careful reflection. May our ongoing discussion in these matters lead to this end so that the church will be strengthened, encouraged, and challenged to bring our entire thought captive to Christ for God's glory and the life and health of the church.

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Covenant Theology: Continuing the Conversation

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Introduction

I would like to thank Drs. Parker and Lucas for the invitation to join this discussion.[1] I certainly cannot fill the shoes of Dr. Horton and I regret he could not be here. We agree on many issues related to covenant theology, including the broad structure of covenant theology, but we disagree on some important matters. He follows Meredith Kline more than I do. I don't distinguish law covenants from promise covenants, and I do not understand the Mosaic covenant as a republication of the covenant of works (COW). I apologize if it seems like the target has shifted a bit. In my circles there is Kline's views of the covenant and there is Murray's view. I appreciate the writings of both men, but I am a follower of neither one completely when it comes to the covenants. I hold to the more standard view of the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF). I am in a denomination that subscribes to that confession, always under the authority of Scripture. I have several responses to the other views and in those responses my views will become clear.

A Future for National Israel?

I want to respond to both traditional and progressive dispensationalists on an issue they have in common. Both emphasize the original meaning to Israel so that there is still a future for national Israel. The traditional dispensationalist (TD) argues for the priority of the original meaning of the text with a strict view of the intention of the human author that gives a binding authority to those intentions. The implications are that the NT does not have priority in interpreting the OT and the typological approach is rejected. The New Covenant (NC) itself is a renewed *suzerainty* covenant

1. Editor's Note: This essay was originally delivered in a session dedicated to Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies as part of the 2022 annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Denver, CO. The session was a follow up discussion between the contributors to *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture*, eds. Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022). Due to health-related reasons Michael Horton was not able to participate, so the Covenant Theology view was represented by Richard Belcher in this session.

sworn by Israel and *excludes Gentiles*. Thus, the church has *no* legal relationship to or participation in the NC.[2] The church has "no covenant unique to [it]," since "the church is [an intercalation] parenthetical to God's covenant program with Israel."[3] The church is thus subsidiary to and dependent on the primary relationship of Israel to the new covenant. This seems to place the mission of the nation of Israel more central to the NT than the Great Commission.

The progressive dispensational (PD) view is different in many ways, particularly they believe the new covenant is established by the death of Christ and it concerns the church, but I want to focus on something they have in common with the traditional view. There is a rejection of typology as used by Covenant Theology (CT) and Progressive Covenantalism (PC) because it cancels out a future for national Israel (not ethnic Israel). Bock terms this "covenantal suppression" which calls into question the character of God because he does not fulfill the promises he has made to Israel. The Mosaic covenant is obsolete and a future for national Israel is based on NT texts, such as Luke 22:16 where Jesus is supposed to refer to a future celebration of the Passover with his disciples (he also references Luke 13:34-35; Acts 1:8, 3:18-21). He seeks to maintain the unity of Jew and Gentile within the structural diversity of Jews and Gentiles in the one new man and in the future role for national Israel.

I don't think either view takes seriously enough the radical nature of what the book of Hebrews teaches. The OT institutions related to the promises of God are shadows of both a heavenly reality and a future fulfillment in Christ. Hebrews 8:5 confirms Exodus 25:9, 40 that the tabernacle is made from a heavenly pattern when it says that the high priests of the OT serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. This suggests that the earthly tabernacle was provisional in character,[4] pointing forward to a future fulfillment in the coming of Christ. When Christ came, he obtained a ministry that was more excellent than the old because the covenant he mediates is better since it is enacted on better promises (Heb. 8:6). The OT institutions of the priesthood and temple are only a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of the heavenly realities (Heb. 10:1). Christ is better in every way and the Jewish people cannot go back to the shadows of the OT institutions.

The book of Hebrews also makes the point that God's people in the OT were looking for more than an earthly fulfillment of the promises that God had made to them. The land of Canaan was not God's highest goal for his people even in the OT. The fact that God's rest was not just referring to the promise of earthly land is confirmed when we are told that Joshua did not lead God's people to rest: "For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on"

2. Mark A. Snoeberger, "Traditional Dispensationalism," in *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture*, eds. Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 175-176.

3. Snoeberger, "Traditional Dispensationalism," 177.

4. Scott Swain, "New Covenant Theologies," in *Covenant Theology*, eds. Waters, Reid, Muether (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 564.

(Heb. 4:8). The highest goal is that the people would join God in his eternal rest by faith.[5] According to Hebrews 11:13-16 the faith of OT believers was forward looking because they did not view this world as their real home but "acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth" (v. 13). They were seeking something beyond the earthly promise of a homeland to a better heavenly country, a city prepared by God (vv. 14-16). OT believers lived and died in a state of anticipation as they waited for the better things that would come in Christ.[6] Abraham himself understood that the land was a shadow of a final heavenly dwelling place.[7] Thus, I would argue that Hebrews does not cancel out the promises made in the OT. Those promises are fulfilled in Christ in a way that brings about a greater reality of those promises in the ministry of Christ as our high priest and in the way God is present with his people. The shadows of the old covenant have fulfilled their purpose and God's people now experience the fuller reality of what God had promised.

I also have questions about a future for national Israel. How can there be a future for national Israel if the constitution of national Israel (the Mosaic Covenant) is obsolete? In fact, part of the argument of the book of Hebrews is that not only is the Mosaic covenant obsolete, but so are the institutions that are so closely related to it, the Levitical priesthood and the temple. If the shadow realities of the Mosaic covenant are made normative for a future national Israel, it fractures the unity of Jew and Gentile in the New Covenant and leads to several false dichotomies. Does Israel continue to offer commemorative sacrifices at a rebuilt temple and participate in the Passover instead of participating in the LS? Part of the purpose of the Lord's Supper is to demonstrate the unity between those who partake of it, including Jews and Gentiles (1 Cor. 10:14-17). Why would a Jewish person want to participate in a shadow reality when Christ has come to inaugurate the full reality of God's presence in Christ? The book of Hebrews is saying that Christ's priestly ministry in the throne room of God is much better and to go back to the old way is a rejection of Christ. Jesus' priesthood is better than the Levitical priesthood (7:11-28). Jesus ministers in the greater and more perfect tent, not the earthly copy of the heavenly realities (the tabernacle/ temple). Jesus brings the full reality of what the Levitical priesthood and the temple represented. Why would anyone want to go back to the shadows of the old covenant?[8]

5. Michael J. Kruger, *Hebrews For You* (The Good Book Co., 2021), 53.

6. Eric Brian Watkins, *The Drama of Preaching* (Wipf & Stock, 2016), 94, 112-113.

7. Vern S. Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (P&R, 1991), 71.

8. Schreiner goes so far as to even describe the sin of apostasy in Hebrews as that of turning back to the Levitical cult. See Thomas R. Schreiner, *Hebrews: Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic Press, 2020), 324–25.

God's Relationship with Adam before the Fall

I also want to respond to both PD and PC on an issue they seem to have in common. PD argues that there was no COW, only a call to trust in God. God made no covenant with Adam but just called people to carry out their responsibilities to him as Creator made in his image. Genesis 1-2 does not give a "do this and live" command. The warning of not eating from the tree or you will die meant that humans were to trust God for the knowledge of good and evil. Faith, not works, was the issue from the start.[9] The story of Scripture did not start in a legal connection but a regal, relational one.[10] However, Bock also acknowledges that there is a command given to Adam not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. He also agrees that with that command comes accountability with the warning of consequences should they disobey that sounds very legal).[11] I would argue that God gave Adam a probationary test of obedience before the Fall that makes God's relationship with Adam before the Fall different from his relationship to Adam after the Fall (which I hope to show in a moment).

Wellum has a much better view of the relationship of God with Adam before the Fall. He understands Adam as the legal representative of humanity and that the obligation for perfect obedience to the law continues after the Fall. These things are foundational for the forensic nature of justification by faith and the Adam/Christ relationship that Paul develops in Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15. But he does not want to bifurcate creation in terms of two covenants (a COW before the Fall and a Covenant of Grace [COG] after the Fall).[12] Perhaps he is reacting to Horton's view that covenants are either law or promise covenants. I don't take that view, but I think it is important to recognize that God deals with Adam before the Fall differently than after the Fall (the COW is different than the COG). The command that God gave to Adam before the Fall not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil came with a clear statement of the consequence of what would happen if Adam or Eve disobeyed the command: in the day you eat from it you will surely die. Adam had the ability to keep this specific command. It was a "do this and live" command because if Adam had obeyed, he would not have experienced the consequences of sin. Those consequences had not yet entered the relationship between Adam and God. Adam had a warm relationship with God and was meeting with him regularly in the Garden

9. Darrell L. Bock, "A Progressive Dispensational Response," in *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture*, eds. Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 224.

10. Bock, "A Progressive Dispensational Response," 226.

11. Darrell L. Bock, "Progressive Dispensationalism," in *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture*, eds. Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 135.

12. Stephen J. Wellum, "A Progressive Covenantalism Response," in *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture*, eds. Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 207

for fellowship. There was no need of a mediator and no need of redemptive grace. God's benevolence toward creation is evident as he showered kindness, goodwill, and many gifts and favors on those whom he had created.

After the Fall we see the consequences of sin and God's relationship with Adam is much different. They hide from God when he comes into the Garden (Gen. 3:8). They tried to cover their shame and guilt with fig leaves (Gen. 3:7), but God must cover them with animal skins (Gen. 3:21). God promised the coming of a mediator to deal with the enmity that now existed between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). God responded to the sin of Adam and Eve with redemptive grace because there was the need of redemption and of a mediator. God's response of grace is initiated in Genesis 3 and is further developed in the covenants of the OT which includes the development of the identity of the mediator.

One of Dr. Wellum's criticisms is that CT loses the organic nature of divine revelation and how each covenant step-by-step discloses God's plan reaching its fulfillment in Christ and the NC. Perhaps some have flattened the covenants, but a robust CT would see that there is one COG with a progression of unity in the different covenants related to the identity of the mediator, the basis of salvation, and the development of the promises of God. The goal of the COG is that God would dwell among his people (Gen. 17:7; Exod. 6:7; 2 Sam. 7:14; Ezek. 36:28; Jer. 31:33; 2 Cor. 6:16; Rev. 21:3). There is a unity of the people of the covenant related to the faith they share in God's promises and in a coming mediator. There is unity in the way of salvation expressed in the same promise of eternal life, the same mediator, and the same emphasis on faith. Each covenant will have its distinctive emphases, but the promises given in each covenant will be continued in the subsequent covenants until they are fulfilled in the NC. Finally, each covenant will also administer the blessings of that covenant to God's people so that they will experience those blessings through faith.[13]

The newness of the NC relates to all the different ways that Christ has brought to fruition the promises of the old covenant into the lives of God's people through faith. Believers experience a dynamic reality through the power of the Holy Spirit in sanctification, the gifting of God's people, and mission. But the newness is not absolute. God is not starting over with something only marginally related to the old covenant. The word for "new" (*kainē*) speaks of progression, not novelty.[14] It's a movement from an acorn to an oak, or as a colleague of mine has stated, from a puppy to a dog, not a puppy to a cat.[15]

13. WCF 7.5 states that the COG was 'for that time, sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation'.

14. Stephen G. Meyers, *God to Us: Covenant Theology in Scripture* (Reformation Heritage Books, 2021), 248.

15. Swain, "New Covenant Theologies," 553.

The Church as God's Regenerate People

I appreciate that Dr. Wellum's response to CT begins by listing the areas of agreement. It is very helpful and sets some parameters over against dispensationalism. His two criticisms of CT are that we fail to follow the Bible's own covenantal presentation and so impose our own covenantal system on Scripture and that we do not fully account for the church's newness as a regenerate people of God. Concerning the first criticism, I have already tried to show Scripturally that there is a difference in the way God responds to Adam before and after the Fall. After the Fall it is by redemptive grace in the outworking of that grace in the different covenants of the OT (Adam [Genesis 3], Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David). I think if you compared how I understand Scripture's unfolding of these covenants with Wellum, there would be a lot of agreement until we get to the New Covenant.

Wellum also argues that CT fails to account for the newness of the church as God's regenerate people in contrast to Israel. This means, according to Jeremiah 31:34, that in the NC everyone who becomes a part of the covenant community is a regenerate believer. Wellum makes two kinds of statements that should be kept separate because they deal with two different viewpoints. First, he states that "The NT knows nothing of one who is in Christ who is not regenerate, effectually called by the Father, born of the Spirit, justified, holy, and awaiting glorification."[16] I agree with this statement if one looks at God's people from the standpoint of election. Everyone united to Christ will receive the blessings of salvation.

But secondly, he also states, "the new people [NC people] will all be regenerate… the entire community will know God and obey from the heart."[17] He wants to argue that all the members of the NC community, which is the church, are regenerate. These statements conflate election with covenant membership. The problem is that our perspective of who is in the NC is very different than God's perspective. None of us know for sure when someone makes a profession of faith and is baptized, that they are a genuine believer who is united to Christ, yet they become members of the visible church.[18]

There are several things I would say in response to the necessity of a fully regenerate covenant community.

16. Stephen J. Wellum, "Progressive Covenantalism," in *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture*, eds. Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 107.

17. Wellum, "Progressive Covenantalism," 98.

18. After the panel discussion at ETS it was clear to me that Wellum holds the classic "visible-invisible" distinction of the church. However, the difference between our positions came down to defining "new covenant membership." Wellum sees that the real benefits of salvation come with joining the covenant community. I hold to a two-fold nuance: (1) the legal aspect of the covenant; and (2) the saving aspect of the covenant. I defend below why I hold this.

1) The Promises of Jeremiah 31 are at the Heart of this Discussion

Some PC's argue that the problem of the Old Covenant was that it could not solve the problem of apostasy and that the NC is intended to remedy apostate covenant members (Heb. 8:9).[19] I would agree that is true eschatologically. In other words, part of the reason the Mosaic covenant failed was because it could not bring to eschatological fulfillment its promises. The New Covenant will bring to eschatological fulfillment its promises. But the promises experienced by believers in the NC are not fully realized eschatologically now because we are in a "already/not yet" situation related to salvation. Wellum recognizes this when he states,

> The Holy Spirit gives a down payment of our salvation to come. We have only the first fruits. We now experience salvation rest entered into by faith in Christ, yet the fullness of that rest awaits the dawning of a new creation. NC believers are now the temple, individually and corporately, and yet we await the new creation where there will be no need for a temple. Lastly the promise of a transformed obedient people participates in the already-not yet dynamic.[20]

I agree with Wellum's analysis of the "already/not yet" character of the promised blessings of salvation stated in Jeremiah 31 but would also apply the "already/not yet" character to the nature of the NC community. It seems like these are a package deal. How can the NC promises of salvation in Jeremiah 31 partake of the "already/not yet" character but the NC community also promised in Jeremiah 31 not partake of that same "already/not yet" character? Not until Christ comes will the church experience the full reality of a purified church. Even if you start with faith as the basis of membership, you need church discipline to keep the church pure.

2) The NT Affirms the "already/not yet" Character of the NC Community

CT emphasizes that the NC itself includes personal, corporate, and legal aspects. There is a legal aspect of the covenant that relates to the administration of the covenant that continues in the NC. In other words, someone can be in the NC legally (externally), without having a saving relationship with Christ. I think the following passages support this.

a. Jesus affirms this view in the parable of the four soils where some receive the word with joy and endure for a while, but persecution or the cares of the world cause them to fall away and they do not bear fruit (Mark 4:16–19).

19. Christopher W. Cowan, "The Warning Passages of Hebrews and the New Covenant Community," in *Progressive Covenantalism*, eds. Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E. Parker (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016), 197.

20. 101-104. See also Cowan, "The Warning Passages of Hebrews and the New Covenant Community," 200. He writes, "Viewing God's promises and warnings through the already-but-not yet orientation of the NT is therefore essential" 200.

b. Jesus also warns those who are *in him* that if they do not bear fruit, they can be removed from the vine (John 15:2), like Judas Iscariot.

c. The administration of the covenant is the same in the NC as it was in the Old Covenant (Rom. 11:13–24):

   i. Paul expresses unity between Israel and the church in the olive tree with the root of the tree representing the OT foundation that paved the way for the coming of Christ and the inclusion of Gentiles.

   ii. Paul makes the point in v. 16 that if the root is holy, so are the branches; there is no distinction made concerning the spiritual condition of the branches. They are holy by being connected to the olive tree whose root is holy – this concept first refers to Jews of the Old Covenant and then to Gentiles of the NC.

   iii. Some of the Jewish branches, that were declared holy because of their connection to the root, were broken off so Gentiles could be added in; the branches were removed because of unbelief.

   iv. Paul tells Gentiles, wild olive shoots, that they were grafted in and share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, but they should not be arrogant toward the branches. The Jewish branches were broken off because of their unbelief but you (Gentiles) stand fast through faith. Paul warns the Gentiles that if God did not spare the natural branches neither will he spare them. If they do not continue in his kindness, they too will be cut off. Gentiles are holy because they are engrafted into the olive tree and they stand fast through faith, but they can be cut off because of unbelief.

   v. Paul teaches that for Jews and Gentiles there is a status of holiness that comes from being part of the covenant that is separate from the inward holiness that is the Spirit's work; this status of holiness refers to the legal aspect of the covenant, which continues in the NT.

3) The Warning Passages in Hebrews are also Significant in this Discussion

A. I don't disagree with the view that the warning passages can be a means of salvation (the PC view), but there is more going on in these passages than just a warning as a means of salvation. This becomes clear in the fourth warning of Hebrews 10:26-31. The nature of the sin is characterized as being done willfully and as an ongoing rebellious act (present active ptc). This sin does not describe the normal ongoing struggles with sin but is a deliberate act of rebellion against God (Num 15:30-31), a persistent lifestyle that repudiates the truth of the gospel which they once received. For such high-handed sins there

no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but only a terrifying coming judgment. Such a person "has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified" (10:29). Some argue that "sanctification" here must refer to genuine believers, but that does not fit the specific context of the description of high-handed rebellion nor the larger scope of Hebrews where perseverance is a criterion for true Christian identity (Heb. 3:6, 14). Hebrews 3:7-19 draws a parallel between Israel and the church where the current condition of the church which is struggling to persevere is parallel to Israel in the wilderness. In both cases perseverance is evidence of faith by which those in Israel and the church will enter the promised rest (3:6, 14).[21] Sin and unbelief will deny them entry (3:12–13, 17–19; 4:2, 6, 11). There is a warning that the church should also not respond to the word of God by hardening their hearts. The apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 10 also parallels the church with Israel and warns them not to respond the way Israel responded. We face the same temptation as Israel of rebellion against God through unbelief. Paul also says "Do not be idolators, as some of them were (10:7)." And then twice "We must not do…as some of them did (10:8 related to sexual immorality and 10:9 related to putting Christ or the Lord to the test).

B. The view that the warning passages in Hebrews are a means of salvation only gives one side of the coin. The warnings are a means of salvation for those who are true believers but the author of Hebrews warns the church about not hardening their hearts in chapters 3-4. Since we do not absolutely know those who are true believers and those who are not, the warning passages legitimately apply to both.[22] The true evidence of a genuine believer in all these situations is persevering faith. Those who are truly in Christ will persevere, those who are only legally connected to the covenant will not persevere.

It seems then that even if someone makes a profession of faith, is baptized and becomes a member of the church, they participate in the blessings of the covenant by taking the Lord's Supper, by hearing the word preached, and by enjoying the fellowship of the saints, and thus such a person would be considered part of the covenant community. Notice the terminology used to describe such members in Hebrews 6:4-6: "who have once been enlightened," "who have tasted the heavenly gift," "have shared in the Holy Spirit," "have tased of the good word of God and the powers of the age to come." For those who have experienced such things and then have fallen away, Hebrews goes

21. Isaac Noh, "Falling from the Greatest Height: An Exegetical Study of Hebrews 10:26-31," unpublished paper but it can be accessed at https://rts.edu/campuses/charlotte/students/pen-and-parchment/Winter and Spring 2022.

22. Richard P. Belcher, Jr., *The Fulfilment of the Promises of God: An Explanation of Covenant Theology* (Christian Focus, 2020), 247, n. 50.

> on to say that it is impossible to restore them again to repentance since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.

DA Carson writes:

> "like other NT books the Epistle to the Hebrews allows for a kind of transitory faith, a form of conversion which, like the seed sown on rocky soil, has all the signs of life, but which does not persevere. The Spirit brings initial enlightenment; the person enjoys the word of God (like the one in Mark 4 who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy), and tastes something of the power of the coming age: perhaps old habits fall away, and a new love for holiness and for God and his reign emerge. But… none of this is enough: there must also be perseverance."[23]

4) Let Me Say a Further Word about the Idea of a Mixed Community

I can agree with Wellum about the church when he writes,

> "the church is now the eschatological, "gathered" people identified with the "age to come." Christians are now citizens of the new Jerusalem (Heb. 12:18–29) because we are no longer in Adam but in Christ. The church is the new man (Eph. 2:11–22); the new temple in whom the Spirit dwells (1 Cor. 6:19; Eph. 2:21); the new creation (2 Cor. 5:17); and presently raised and seated with Christ (Eph. 2:5-6)."[24]

This fits the perception of the church in my Presbyterian circles. The WCF faith uses the phrase "gathering and perfecting the saints." It is not as if Presbyterian churches have the goal of many unbelievers – a large mixed community. I am sure there are both Presbyterian and Baptist churches that have many more members on the roll than faithful attenders. I think this kind of mixed community is unbiblical. But I believe it is impossible to have a completely pure covenant community this side of the second coming.

When Peter on the day of Pentecost declared that "the promise is for you and for your children, and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself" he was speaking largely to a group of Jewish men who would have understood that promise in a certain way considering their Jewish background. The promise would be for them through faith but then also for their children. This promise was also for Gentiles who are far off.[25]

23. D. A. Carson, "Reflections on Christian Assurance," *WTJ* 54 (1992): 20.

24. Wellum, "A Progressive Covenantalism Response," 210.

25. When *hosos* is used with *an* it makes the expression more general, as in Matthew 22:9 and Luke 9:5, not more restrictive (*BDAG*, 729)

Children are considered part of the church. In Ephesians 6 Paul frames his instructions to children in covenant language saying, "children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right" and then quotes the third commandment. As parents, we sing and pray with our children, and we encourage them to trust in Jesus and if they do not, eventually they would experience the negative consequences of not trusting in Jesus.

In the NT's account of the church and in our experience, the church is both glorious and full of problems. Paul addresses the church in Corinth as "those sanctified in Christ Jesus" (1 Cor. 1:2) and then in chapter 5 he excommunicates a member involved in sexual immorality. The letters of the NT are written to the church to strengthen the faith of those who believe, but there is also warning to those who are in danger of falling away. If someone makes a profession of faith, becomes a member of the church, but then starts to live in a way that denies Christ, the proper response is to start the process of church discipline, hoping it will lead to restoration. They are part of the community and must be removed from the community, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 5:12, quoting from Deut. 17:7, "Purge the evil person from among you." Such people are legally, outwardly, and visibly part of the church (the visible church). Of course, from God's perspective, he knows who are his.

I think both Baptist and Presbyterian churches need church discipline to maintain a pure, regenerated church because there are some who become part of the NC community whose professions of faith are not genuine. Not until Christ comes will the corporate church experience the full reality of a purified church. Even if you start with faith as the basis of membership, you need church discipline to keep the church pure.

Book Reviews

Wells, Tom, and Fred G. Zaspel. *New Covenant Theology: Description, Definition, Defense*. Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2002, $79.99. Paperback.

How one puts together the Old and New Testaments is a massive conversation. Does one emphasize continuity or discontinuity between the testaments? How does one understand the relation between Israel and the church? What do those in the New Covenant do with the Old Covenant law? And on and on one could go asking relevant questions on this topic. Any endeavor to bring clarity to these questions and this conversation is both a daunting and a needed task, which is why I am thankful for the time-honored classic *New Covenant Theology: Description, Definition, Defense* by Tom Wells and Fred Zaspel. Though written over twenty years ago, this work brings clarity and conviction to this conversation from a New Covenant Theology (NCT) perspective that is still relevant today.

Tom Wells is a writer and preacher who lives in West Chester, Ohio. He pastored The King's Chapel (Reformed Baptist Church) in West Chester for nearly thirty years. He has published several books including *Come to Me!*, *Christian: Take Heart!*, *A Price for a People*, *The Moral Basis of Faith*, and *A Vision for Missions*. Fred Zaspel serves as a pastor at Reformed Baptist Church in Franconia, Pennsylvania, adjunct professor of systematic theology at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, executive editor of Books at a Glance, and a project editor at The Gospel Coalition. He has written several books including *The Theology of B.B. Warfield: A Systematic Summary*, *Warfield on the Christian Life: Living in Light of the Gospel*, and *The New Covenant and New Covenant Theology*.

The authors begin the book with a preface that sets the stage for all that follows. In their preface, they offer five justifications for their work and then they work through each justification in depth in the first chapter. Perhaps the most important justification which affects the foundation of NCT as a system is the need to read the OT in light of the NT. As they state on page 14, "We must certainly read the rest of Scripture in light of the apex of revelation, which is the NT. Read it all we must! But which testament controls our thinking and which we use for finetuning is the all-important consideration." Continuing this line of thought, chapter one offers a defense of each of the five justifications from the preface. In this chapter, Wells relates the goal of NCT by stating, "It is to join together three things: the logical priority of the NT over the Old, the logical priority of Lord Jesus over his godly predecessors, and the logical priority of the theology of the text over our own theologies and those of others" (p. 22). If one needed a summary of what NCT was all about, this would be it.

In the rest of the book, the authors offer a description of divine revelation and how it climaxes in the NT Scriptures (chapter 2), a thorough description of the New

Covenant (chapters 3-4), a nearly exhaustive treatment of Matthew 5:17-20 and its implications on this conversation (chapters 5, 6, 7, 8), a discussion about the continued relevance of Divine law (chapter 9), a discussion about the meaning and source of moral law (chapter 10), a response to a critic of their view (chapters 11-12), a couple of test cases in which their view is related to the Sabbath (chapters 13-14), and, finally, a chapter on how Creeds affect one's understanding on this topic (chapter 15).

Wells and Zaspel's *New Covenant Theology* is a fascinating and thoughtful work that is sure to stimulate the minds of almost every reader. Their writing is clear, convictional, and enjoyable. For the purpose of this review, positive evaluations will be discussed first, and then critical evaluations will follow.

First, Wells and Zaspel give a great amount of attention to one of the most debated aspects in the covenantal/dispensational conversation, that is, the relation of the Christian to the Law of Moses. Arguably, this is the focus of the entire book. Though NCT theologians are often accused of being antinomians, Wells and Zaspel are quick to dismiss this claim and provide further clarity of their view. They write,

> Jesus is to Moses what the butterfly is to the caterpillar. Moses is not struck down. Moses did not "fall" (Luke 16:17). Nor was he "destroyed" (Matt. 5:17). Moses is "fulfilled." In Christ, Moses reaches maturity and emerges in full bloom. Moses' law still has relevance, but only as it comes to us from the hands of the Lord Jesus. Christians today must still read Moses, and for great profit, but when they read him they must be careful to wear their Christian lenses. Moses' law is not simply incorporated into the New Covenant as it was revealed through Moses–it is fulfilled, advanced, and brought to completion (p. 157).

In other words, they do not denigrate the law; instead, they emphasize its fulfillment in Christ and clearly state that it is still relevant to the Christian today, but only through the interpretive lens of Christ. While some may not be convinced of their argument, accusations that Wells and Zaspel advance antinomianism is unfounded and based upon a misunderstanding of what they are saying.

Second, the irenic spirit throughout the book, especially when interacting with the views of others and critics, is to be commended. Wells and Zaspel seem to desire honest and informed conversation on this incredibly important topic. Though passions often rage when these matters are discussed, their book is a welcome example of thoughtful interaction and charitable dialogue.

Next, and shifting to the critical evaluation, one weakness is that there is not enough time spent on other texts/topics related to the covenantal/dispensational conversation. They spend a significant amount of time on Matthew 5:17-20 (4 chapters!) and the law but give a more cursory survey of other relevant texts and topics. For example, an extended discussion on Hebrew 8 or 2 Corinthians 3 would have been helpful in further delineating their views, as well as a more thorough discussion

on NCT's view of the church and Israel, baptism, the covenant of redemption/works/grace, etc. It is not that Wells and Zaspel ignored these matters altogether, it is rather that they were not sufficiently dealt with in detail. In other words, in order to advance the covenantal/dispensational conversation and perhaps persuade one to become a NCT theologian, more explanation of the fundamental points of divergence between the various systems is needed.

For those unfamiliar with NCT, this resource is a great place to begin learning more about its distinctives and viewpoints. Though several other books on NCT have been printed since this volume first came on the market, *New Covenant Theology* remains a classic representation and defense of NCT. Wells and Zaspel have penned a thoughtful and insightful work that will challenge the thinking of almost every reader. This reviewer recommends it.

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Schreiner, Thomas R. *The Joy of Hearing: A Theology of the Book of Revelation*. Wheaton, IL.: Crossway, 2021, 208 pp., $19.99, paperback.

Thomas R. Schreiner (Ph.D., Fuller Theological Seminary) is the James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation, professor of Biblical Theology, and Associate Dean of the School of Theology at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Schreiner has published widely in biblical studies and theology. Schreiner has served extensively as a pastor, which flavors the purpose and tone of this work as an aid to students, preachers, and laypeople.

In seven chapters, Schreiner overviews theological themes in Revelation. While he decisively interacts with other scholarship, lingering eschatological questions, and historical issues, he attempts to pursue the book's arguments according to its inner logic and structure. The seven "blessed" sayings of Revelation (Rev 1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9, 20:6; 22:7, 14) serve as a summary of the various aspects of God's gift of revealing his plan to the faithful as they encompass revelation, alertness, martyrdom, resurrection, obedience, calling, and cleansing. The point of these apocalyptic visions and the corresponding apocalyptic text is to symbolically reveal the divine perspective on history and unseen realities usually inaccessible to human beings. This access, the ability to hear and receive the message God is trying to tell and the reality he is unveiling, produces joy in the hearer. Hearing serves as a metaphor for grasping God's plan. However, the beatific vision of Revelation is not limited to understanding and comprehension but also obedience.

The first chapter explains the opponents of God, those who refuse to believe his message but have thrown in their lot with his enemies (e.g., false prophet, beast, Rome). The following chapter contrasts the spiritually deaf with those who can hear God's call. They are charged to remain faithful amid tribulation (a threat not

relegated to believers in another era but a reality through all of history). Chapter three is a thematic look at God's sovereignty, holiness, and judgment, a necessary reminder for believers amid suffering. Judgment is comforting for the faithful. The next chapter focuses on Christ as lion and lamb and proceeds to demonstrate the high Christology of the letter. Chapter five stands out for its focus on the Holy Spirit, an often-underdeveloped theme in other treatments of Revelation. With chapter three focusing on the sovereign rule of God from his throne, the Son of God in chapter four, and the Spirit in chapter 5, Schreiner naturally highlights the Trinitarian flavor of the text (*contra* the unholy trinity of the dragon and two beasts). The penultimate chapter highlights the forward-focused nature of Revelation, meant to direct the reader's heart toward the future. The final chapter serves as a self-described appendix dealing with millennial interpretations.

Schreiner produces a worthy inaugural volume in Crossway's New Testament Theology series. This volume represents beautiful biblical theology and the best kind of pastoral theology. It is academically responsible, pastorally sensitive, and well-written (a sometimes-rare characteristic in academic circles). The hidden gem of each chapter is the summary section, connecting the message of Revelation to believers today. The intended audience will discover troves of helpful material in these concluding remarks.

If the book suffers from any challenge, it is simply the difficulty of remaining what it intends to be. Schreiner's discipline in taking his cues from the themes of Revelation is noteworthy. Nevertheless, a book as debated and nebulous as Revelation with related eschatological questions and controversies is bound to push whatever limits the author intended. As such, the organization can sometimes be uneven. By trying to keep the volume thematic and readable, specific topics are bundled in odd places. For example, why is the discussion of the 144,000 elect and the dragon sandwiched in a chapter on Jesus Christ, the promised lamb that will overcome? The discussion itself is excellent, but the placement is perplexing, highlighting the challenge of this type of work.

In his chapter on the Holy Spirit, Schreiner highlights the often-underemphasized role of the Spirit in this text. However, this chapter, with the potential for a unique contribution to the field, is also the shortest. It seems that Schreiner has tapped into a vein ripe for more exploration, as demonstrated in recent works, such as Brandon Smith's forthcoming *The Trinity in the Book of Revelation: Seeing Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in John's Apocalypse* (Downers Grove, IL.: IVP Academic, 2022) and Jamieson and Wittman's *Biblical Reasoning: Christological and Trinitarian Rules for Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022), mainly chapter three which uses Revelation as a test case for a trinitarian understanding of the theology of Holy Scripture.

Schreiner focuses on understanding the message revealed but I would be interested in more discussion regarding the form of the message as Scripture.

Revelation opens with an admonition to read and hear (i.e., understand) in the first chapter and a warning not to add or take away from the "words of the book" (Rev 22:19) in the last. These prophetic bookends highlight the scriptural nature of this prophecy. John is relaying the message of Jesus, in the Spirit. What is the relation between John's words and the Spirit's words? How does the reader encounter the very words of God in the text of Revelation? For there is no "joy of hearing" unless the "words of this prophecy" are first "read" (Rev 1:3), and such a development has important implications for understanding the nature of Christian Scripture.

The author tries to relegate outside eschatological concerns to excurses (e.g., 144,000, Bauckham's understanding of the seals). However, such questions continue to force themselves into the body of the work, most notably in the final chapter on the Millennial Kingdom and its various interpretations. One can hardly fault him for dealing with external theological questions, as most modern readers will come to a volume such as this looking for answers. Schreiner handles such questions fairly when they intrude (e.g., apocalyptic literature, preterism, great tribulation, millennial views, dispensationalism, etc.) but herein lies the challenge. Because this volume is a disciplined attempt to be a self-contained biblical theology of Revelation, it struggles to be what it is. As much as the inner logic of the text is the driving force, outside demands continue to infringe. Readers approaching this volume for answers to every eschatological lacuna will be disappointed. However, Schreiner's volume is an unparalleled guide for the student of Revelation who wants to wade through its themes and goals. The sense of the text is clearly explained with a pastoral call for all believers to open their ears to God and follow him.

This volume serves as a helpful summary and introduction to one of the most challenging books to interpret in the New Testament. Furthermore, few handle the challenges this book poses with the author's level of detail and concision.

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Marsh, Cory M. *A Primer on Biblical Literacy*. El Cajon, CA: Southern California Seminary Press, 2022, pp.130, $12.99, paperback.

Cory M. Marsh is a Professor of New Testament at Southern California Seminary, located in El Cajon, CA. Dr. Marsh also serves as the Scholar in Residence at Revolve Bible Church in San Juan Capistrano, CA. He holds a Ph.D. in Biblical Theology from Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Dr. Marsh is a member of The Evangelical Theological Society, The Evangelical Philosophical Society, The Society of Biblical Literature, the Institute for Biblical Research, and the Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics.

A Primer on Biblical Literacy is a short introduction to the concept of how to understand God as revealed in Scripture. The book is composed of three chapters and

includes the full text of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy at the end. The first chapter presents the need for biblical literacy among Christians. A brief exegesis of Jesus' bout with Satan in the desert demonstrates how the Word of God has always been under attack. He then highlights many people who have mishandled the Bible in the last century from religious cult leaders such as Jim Jones and David Koresh to prominent word-of-faith leaders like Joel Osteen and Bill Johnson. However, Marsh claims, "A more urgent danger exists in the average pew every Sunday: *sincere Christians simply do not study the Bible for themselves* (p. 16)."

In chapter two Marsh attempt to define biblical literacy as achievable awareness and proficiency in understanding the Scriptures. He states, "biblical literacy is achieved when the Christian is able to recognize the various historical contexts and literary genres in Scripture that God used to reveal Himself and, from there, can discern the Scripture's meaning expressed through those contexts (29)." Marsh postulates that a lack of clear definition and a lack of emphasis on biblical literacy has led to such staggering rates of biblical illiteracy among Christians today. According to Marsh biblical literacy requires being a true follower of Christ, prayerfulness, humility, obedience, diligence, and a genuine growing love for God (pp. 33–35). He notes that "*spiritual maturity and biblical literacy are connected by fellowship*" (p. 36).

Chapter three discusses the principles and methods of biblical literacy and hermeneutics. Marsh elucidates the importance of finding meaning in the text, argues for authorial intent over reader response approaches, and ensures the context of the passage is considered. Marsh then presents a three-step process to hermeneutics beginning with observation, then interpretation, and finishing with application. Marsh labels authorial intent the meaning of the text and application the significance of the text. He completes the chapter by using two common examples of misinterpreted passages, Jeremiah 29:11 and Philippians 4:13, and applying his method to discover their true meaning and significance.

A Primer on Biblical Literacy is just as the title describes, a short introduction to the far-reaching topics of biblical research, interpretation, and application. Marsh accomplishes his original goal of presenting typical theological topics of biblical literacy and hermeneutics in an easy-to-understand way. Marsh's outline of the book has a positive logical flow by presenting the need for biblical literacy in the first chapter, defining biblical literacy in the second chapter, then explaining how one achieves biblical literacy for himself in the third chapter. The casual presentation of the material and the simple form of the book make it a book that is accessible to laypersons of any level of biblical literacy.

There are several commendable aspects of the book. First, Marsh's urgency of the need for biblical literacy is obvious. His examples of the misuse of Scripture by religious cult leaders give a dire warning about some of the real dangers of misinterpreting Scripture. Marsh is deft to point out that the lack of interpretive accountability by their followers and syncretism with their personal philosophies

led to their popularity and downfall. Had each of these false teachers existed within a biblical community, it is possible they could have been corrected and saved from calamity along with their followers.

Second, Marsh is to be commended for defining biblical literacy as achievable awareness and proficiency. As he stated, too often people believe that to fully understand the Bible one must have a comprehensive understanding of the original languages, be completely versed in the historical settings, and hold a seminary degree in theology. One needs simply to make a concerted effort to understand God's Word as He intended, rely on the power of the Holy Spirit to guide (what Marsh calls spiritual maturity), and humbly submit to the body of Christ for instruction and correction.

Third, the concept of Christian community as a core aspect of biblical literature is the most important part of Marsh's argument. While hermeneutics is often an isolated endeavor, true biblical literacy requires the power of the Spirit found in the fellowship of believers who gather as the body and bride of Christ. In this sense, biblical literacy is a form of worship built out of a desire to truly know and understand God.

While I agree wholeheartedly with the thesis and content of *A Primer on Biblical Literacy,* there are some points of contention with Marsh's approach. First, a distinction should be made between biblical illiteracy and false gospels. Religious cult leaders, while certainly biblically illiterate, are far more guilty of knowingly eisegeting the text. Ignorance of biblical truths and blatant false beliefs have points of overlap but are not the same. Far more often a lack of biblical literacy stems from a lack of genuine belief in God and His Word and results in falling away from the faith into secularism. While Marsh hints at this near the conclusion of chapter one (16), focusing on spiritual apathy as the result of biblical illiteracy would have been a stronger argument.

Second, I believe that the larger portion of the first chapter should have been on the false gospel of the word-of-faith movement rather than the religious cult leaders. Word-of-faith leaders have far-reaching ministries which affect and afflict millions of people worldwide. Religious cult leaders and their followers, though generally more fatal, pale in comparison to the millions who have been directed to hell by the prominent leaders of the prosperity gospel. However, I would like to acknowledge that his deemphasis on prosperity preachers could have been a stylistic choice considering the volume of conservative evangelicals who have already condemned such teachings.

Third, the primary critique of this work is the volume of hermeneutical material covered. Marsh specifically states, "...this book is not intended to be a technical work on hermeneutics (xvii)," then proceeds to dedicate almost one-third of the book to hermeneutics. I do not disagree that hermeneutics is essential for biblical literacy. However, in organizing his material in this manner, he defeats his claim that

hermeneutics and biblical literacy are distinctly different practices. Marsh believes that biblical literacy is a larger topic encompassing hermeneutics, but from the presentation, I would claim that biblical literacy is an outcome of good hermeneutics.

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Wellum, Stephen J., and Brent E. Parker, eds. *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course Between Dispensational and Covenant Theologies*. Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016, pp. 300, $25, paperback.

Steven J. Wellum is the editor for the Southern Baptist Journal of Theology. Wellum has written many articles and reviews for this journal. He is also a professor of Christian theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Most relevant for this review, Wellum co-wrote *Kingdom Through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* with Peter J. Gentry. Brent E. Parker is the assistant editor for the Southern Baptist Journal of Theology. In 2022, Parker edited *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture* with Richard J. Lucas. Wellum and Parker (as well as the various authors who contribute chapters to the book) are well-versed in the scholarship around Dispensationalism, Covenant Theology, and Progressive Covenantalism.

Progressive Covenantalism is an edited collection of essays. Each essay is written by a different author (ten in all). While these essays do not build off one another, the editors have grouped them into three major sections. The first group of chapters (chs. 1–4) discusses topics around how the covenants interact (p. 4). These first four chapters deal with general issues and uses these to illustrate how Progressive Covenantalism differs from Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism. By highlighting these issues and distinguishing Progressive Covenantalism from Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism, these four chapters lay the groundwork for the arguments to come.

The second section of the book (chs. 5–8) focuses on issues that pertain to Covenant Theology arguments (p. 5). These four chapters focus on issues that are divisive between Progressive Covenantalists and Covenant Theologians (circumcision, the Sabbath, the warning passages of Hebrews, and ethics). These four chapters do not necessarily connect or rely on each other. Instead, they are separate arguments that further clarify Progressive Covenantalism. The reader should note that these chapters address highly debated topics.

The final two chapters (chs. 9-10) focus on issues that differentiate a Progressive Covenantalist from a Dispensationalist (p. 6). Similar to the second section of *Progressive Covenantalism* arguing against Covenant Theology, these two chapters dive into topics Dispensationalists use to argue against Progressive Covenantalism.

These two topics are Romans 11 and national Israel in the millennium (chapter 9) and national Israel fulfilling the Old Testament land promise in the millennium (chapter 10).

As someone who is not convinced by Progressive Covenantalism, this reviewer disagrees with many of the arguments within *Progressive Covenantalism*. The reason I could not agree with the conclusions of many of the book's arguments was that I did not share the author's presuppositions. The reader (whether or not the reader agrees with the conclusions) should look to *Progressive Covenantalism* as an example of clear argumentation. The quality of the writing and the ability to form an argument was excellent throughout the book.

Steven Wellum's chapter on ethics is an example of excellent writing that depends on a few beliefs unique to Progressive Covenantalism. Because the scope of this review is not to debate Progressive Covenantalism, this section will interact with a common Progressive Covenantalism argument; that there is no tripartite distinction of the Mosaic law. The greatest positive about Wellum's argument against the tripartite distinction of the Mosaic law is his fairness. Wellum treats the tripartite distinction honestly and does not create a strawman argument. Instead, he focuses on three reasons the tripartite distinction is not morally binding.

While these three reasons (assumed true) create a compelling argument, this section of Wellum's chapter could have interacted more with Covenant Theology's arguments. That said, he does acknowledge a few points that commonly arise in this discussion. For example, Wellum acknowledges that distinctions can be seen within the law (p. 218). Other than the occasional mention, the lack of interaction with Covenant Theology arguments highlights the presuppositional nature of the position.

The biblical-theological student that interacts with this book will grow in his understanding of the covenants and how they interact. This is because *Progressive Covenantalism* is an incredibly important addition to the ongoing conversation on the relationship between the Old and New Covenants. This book has taken the positions explored in *Kingdom Through Covenant*, synthesized them, and presented them in a comprehensive package. This book allows the reader to explore Progressive Covenantalism in the context of the systems close to it (Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism). If one read *Kingdom Through Covenant* and was curious about Progressive Covenantalism, he needs this book.

The biblical-theological student will also grow in more specific areas than the covenants. The major topics of the book include typology, ethics, the Sabbath, an understanding of both promise and fulfillment, the relationship between law and grace, and many other essential topics in biblical theology. The intended audience of the book goes beyond those who subscribe to Progressive Covenantalism. This book deepens the reader's understanding of the topics above, whether or not he agrees with the Progressive Covenantalist position. The dutiful student knows the importance of wrestling with tough issues. This book provides the reader with an opportunity to sharpen himself—on his position and the position of others.

While reading *Progressive Covenantalism*, the biblical-theological student must look for the major arguments. These arguments debate against Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism. This can most clearly be seen in the book's overall structure (4–6). These debates appear in every chapter, and the reader would benefit from carefully reading each essay with an open mind and pen at the ready. While clearly explained and easy to follow, these arguments require some prior knowledge to be most beneficial. The prior knowledge required is reasonable for the biblical-theological student. Such knowledge includes a basic understanding of the Mosaic law, covenants, current popular arguments (i.e., the Sabbath, theological systems, typology), and the biblical narrative. These topics should be familiar to the biblical-theological student.

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Averbeck, Richard. *The Old Testament for the Life of the Church: Reading the Torah in the Light of Christ*. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2022, 382, $35.26, paperback.

Richard Averbeck's *The Old Testament Law for the Life of the Church* is first and foremost a book about worship. For Averbeck, who serves as professor of Old Testament and Semitic languages at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, the Law continues to play a vital role in leading believers on the path of holiness and acceptable worship. The church, enlivened by the Spirit, should continue to see the Law as a good gift and guide, even as believers must recognize the Law's inherent limitation and inability to transform the heart.

In his introduction, Averbeck lays out his three theses: the Law is good, weak, and a unified whole (pp. 14-18). Averbeck divides the body of the book into three parts. The first two focus on understanding the Law in its redemptive, historical, and literary contexts, and the final considers how the New Testament authors viewed and used the Law.

Averbeck begins by defining the biblical idea of covenant and develops a paradigm by which each of the redemptive covenants (e.g., Abraham, Mosaic, Davidic, New) builds upon the prior. The Law of Moses was given in a redemptive context where obedience was seen as the appropriate response to God's deliverance from Egypt (p. 107). The Israelites did not earn God's favor; they obeyed and worshipped because they had already received it. The redemptive context of the Law set it apart from all other ancient Near Eastern law codes, even as the Law shares important features with other collections (pp. 91-94).

Averbeck argues the Law of Moses shows growth, development, and change over time, "due to the changing realities in which the people would be living" (p. 101). For instance, as Israel transitioned from worship in the wilderness, to the

tabernacle, to the temple, God adjusted the laws regarding altars and the location of sacrifices. Thus, adjustment to the Law based on the time and circumstances of the worshipper is built into the Law itself. The Law's purpose was to preserve the sancta and allow Israel to live in holiness as a kingdom of priests, set apart from a profane world (p. 206). Both individuals and the community had to maintain their holiness, and the food laws and purity laws existed to set Israel apart from the surrounding nations (p. 214).

In part three, Averbeck turns to the New Testament, examining the Law in the teachings of Jesus, the early church, and Paul. Jesus declared the Law would never pass away (Matt. 5:18), and Jesus fulfilled the Law, according to Averbeck, not in the sense of bringing it to an end, but by demonstrating to his followers how God intended the law to be obeyed all along (p. 233). Jesus condemned the excessive and burdensome traditions of the elders, but he did not nullify the Law itself. Because the new community of faith included Gentiles, Jesus transformed the Law to the "accommodate the needs and concerns of the new covenant community" (p. 254).

Averbeck argues the early church was no less concerned with holiness than ancient Israel, but they had to work out the ideals of holiness in the mixed setting of Jew and Gentile (p. 270). The Jerusalem Council allowed for both Jew and Gentile to worship according to their conscience, so long as the unity of the church was not disrupted (pp. 272-275). Even as a believer, Paul offered sacrifices in the temple to fulfill the Nazirite vow (Acts 21:20-26). Averbeck describes the Law of Christ as the "the way Jesus mediated the Old Testament law to us for our lives as his followers" (p. 279). The weakness of the Law, according to Averbeck, is that it doesn't have the power to change the human heart. But believers should not assume this weakness is a defect. The Law was never intended to change the heart. The goodness of the Law is evident in Romans 7:14, where Paul even refers to the Law as spiritual (p. 284). According to Averbeck, the central concerns of the Law—love for God, love for neighbor, holiness, creation order—are all mediated to us through the law of Christ (p. 311). He summarizes, "In effect, we need to shift our thinking about this subject to the *level* or *kind* of application, not the *limit* or *extent* of application (p. 314).

With reference to the Old Testament, Averbeck's presentation of the logic and setting of the Law is sophisticated and even elegant. He helps the reader understand the Old Testament on its own terms, and in doing so sheds the residue of legalism many associate with the Law. In his treatment of the New Testament, he presents a nuanced, commendable view that faith is paramount in the continued application of the law. Faith is (and has always been) the necessary for both salvation and sanctification, and the Spirit continues to use His inspired Word to conform believers to Christ. In that sense, Averbeck's position is a robust third use of the Law with the crucial caveat that the *entire* Law remains useful.

One seeming gap in Averbeck's work is a thorough examination of key New Testament passages about the Law and the Mosaic covenant. For instance, Averbeck

peculiarly does not direct engage the claim in Hebrews 8:13 that the old covenant (e.g., Mosaic covenant) is obsolete and will soon pass away. Averbeck implies that Christ's work and the Messianic age has brought about a major shift, foreshadowed if not completely analogous to the shift between tabernacle worship in the wilderness to temple worship in Jerusalem. One questions whether such a comparison does justice to the uniqueness of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ as an act of new creation.

Although not one his three theses, Averbeck's consistent claim that the Law of Christ mediates the Law of Moses is foundational to his argument. While Averbeck is no doubt correct that the law of Christ corresponds to the Law of Moses (16), it is not clear that Jeremiah 31:33 refers to the Law of Moses being written on the heart. Just as marriage was designed as a reflection of the Gospel, not vice versa, it seems very possible that the Law of Moses reflects the deeper, prior, and more fundamental law of Christ, not vice versa. One indication Jeremiah may have been referring to this deeper law is his claim in 31:34 that in the new covenant sins would be remembered no more, a situation that clearly transcends the perpetual activity of the Mosaic sacrificial system.

Overall, Averbeck presents a very helpful resource, especially in understanding the Old Testament Law within its cultural and literary context. Stimulating at every point, the book would benefit from more extensive and systematic treatment of certain New Testament passages, especially Hebrews. In the opinion of the reviewer, Averbeck's expertise and insight into the Old Testament Law warrants its own volume, which in turn would allow him the space to engage as deeply with New Testament texts as he does with Old Testament texts. As a reminder that the Law was and is fundamentally about worship, the work will benefit student and scholar alike.

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Pietsch, B. M. *Dispensational Modernism*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 262, $100.84, Hardcover.

Theological works that deal with the subject of dispensationalism from a biblical and theological perspective are certainly not lacking. From academic works like Dwight Pentecost's *Things to Come* and John Gerstner's *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth* to sensational works like John Hagee's *Four Blood Moons* and David Jeremiah's *After the Rapture*, the topic of pre-tribulational-premillennialism has been written on extensively. Numerous works have been written in defense of and in opposition to this theological system. Yet, very few works have examined dispensationalism from an historian's perspective. That is what B. M. Pietsch seeks to do in *Dispensational Modernism*.

Pietsch's work is a rarity in that it avoids both the theological and exegetical considerations within traditional dispensational argumentation. He seeks to analyze the explosive beginnings of dispensationalism in America between 1870 and 1920. His thesis is that dispensationalism was "built upon modernistic epistemic foundations" comprised of "a pervasive system of attitudes, assumptions, and methods that gave prophecy belief its meaning, traction, and popularity" (p. 2). In other words, dispensationalism's roots are not primarily grounded in theological conversations, but in modern cultural trends. Pietsch relentlessly makes his case while intentionally avoiding the doctrinal and exegetical arguments that are ubiquitous in dispensational discussions.

Chapter 1 argues that the "DNA of dispensationalism was technological and taxonomic modernism" along with its "fixation with method" (p. 43). Pietsch contends that the phenomenon of dispensationalism's success is found primarily in the cultural shifts of society relating to standardization, precise measurements, and classifications that brought about "cookbooks and grocery barons and Sunday school literature" (p. 43). It is not a coincidence that the genesis of precise measurements and textual rules in cookbooks and the rise of dispensationalism coincided (26).

Chapter 2 demonstrates that amid the rise of specialization in both the workplace and the academy, dispensationalists were in danger of losing their credibility. Their previous claims of scholarly authority were being undermined by those with higher levels of academic standing. They realized that "they must specialize, enforce methodological homogeneity, and bathe their work in scientific jargon, or perhaps even abstruse sophistication" (p. 59). Chapter 3 details the dispensational understanding of biblical authority which was grounded in the linguistic structures of the text which could be discovered through classification, quantification, cross-referencing, and intertextual typology (p. 76).

Chapter 4 deals with the hermeneutics of dispensationalism. Pietsch asserts that the pervasive accusation that dispensationalists were anti-intellectualists who despised science and modern epistemological methods is quite incorrect; rather, dispensationalists readily utilized modern technological practices and "argued that their methods of reading the Bible were the most scientific, and best revealed the true meaning in the Bible," particularly concerning future events (p. 96).

Chapter 5 examines the dispensational conception of history and time which utilized contemporary engineering principles to create a complex system of time's progression while chapter 6 considers how this understanding of time was used to map out an intricate theology of the future based upon God's predetermined plan revealed through prophetic texts. Chapter 7, perhaps the most laborious chapter, considers the creation and distribution of the *Scofield Reference Bible* (with its vast amounts of mathematical calculations, precise quantifications, and detailed maps) and its influence on the widespread acceptance of dispensationalism.

It is not an overstatement to say that this book is a must read for any scholar or serious Bible student who wants to understand the phenomenon of dispensationalism's popularity in America. To be clear, this work is not for everyone. It was originally written as a PhD dissertation for Duke University and was then published as a book and without question, it reads like a dissertation. Some sections are unnecessarily detailed. For example, chapter 7's analysis of the *Scofield Reference Bible* could have been cut in half and still accomplished its purpose. Chapter 3's examination of Common Sense Realism in Princetonian thought could have been reduced to a few pages and then supplemented with a substantial footnote.

Furthermore, this work is for those with a wide grasp of deep theological issues, without which, Pietsch's claims cannot be assessed appropriately. For example, Pietsch's analysis of Charles Hodge seems to perpetuate the dubious claim that Hodge was a captive to Common Sense Realism and used that epistemological method as the sole ground of biblical interpretation. Though this claim is pervasive among scholars of American historical theology, it should be reconsidered. Paul Helseth's work, *"Right Reason" and the Princeton Mind* (2010) has dealt a significant blow to this assumption. Helseth convincingly argues that the Old Princetonians, including Hodge, were not enslaved to Baconian thought to the point that it controlled all of their theological assumptions. In any case, the point is that this work is not for the theological novice.

Nonetheless, Pietsch's work is groundbreaking because in each chapter he shatters the notion that dispensationalism was born out of an anti-scientific and anti-modernist mindset and instead demonstrates that dispensationalism has consistently and readily embraced a modernist taxonomic framework. Dispensationalists were confident that their epistemological and hermeneutical methods were "more scientific than the speculative hypotheses of higher critics" and therefore, their conclusions should be viewed as scholarly and trustworthy because they were built upon the best contemporary assumptions (p. 8).

He also argues convincingly that the epistemological method of dispensationalism is not based upon Common Sense Realism or Baconian inductive methods; rather, it is based upon republican perspicuity— the idea that each individual has an absolute right to interpret the Bible as he sees fit (p. 97). He notes, "Common Sense implied that all minds could arrive at common interpretations; republican perspicuity implied that common minds could discover remarkable new biblical truths, or recover old ones" (p. 97). Pietsch writes, "Despite their occasional use of Common Sense rhetoric, dispensationalists were more firmly rooted in the traditions of republican perspicuity than Scottish Common Sense reasoning" (p. 121). This is demonstrated, not through an arbitrary concatenation of persons and events, but through extensive historical and reasoned analyses which reinforce a coherent apologetic for his thesis.

Now, if you are looking for a doctrinal and exegetical interaction with the theology of dispensationalism, look elsewhere. If you are seeking a textually critical

examination of Daniel's 70 weeks as they relate to the tribulation, this book is not for you. If you want to examine an historical-grammatical analysis of I Thessalonians 4:13-18, this work will greatly disappoint. You will find in this work no examination of dispensationalism's understanding of the biblical covenants, the relationship between Israel and the church, or the exposition of prophetic texts.

Yet, *Dispensational Modernism* constitutes a significant assessment of the origins of dispensationalism and its modernist epistemological, taxonomical, and hermeneutical methods. Theologians and well-studied pastors can benefit greatly from interacting with this work of historical theology. Though not nearly as dramatic as Hal Lindsay's *Late Great Planet Earth* or John Walvoord's *Armageddon, Oil, and the Middle East Crisis*, its historical analysis of dispensationalism is arguably much more illuminating and profitable for the student of biblical studies and historical theology.

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Donaldson, Alistair W. *The Last Days of Dispensationalism: A Scholarly Critique of Popular Misconceptions.* Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2011, pp.168, paperback.

Alistair Donaldson wrote *The Last Days of Dispensationalism*; at the time of this writing, he was a lecturer at Laidlaw College in Christchurch and is currently a funeral director at Hope Funerals Christchurch. Donaldson, in this work, critiques biblical misconceptions within classical dispensationalism: their literal hermeneutic, who is Israel, the Kingdom of God, the Rapture and the Tribulation, and the Millennium. This book aims to show how classical dispensationalism advances a distorted paradigm of the world and, with each viewpoint, offers his understanding of the issues. Donaldson concludes the book with a chapter focused on his thoughts on eschatology.

The opening chapter focuses on the literal hermeneutic of Ryrie, Scofield, Walvoord, and others; however, his primary focus will be on Ryrie's *Dispensationalism*, published in 1995. The focus of this chapter is the inconsistent application of the literal hermeneutic in selected passages while ignoring the genre of the text and the New Testament use of the Old Testament. Donaldson brings out a critical point problematic within the literal hermeneutic: the interpreter's presuppositions of the Bible (p. 13). Donaldson concludes with problematic areas within the literal hermeneutic espoused by dispensationalists: literalism is not logical; it can lead to eisegesis; there is not a consensus in dispensationalist scholarship, and consistent application of the literal hermeneutic is unsustainable (pp. 27–29).

Chapter two discusses various views of the nation of Israel from a dispensationalist and non-dispensationalist perspective. Donaldson intertwines the views of

dispensationalists on this subject with the views of theologians throughout history. Classical Dispensationalism views that Israel is "the literal physical nation of the of Jewish people" (p. 37) while arguing that "Jesus is the true Israel, Israel-in-person. Further, the church, by being 'in Christ' who is Israel-in-person, is incorporated into and assumes the identity and mission of true Israel" (p. 68). Throughout the chapter, Donaldson shows the impact of the dispensationalist view of Israel within the political realm.

The third chapter describes the misconceptions within the classical dispensationalist view of the kingdom of God. According to Scofield, the kingdom of God is "a present reality; the kingdom of heaven is a future reality" (p. 72). Donaldson argues that the foundation of this thought is the dispensationalist view of Israel and is not supported biblically. The chapter concludes with an emphatic plea for the church to "come to terms with what it means to be God's people living between the times of the kingdom now and the kingdom as yet to be fully realized" (p. 95).

Next, he examines the Rapture and the Tribulation, with the foundation of his thoughts coming from the Left Behind Series of novels. Donaldson then examines a few select texts from Scripture and expounds on the text from a dispensational and covenantal view. This exposition brings out what Donaldson considers a misconception within dispensationalism, that "absolute literalism prevents dispensationalists from perceiving the literary intent of those passages" (p. 126). Donaldson concludes the chapter by stating that "a future seven-year tribulation preceded by rapture of the church at the first two-stage return of Christ is not found" (p. 127).

The next misconception, Donaldson argues, is the Millennium. In this concise chapter, Donaldson argues that Revelation is symbolic writing, and, since there is no chronological order to the book, that a literal millennial reign "understood by dispensationalists is questionable" (p. 146). He follows this chapter with his concluding chapter which he describes a comprehensive eschatological worldview that "realizes the significance of Christian living in the present age and hope for the future in a manner more consistent with an eschatological worldview narrated in the biblical story of redemption" (p. 159).

Donaldson's goal was to test five tenets of dispensationalism and determine if they were biblical and if these tenets provide an inadequate worldview that hinders proper Christian living (p. xii). While I cannot say he has met his goal, I want to begin with one argument that Donaldson makes that is well thought out and is an issue that dispensationalists need to address: the literal hermeneutic. In the first chapter, Donaldson rightly addresses this issue and does an outstanding job of carrying this forward in the following chapters to show that the literal hermeneutic employed by some is problematic in dispensationalism because of the inconsistent application of the hermeneutic. In his final chapter, Donaldson provides his eschatological view in a concise manner that causes the reader to contemplate his viewpoint whether or not he or she agrees with him.

Although the first and final chapters are well-written and persuasive, the other chapters are tenuous. In chapter two, Donaldson claims that Zionism by world leaders reflects dispensationalism's influence without considering numerous political and social influences. His treatment almost comes off as anti-Semitic and causes the reader to lose focus on the biblical basis of who Israel is. This conundrum is evident in the twenty-two pages of this chapter describing the misconceptions of the dispensationalist view; Donaldson dedicated only three pages to the exposition of biblical passages before transitioning to his viewpoint, which, in this section, he provides ample biblical evidence and exposition.

In chapters four and five, Donaldson carefully selects passages he wishes to examine while at the same time leaving passages that support the dispensationalist view. In both chapters, Donaldson submits that he cannot fully address every passage that concerns the Rapture, the Tribulation, and the Millennium due to the lack of space. Although the passages he selects raises concerns, and they do not encapsulate the corpus of the Bible on these subjects.

Students or theologians desiring an introductory treatise on dispensationalism will benefit from this work. Donaldson, throughout the book, takes select views from various dispensationalists and provides little personal commentary on the biblical basis for the said views. He does provide more than an adequate amount of scholarly sources on each topic for further study. It should be noted that individuals wanting a technical book on dispensationalism or a comparative work on dispensationalism versus covenant theology would be better served by reading Ryrie's *Dispensationalism* or Merkle's *Discontinuity to Continuity: A Survey of Dispensational and Covenantal Theologies.*

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Ryrie, Charles C. *Dispensationalism*. Revised and Expanded. Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2007, pp. 272, $15.29, paperback.

Charles Ryrie (1925-2016) earned his Th.M. and Th.D. at Dallas Theological Seminary and later completed a Ph.D. from the University of Edinburgh. He became a notable voice and theologian of classical dispensationalism due to this book, which was first published in 1966 and his editorial work on *The Ryrie Study Bible* – first published in 1978. Ryrie retired as the Dean of Doctoral Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary in 1983. At the end of his academic career he published over 25 books.

Ryrie begins *Dispensationalism* by stating its purpose. He explains, when addressing the first edition of this book, "its purpose was to present classic dispensational teaching in a positive way in order to correct misunderstandings and allay suspicions about it" (p. 14). This remained the purpose of his later revisions of this work, including this current edition. In order to carry out this purpose,

the first chapter presents the broad scope of the book by asking the question, "Is dispensationalism helpful or heretical?"

Chapters two and three guide the reader with suggested descriptions and definitions of dispensationalism. Chapter two seeks to answer the question, "What is a dispensation?" while chapter three answers the question, "What are the dispensations?" A concise definition Ryrie gives is that, "A dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God's purpose" (p. 33). Both of these chapters built the foundation for chapters four through twelve. However, one of the most important sections in these two chapters is when Ryrie lays out the three marks of dispensationalism. These three marks, the *sine qua non*, are what marks off a person as a dispensationalist, according to Ryrie. They include:

1. "A dispensationalist keeps Israel and the church distinct" (p. 46).
2. "This distinction between Israel and the church is born out of a system of hermeneutics that is usually called literal interpretation" (p. 47).
3. "The underlying purpose of God in the world… [is] the glory of God" (p. 48).

From these three markers, Ryrie spends chapters three through eight expounding on classical dispensationalism by looking at topics such as the distinct dispensations, the origin, the hermeneutics, salvation, the church, and eschatology, respectively.

In chapters nine through eleven, two nuanced versions of dispensationalism are presented such as Progressive Dispensationalism and Ultradispensatinalism, and one distinct view – Covenant Theology. Finally, in chapter twelve, Ryrie gives a plea for his readers about fellowship and unity. He makes the point that whether you are dispensational or not, Christians are to remain united in their common beliefs about Christ and salvation.

There are three major items worth analyzing that show up throughout this book. Two are positive critiques and one is negative. However, as this book stands, for almost 60 years from its first edition, it remains a helpful guide and one of the leading voices in dispensational discussions today.

The first positive critique of this volume is that he compares and contrasts competing positions throughout this entire work. Ryrie does well to articulate various positions such as covenant theology, progressive dispensationalism, and ultradispensationalism. He does this to *attempt* a fair representation of other viewpoints. Ryrie desires to be careful in this arena, because he rightly points out how Classical Dispensationalism has not always been represented with integrity. Ryrie humbly admits in the last chapter, "The dispensationalists, the revisionist, and the nondispensationalist have a right to feel that their understanding of the Bible is the true one, but none has the right to think or act as if he were the sole possessor or truth" (p. 244). He continues on to say, "Nothing is gained for one's viewpoint by running down the opposition" (p. 244). While Ryrie makes these qualifications in

the context of dispensationalism being the position opposed, he recognizes that this can be reversed.

The second positive critique is that Ryrie successfully accomplishes what he sets out to do in this volume, "To correct some misconceptions about dispensationalism that [has] given rise to false charges against it, and to give a positive presentation of normative [classical] dispensational teaching" (p. 243). A major misconception Ryrie corrects is on how dispensationalists understand salvation in chapter six. The accusation he desires to correct is the belief that dispensationalists teach multiple ways of salvation (p. 121). This accusation arises from the stark distinction dispensationalists make between Israel and the church. However, Ryrie is successful as he analyzes the relationship between the law and grace. According to Ryrie, salvation has always been through grace. During the time of the Old Testament, God poured out grace in the law.

Ryrie is also successful in giving a positive presentation of Classical Dispensationalism. The way he accomplishes this is by arguing why dispensationalism does not only compete with the Covenant Theology, but why is far exceeds it. Again, Ryrie takes the high road by portraying Classical Dispensationalism as the only plausible hermeneutical option when the exegesis is consistent in the literal interpretation of the text. However, this positive critique is only positive in the sense that Ryrie accomplishes what he says he will do with the book.

While Ryrie seeks to fairly represent the opposing positions his *attempts* sometimes fall short. While this is not the main focus of the book, it still plays a major role in it. He falls short in fairly representing Covenant Theology throughout the book. This likely happens because Ryrie makes many short and bold claims about Covenant Theology in order to make comparisons between it and dispensationalism before he ever gets to the chapter he dedicates to Covenant Theology – chapter ten. For example Ryrie says, "Covenant theology… because of the rigidity of its unifying principle of the covenant of grace, can never show within its system proper progress of revelation" (p. 23). This claim is unfair because covenant theologians would not claim this to be true and Ryrie does not back up this claim. Another example of this is found in chapter five when Ryrie discusses how dispensationalists are the *only* consistent interpreters of Scripture holding to the grammatical-historical hermeneutical method (pp. 91–93). Again, covenant theologians also claim to hold to the grammatical-historical hermeneutical method. The problem is that Ryrie describes the literal sense of interpretation too narrowly. Ryrie says, "Covenant theologians are well known for their use of nonliteral interpretation" of Old Testament prophecy (p. 24). He even claims, "covenant theology produces artificial exegesis" (p. 223). With all of these bold claims, Ryrie does fall short to prove that they are true. Any covenant theologian reading this book can appreciate the positive assertions of Classical Dispensationalism, while also recognizing that he does misrepresent the Covenant Theology position.

Overall, *Dispensationalism* is a significant work in the field of theological and hermeneutical studies. It provides a framework on how to interpret Scripture. This book is a great reference point for classical dispensationalists. Students should approach this text to grasp the main arguments for dispensationalism and how it has historically been articulated by one of the leading voices on the subject – Charles Ryrie. This book will give any theological student, pastor, or lay Christian a good start to understand how Classical Dispensationalism as a system approaches Scripture for interpretation.

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Joslin, Barry C. *Hebrews, Christ, and the Law: The Theology of the Mosaic Law in Hebrews 7:1-10:18*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009, pp. 354, $47, paperback.

Barry Joslin holds a ThM in Historical Theology and New Testament Studies from Dallas Theological Seminary in Dallas, Texas, as well as a PhD in New Testament Theology from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. After completing his doctoral work in 2005, he went on to serve as a Professor of Christian Theology at Boyce College until 2021. He now serves as the Senior Associate Pastor & Worship Pastor at Sanibel Community Church in Sanibel, Florida.

In *Hebrews, Christ, and the Law,* Joslin addresses a major area of dispute in biblical theology: the relation of the Mosaic Law to the New Covenant (NC). This question is also crucial in the divide between covenantal/dispensational theological systems. Joslin's contribution to the conversation is summed up in his thesis that "the work of Christ has transformed the law, and this transformation involves both its internalization and fulfillment in the NC; the law has forever been affected Christologically" (p. 2).

The first chapter serves as an introduction to the theology of the Mosaic Law in Hebrews. Joslin sees a divide in scholarship on the book of Hebrews between two larger categories concerning the law: (1) "no ongoing validity of the law in the NC era", or (2) "ongoing validity of the law in the NC era" (p. 8). His own view closely resembles the second of those groups, but not without qualification. Having shown this key issue, chapter 2 interacts with the use of "the law" in Second Temple Judaism, focusing on how the term was understood in the contemporary theological context of Hebrews (p. 23). In chapter 3, Joslin considers the literary structure of the book. Noting the various challenges and offering a careful evaluation of influential scholars, he finds George Guthrie's "eclectic approach to the structure of Hebrews" most persuasive considering the complexity of the text (p. 130).

The heart of his book is in the exegetical argument of chapters 4, 5, and 6. Chapter 4 evaluates 7:1-28, giving specific attention to how the writer of Hebrews

understands the law (p. 132). Joslin argues that the "change in the law" described in 7:12 is *Christological*. That is, "the law has been transformed in Christ, and this transformation involves both its *internalization* and its *fulfillment* in the NC" (p. 134). Chapter 5 continues with 8:1–13, addressing the quotation of Jeremiah 31, with the law being "written on the heart" and what this means in the light of this transformation. His conclusion is that while the *content* of the law has not changed, its *location* and *application* have been affected by the Christ event and thus *transformed Christologically* (p. 192). Chapter 6 covers 9:1-10:18, beginning with an exegetical overview, followed by a discussion of what is meant by the law's "having a shadow," and the blessings of the NC to which the shadow corresponds (p. 226). The evidence of his exegetical argument shows that the law was not "abrogated," as some suggest (p. 264). Rather, the law succeeded in exactly what it was designed to do: point to Christ who is the substance of the eschatological hope of God's people and who has secured "the good things to come" (p. 264).

Though it is no easy task, Joslin's work is exegetically thorough given the enigmatic nature of Hebrews. While discerning the structure of Hebrews has proven to be elusive for many and is without scholarly consensus, he does well to present the options available within current and past scholarship, as well as grounding his own stance in the text itself (pp. 91-92). His interaction with French and German primary sources in their own language is a potential obstacle for readers unacquainted with those languages. The context makes most of these interactions clear, but it can present a challenge to focusing on his argument. That focus is much needed as the book is no light treatment of the subject at hand.

As noted in his introduction, Hebrews scholars tend to see either (1) discontinuity or (2) continuity of the Mosaic Law with the NC. However, Joslin sees the fundamental question here to be wrong. Rather than asking *whether* the law has ongoing validity in the NC, he argues, the question ought to be focused on *how* the writer of Hebrews understands the "change in the law" as clearly stated in 7:12; what it means to have the law "written on the hearts" of NC members as foreshadowed in Jeremiah 31, as quoted in 8:10 and 10:16; and what is meant by the use of the term "shadow" in reference to the law in 10:1 (p. 20).

Aligning himself "loosely" with the second group of scholars, Joslin sees *continuity* prevailing in terms of the content of the law, however, not without a certain *discontinuity* in terms of location and application (p. 21). As he points out in chapter 4, "[there] are radical changes that occur in both the priesthood and the law that involve both discontinuity and continuity," which makes sense of his use of the term "transformation" in describing such changes (p. 133). On the one hand—in terms of *continuity*—when the writer of Hebrews speaks of "the law," it seems clear that he has in mind the Mosaic Law. Joslin's analysis of the writings of Second Temple Judaism shows quite well that the term "law" in this theological context overwhelmingly refers to the Mosaic Law of the Old Covenant (OC) and, therefore, would undoubtedly be

the referent of this term for the writer of Hebrews as well. Moreover, this seems to be "the law" referred to by Jeremiah as written on the hearts of those to whom the NC is given (31:31-34). On the other hand—in terms of *discontinuity*—the law has changed in location and application. Or in his words, "the law has forever been affected Christologically" and, thus, "transformed in the light of Christ" (p. 264). What was once external is now written on the heart. What was once viewed in terms of regulation is now a "blessing of God" that ensures covenant obedience (p. 173). On each of these points, Joslin's exegetical argumentation is formidable.

Joslin's contribution has addressed an area of New Testament studies and biblical theology that continues to develop. The rise of this area of study is nothing new, nor is it a passing fad in academic circles. One can easily see its prominence in the current evangelical conversation—hence, this issue of the journal, among many others in recent years. Engaging Joslin's work as a student of biblical-theological studies fosters a greater awareness of the rigorous work of this field, which is both a challenge and an encouragement. When discussing Hebrews specifically, or the question of continuity or discontinuity, the law, covenants, or theological systems in general, *Hebrews, Christ, and the Law* is well worth reading, wrestling with, and coming back to again.

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Griffiths, Phillip D. R. *Reformed Baptist Covenant Theology.* Eugene, OR: Resource Publishers, 2022, 143, $18.99, paperback.

Phillip Griffiths is a retired teacher living in Bethlehem, Pembrokeshire, with his wife Melody and their two sons, Benjamin and Joseph. Griffiths holds three bachelor's degrees, a Master of Theology degree in philosophical & systematic theology, and a post-graduate diploma in theological studies from the London School of Theology. In addition to his works on Reformed Baptist Covenant Theology, Griffiths has written on the Enlightenment's effects on theological thought from Calvin to Barth, answering Jehovah's Witnesses, and a critical piece on N.T. Wright's New Perspective on Paul.

Reformed Baptist Covenant Theology is the second book of Griffiths that focuses on Covenant Theology from a Reformed Baptist perspective. However, unlike his first book, this one seeks to be less polemical and offers a positive presentation of the Reformed Baptist heritage and intellectual view of credobaptism. Although "Reformed Baptists stand shoulder to shoulder with their Reformed paedobaptist brethren" on the essentials of the faith, different covenant theologies remain, leading to diverse ecclesiologies and sacramentologies (p. viii). Griffiths is committed to unity, but not at the expense of theological integrity. He challenges Reformed Presbyterians to think deeply about their positions, encourages his Reformed Baptists

readers to become saturated in God's Word, and hopes this work "will go some way in assisting Christians to understand God's covenants" (pp. 133-134).

I found the style and posture of this book to be of great benefit for understanding and emulation. From its outset in the Reformation, covenant theology has been characterized by disagreements and debates. Joining that conversation, Griffiths gracefully interacts with counter positions while promoting and clarifying a Reformed Baptist position. Throughout these interactions with Presbyterians, readers are presented with a civil and collegial posture that can and should be replicated as brothers in Christ seek to dialogue regarding secondary-level issues.

Griffiths' teaching background is evident as he progressively works through the biblical covenants. First, he clarifies what a covenant is by presenting the traditional conditional and unconditional covenant models. Although this work intends to be brief, Griffiths should have given more consideration than two pages here for clarity and an honest evaluation of scholarship on what constitutes a covenant, the various proposed forms, and the theological outcomes covenant definitions produce.

Next, the classic Reformed law-gospel distinction is alluded to as Griffiths presents two overarching covenants: the covenant of works with Adam and the "new covenant…the outworking in time, of a covenant made in eternity" (p. 4). Griffiths does well interweaving Scripture and the 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith to justify man's depraved position in the Covenant of Works with Adam as the federal head. Because the doctrine of a works-based covenant with Adam is common in Reformed theology, Griffiths utilizes various sources from multiple camps to demonstrate mankind's doomed fate and the necessity of a Mediator.

Griffiths then outlines redemption through the second Adam, Christ, as the fulfillment, or inbreaking, of the covenant of redemption into history. Griffiths consistently places salvation in the NC alone and rejects a Presbyterian dual administration of the Covenant of Grace schema. He encourages readers "think of the Covenant of Grace as the new covenant before it was formally ratified or consummated in the shed blood of Christ" (p. 13). Matters are further clarified when Griffiths quotes Bavinck, saying Christ appeared immediately after the fall in the promises.

Chapter four furthers the understanding of the New Covenant in the Old Testament. He begins by stating, "the 1689 Reformed Baptist position has often been subject to misrepresentation" (p. 21). It is true that most Particular Baptists that composed the 1689 LBCF understood the retroactive application of the NC (COG) during the time of the OT (known today as 1689 Federalism). However, many historical Baptists held to a dual administration of the COG, once in the OC and again, differently in the NC. I agree with the position proposed by Griffiths in this chapter; however, this work would have benefited from him recognizing that some Reformed Baptists (20th Century Reformed Baptists) today still hold to a dual administration schema. If not only to represent the current discussion accurately. His

proposed examples of misrepresentation hold true for all Reformed Baptists. Whether they hold to a dual or retroactive COG administration, all Reformed Baptists believe that the NC blessings were present somehow to the OT saints.

Chapters five through ten outline how the NC was retroactively applied through the subsidiary covenants of the OT. The *protoevangelium* of Gen 3:15 contained the promise that would be ratified in the NC. Abel and Noah operated in faith in the promise of the woman's serpent-crushing seed resulting in God covenanting with Noah, further establishing and progressively revealing in greater clarity the *telos* of the NC in Christ. With Abraham's covenant(s) being the primary points of contention between Presbyterian and Reformed Baptist CT, Griffiths admirably dedicates three chapters to explanation. Along with most Reformed Baptists, including Nehemiah Coxe, whom Griffiths quotes extensively, Griffiths argues that there are two covenants with Abraham: the first, Gen 15, was a covenant promising a covenant (NC). The second, Gen 17, was the covenant of circumcision given as a condition for Abraham's offspring to enjoy the promise of physical Israel. Griffiths identifies two levels of meaning in Abraham's covenant of circumcision. The first is the "dispensational level," referring to Abraham's physical seed, and the second, the "trans-dispensational" level, refers to "his seed (singular) who is the Christ, and this includes all those who have faith" (p. 58). Reformed Baptists would give a cheerful amen to Griffiths' recognition of Abraham's dual capacity; however, words matter, and the terms "dispensational" and "trans-dispensational" carry common theological connotations unfitting and undesirable for CT. For that reason, I highly recommend Griffiths utilize different terminology here.

Griffiths represents a 1689 Reformed Baptist view of the Mosaic covenant as *a* covenant of works continuing and managing the physical promises to Abraham, not *the* covenant of works made with Adam in Eden possessing the possibility for eternal life. The Law of Sinai was given to Israel to enjoy the land and as a teacher to show them their sin and need for a greater Seed – a Savior. Interestingly enough, with so much talk about the NC's progressive revelation and application in the subsidiary covenants, Griffiths does not have a chapter on the NC.

Griffiths concludes with a helpful analysis of Presbyterian and Reformed Baptists' understanding of circumcision and baptism and a final chapter where he claims that what sets those saved in the OC apart from those saved in the NC is that only those during the NC era are baptized by the Holy Spirit. This final chapter needs to be understood as the views of Griffiths and not as the view commonly held by Reformed Baptists.

In sum, Griffiths has produced a concise and non-technical work that readers of all levels can enjoy and benefit from. Students new to the study of covenant theology will find within this work the basic components of the Reformed Baptist view and a glimpse into the unique role systematic and biblical theology play in this

conversation. Similarly, pastors may find a helpful guide for their preaching and congregants to understand the one plan of God as revealed in the Scriptures.

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Blaising, Craig A. and Darrell L. Bock. *Progressive Dispensationalism*. Baker Academic, 2000, pp. 336, $35.00.

The current text of *Progressive Dispensationalism* being reviewed is a reprint by Baker Academics. *Progressive Dispensationalism* was previously released by BridgePoint Books in 1993. The reprint of the edition in 2000 was a testament to the book's popularity (p. 7). The inclusion of this book into JBTS's special edition on Covenant speaks volumes about the book's ongoing influence. In fact, the endorsements on the back cover still hold true today in 2023: "This book will bring the reader up-to-date on progressive dispensationalism" and this book "has positioned its movement within the mainstream of biblical scholarship."

The second edition has an updated preface. The preface draws attention to the new layout of the volume and other helpful publications that are more recent (at the time of publication). Of particular mention, the preface notes that many have used the third part of the book, i.e., "Exposition," for a textbook. This reviewer finds the chapter perhaps most equipped to highlight the features of dispensationalism as it provides examples that support the authors' claims. The book is subdivided into four parts: "History," "Hermeneutics," "Exposition," and "Theology and Ministry." Blaising wrote parts one, three, and four, with Bock wrote "Hermeneutics." The third chapter holds most of the content, i.e., 177 of the 336 pages.

Blaising begins the discussion on progressive dispensationalism by recounting the history of traditional dispensationalism. The chapter introduces significant figures in the dispensational movement, such as D.L. Moody and C.I. Scofield (p. 10). The author provides the fundamental framework for understanding progressive dispensationalism, e.g., definitions, which the authors develop more fully later. Also of critical importance, the chapter covers "The Central Dualism," a key to understanding classical dispensationalism (pp. 23–24). Before discussing progressive dispensationalism more fully, the chapter surveys previous models of classical dispensationalism. The authors use many visual aids to assist the reader, most frequently depicting dispensations via timelines. The chapter finishes with a discussion of *progressive dispensationalism*, highlighting how the theory is more holistic in understanding redemption, rejecting the eternal dualism associated with traditional dispensationalism (pp. 46–47).

Bock's section on interpreting the Bible follows the introduction, which includes chapter two "Interpreting the Bible–How We Read Texts," and chapter three "Interpreting the Bible–How Texts Speak to Us." These chapters reflect hermeneutic

principles, which are not unique to the dispensational tradition. For example, Bock discusses authorship, the reader, and the use of grammar to interpret texts. The interpretive information provided within these chapters is still applicable today, even mainstream. Perhaps a little antiquated is the brief discussion of typology (p. 68). With some reservations by this reviewer, most protestant readers who are familiar with Scripture will probably only skim this section to ensure the authors are not employing a unique stance for interpreting Scripture.

Part three contains five chapters examining "Dispensations in Biblical Theology," "The Structure of the Biblical Covenants: The Covenants Prior to Christ,' "The Fulfillment of the Biblical Covenants Through Jesus Christ:" "The Kingdom of God in the Old Testament," and "The Kingdom of God in the New Testament" (p. 5). This section, in its essence, provides examples of how progressive dispensationalism aligns with the broad strokes of Scripture, i.e., a biblical theology with a focus on covenants and kingdoms. Readers hoping to nuance progressive dispensationalism against alternative views like progressive covenantalism will find these chapters more beneficial than the proceeding chapters covering the history of the movement and hermeneutics.

Part four, a discussion on "Theological and Ministerial Issues in Progressive Dispensationalism," concludes the book. Part 4 addresses *progressive dispensationalism* and the church. From the onset, Blaising admits that not all interpretive problems have been reconciled, leaving the modern reader (2023) as to what problems have been solved across the twenty-plus years since the reprint (p. 284). Regardless of such inquiries, the final chapter does provide clarity as to how the Church fits into the current dispensation.

Although the authors discuss that chapter three may be the most widely read, implying it may be the most beneficial, the entire book has benefits to scholars, pastors, and congregants. The authors cover a significant amount of ground by tracing progressive dispensational across both time as a movement for understanding Scripture and Scripture, demonstrating why progressive dispensation best captures the unfolding story. This voluminous task, or large scope, is the source of great blessings but also the cause of a set of drawbacks.

First, the scope of the book is helpful. By providing the history of dispensationalism, the volume disabuses the reader of misconceptions that arise from conflating previous dispensationalist views with *progressive dispensationalism*. Bock's succinct chapters on hermeneutics provide the reader with the framework for how those who attest to progressive dispensationalism understand Biblical interpretation. The reader then witnesses the hermeneutic applied across Scripture before the book concludes with issues related to the theory.

Second, a point of critique, the relationships between the dispensations and the covenants need fuller treatments. The authors tend to separate and handle each covenant individually or in pairs, prohibiting the reader from fully grasping how

progressive dispensationalism incorporates the covenants. For example, the authors discuss both the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants together, in part because they are examining Galatians 4:24 (p. 196). In this case of comparison, it shows how the covenants show precedence, compares the length of the covenants, etc. With this study in mind, by including the Davidic Covenant the reader could learn how the dispensationalists perceive precedence, duration, and additional features across the three covenants. In a similar vein, the Davidic covenant may have been better surveyed alongside the Mosaic covenant from Solomon's reign until the exile because of the role the kings play in relation to both covenants, i.e., the kings fall under both the Mosaic and Davidic covenants (pp. 148–150). Full disclosure, the book does have a section titled "The Davidic Covenant and the Mosaic Covenant" (pp. 168-69). However, the approximate page and a half of material needs expansion.

The last of the covenant issues relates to the Adamic Covenant, that is, the book does not clearly articulate the dispensational view in relation to this covenant. The authors mention the Adamic covenant prior to examining the structure of the biblical covenants in chapter five (pp. 116–117) but is not covered in chapter five. The absence of a discussion about the Adamic covenant leads to confusion, in particular, when discussing man's obedience to God and the Law. For example, the authors state that progressive dispensationalism is "not antinomian" for no state of lawlessness existed from Abraham to the Mosaic covenant (p. 199), yet a reader may ask how the law differs from Adam to Christ or how the dispensations may be influenced by the Adamic Covenant.

Surely, some of the areas of critique result from the large task of conveying every nuance of the large topic of *progressive dispensationalism*. In fact, when the reader finishes the volume, they will have learned a significant amount of information concerning Dispensational Theology. The greatest compliment to Blaising and Bock is that their work provides enough information to teach a reader what is *progressive dispensationalism* and, likely, enough data for the reader to accept or reject the theology.n view of this praise, *Progressive Dispensationalism* is recommended to both seminary students and congregants.

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Tabb, Brian J., and Andrew M. King. *Five Views of Christ in the Old Testament. Counterpoints: Bible & Theology.* Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2022, pp. 322, $26.99, paperback.

Brian J. Tabb and Andrew M. King are the general editors. Tabb serves as the "academic dean and professor at Bethlehem College & Seminary" and as a general editor for *Themelios* (p. 9). King serves as "assistant professor of biblical studies at Midwestern Seminary and Spurgeon College" (p. 9). The contributors are well-known

Old Testament scholars: John Goldingay (senior professor, Fuller Theological Seminary), Tremper Longman III (professor emeritus, Westmont College), Havilah Dharamraj (department head of biblical studies, South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies), Jason S. DeRouchie (research professor, Midwestern Seminary and Spurgeon College), and Craig A. Carter (research professor, Tyndale University).

Although the title, *Five Views of Christ in the Old Testament*, is in many ways self-explanatory, the editors provide some introductory information to help guide the reader. The editors supply Luke 24:27–45 as a backdrop for the discussion on the five views of Christ, particularly v. 27 while on the Emmaus Road, Jesus explains to his disciples that the Scriptures, in every portion, concern Him (p. 13). Each of the five scholars describes how they understand the OT attests to Christ or, better, where, if at all, Christ may be found in the OT. The book contains five main chapters where a single initial scholar describes their understanding, followed by the remaining four scholars who provide individual responses (approx. 5 pages per scholar), and concluded by the initial scholar's rejoinder (a final response). After the five chapters, the editors provide a conclusion for the volume.

This review first provides the primary thrust of each author's viewpoint, and second, a critique of the volume. In a book focused on a conversation between scholars, the assessment section gives attention to three main points: (1) The contributors' and editors' ability to accomplish the series and the individual volume's goal, (2) the clear articulation of each viewpoint along with the responses and rejoinders, and (3) the subjective but important analysis of the conversation, e.g., do the authors provide the appropriate discussion points for the reader to make an informed decision about which viewpoint they most align.

In chapter one, the "First Testament Approach," Goldingay suggests it is "unwise to read Jesus back" into the First Testament, an endeavor that would obscure the intent of the First Testament, that is, learning about God (pp. 21–22, citation from 22). For Goldingay, one should allow the First Testament to speak for itself, independent from the New Testament (p. 44). Moreover, with this approach, modern readers share the experience of the First Testament people (p. 45).

In chapter two, the "Chistotelic Approach," Longman III recommends reading the OT twice: First, giving attention to the original context and the "full theocentric power," and second, giving attention to the text's "Christotelic significance" (p. 100). Therefore, Longman finds that Jesus is in the OT, particularly from the second reading, with "Christ serving [as] the goal (the *telos*)" (p. 74).

In chapter three, the "Reception-Centered, Intertextual Approach," Dharamraj proposes that a Common Reader, knowledgeable of the Old Testament, reads "Jesus in the Old Testament" with an intertextual approach, i.e., by "instinctively" relating multiple texts, including New Testament texts about Jesus, with the Old Testament passage at hand (o, 127). Dharamaj's contribution was perhaps the most difficult to read, in so much, that her introduction required educating the reader substantially,

e.g., she defined the *common reader* (p. 127), explained *intertextual method*, along with *production-centered* or *causality* methods (p. 128), and *public meaning* (p. 129).

In chapter four, the "Redemptive-Historical, Christocentric Approach," DeRouchie proposes that Jesus is in the Old Testament, which is observable through the "progressive unfolding of God's saving purposes disclosed from Genesis to Revelation, all of which grow out of and culminate in God's commitment to glorify himself in Christ. Jesus is, therefore, the beginning and end of the Bible, holding it all else together (Col 1:16–17)" (p. 182).

In chapter five, the "Premodern Approach," Carter argues that Christ is in the Old Testament in many ways, e.g., the fulfillment of prophecy, typology, and through when "[t]he Son himself speaks in the Old Testament" (239–240). Carter states that the "Premodern Approach" is closer to a spiritual discipline than a method (242).

Five Views of Christ in the Old Testament is recommended to all Bible-reading Christians, that is to say, all Christians. Three reasons for this recommendation can be quickly reported: (1) The topic is essential, (2) the authors are cordial, and (3) the views are clearly presented.

It is presumed that the book's audience would likely agree with the first claim, for why else would they read the print? The second and third points are only apparent by reading the book. Regarding the second point, it was common practice for respondents to open their critiques with praise for or by identifying common ground with the recipient. Moreover, the rejoinders remain friendly. For example, Goldingay noted that Carter misunderstood/misrepresented one of Goldingay's positions without going on the defense or offense, only correcting the mistake (p. 71).

The third point, that the views are clearly articulated, is observable in the initial presentation of each view, the responses, and the rejoinders. The clarity within the initial responses and rejoinders is accredited to each author's diligent work, including the ordered presentation of their respective views, definitions, and helpful examples. The reader may be challenged to choose a single view due to the compelling presentations of how one may view Christ in the Old Testament, but this difficulty would be a result of the validity and presentation of each view. The book's clear writing ensures that the reader can form an educated opinion as to what view they find most viable. A great amount of praise can be given to each individual writer, but together, their contributions amount to more. At times in the responses, scholars pointed out the same or similar critiques, which provides some validation to an individual scholar's claim. For example, in response to Dharamraj's "Reception-Centered, Intertextual Approach," both Oswalt (p. 153) and DeRouchie (p. 165) question if a Common Reader is not interested in authorial intent. At other times, the responses provide unique critique, which builds a cumulative argument. Perhaps least often, the contributors' responses provide contrasting statements to one another, which serves the reader by highlighting each author's view. For example, in response to Longman's "Redemptive-Historical, Christocentric Approach" Goldingay contests

that the New Testament finds Jesus in the First Testament (p. 102), while DeRouchie writes "[t]he New Testament's authors give no evidence that they interpreted their Scriptures as if Christ had not come" and that for Paul, Jesus' appearance "reshaped all his biblical interpretation" (p. 113). With these remarks in mind, both Goldingay's and DeRouchie's understanding of Christ in the Old Testament are clarified in their responses to Longman.

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Merkle, Benjamin L. *Discontinuity to Continuity: A Survey of Dispensational & Covenantal Theologies.* Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020, pp. 236, $25.99, paperback.

Benjamin L. Merkle serves as the M.O. Owens Jr. Chair of New Testament Studies at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary where he has taught since 2008. Merkle has authored or edited more than 30 theological and exegetical books, and he proves himself as a trustworthy theological guide throughout *Discontinuity to Continuity.* Merkle, having served as an IMB missionary to Southeast Asia, knows how to communicate the most intricate theological details to a wide audience. As such, this book will be useful to both young scholars, pastors, and theologically minded students.

In *Discontinuity to Continuity*, Merkle sets out to help readers better understand the arguments of the major dispensational and covenant theological systems. The six systems that Merkle highlights are classic dispensationalism, revised dispensationalism, progressive dispensationalism, progressive covenantalism, covenant theology, and Christian reconstructionism. To describe these schools of thought, each chapter progresses through the same four themes – the basic hermeneutic of each position, how each position understands the relationship between the covenants, each position's stance on the relationship between Israel and the church, and each position's understanding of the Kingdom of God (p. 7). Rather than advocating for any particular system, Merkle simply wishes to "inform rather than persuade" and tries to "silence" his own opinion (p. 2).

More than the content he provides (which is thorough and helpfully presented), Merkle displays the character and tone of a theologian through his descriptions and assessments of the major theological systems he surveys. Merkle is quite gracious in his estimation of each view. He quotes extensively from primary sources and is quick to provide necessary context if a potentially scandalous quote could be misconstrued. The author obviously wishes to promote the best argument possible for each viewpoint, and he refuses to take potshots against his interlocutors even when they make it easy for him to do so! Indeed, even the most skeptical reader may find himself agreeing with some of the points Merkle makes in favor of an opposing

system. Perhaps some readers may disagree with Merkle's assessment of each view, but it is difficult to accuse him of straw manning.

There is an inherent shortcoming in any survey, and readers should approach the book appropriately. A survey in which the author maintains objectivity and holds his position close to his chest may leave readers feeling like they are visiting a buffet. If we take Merkle's word on the subject, then all the included positions have roughly the same number of strengths and weaknesses. Perhaps one reader may resonate with one position's strengths and be left unbothered by its weaknesses. If that's the case, then readers may conclude that all systems stand on equal footing and commitment to one is simply a matter of personal preference. While it is important to remember that theologians must demonstrate teachability and a willingness to learn from those we disagree with (a virtue that Merkle consistently demonstrates throughout the book), we also must understand that dispensationalism and covenant theology cannot both be correct, a fact that Merkle acknowledges (p. 24). A fatal flaw exists somewhere in at least one of these systems, and introductory surveys tend to overlook such hierarchy of beliefs (some schools of thought are simply better than others). Still, weaknesses of the genre notwithstanding, if one is going to write a theological survey and wish to withhold their view on the subject, then this is the way to do it – thoroughly, graciously, and with an eye to the Bible.

Each chapter focuses on a different school of thought while using the same major questions to summarize and evaluate the views. As such, the chapters can become somewhat repetitive. This repetition, however, is a necessary evil if a consistent method of evaluation and assessment is to be used. By the end, this repetition should help readers become adept at recognizing the main themes of dispensationalism and covenant theologies. This reviewer does not expect to forget the difference between typology and allegory anytime soon, a distinction made numerous times throughout the book. If a reader was only interested in learning more about one perspective, then this is not an issue, but readers of the entire book may find overlapping arguments and repeated citations a bit tedious at times. However, the final chapter serves as an extensive summary of the preceding arguments. If a reader was in a hurry, then he could find the most pertinent information in this final summary chapter, though without Merkle's helpful assessments of each view.

Readers familiar with the topic may already recognize the chief weakness of Merkle's work, which is the absence of any mention of Baptist covenant theology. Covenantal Baptists, such as those who affirm the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith, will feel unrepresented in the book. The Baptist voices that Merkle interacts with fall under progressive covenantalism or dispensationalism, but all the representatives of covenant theology are Presbyterians. This is, to this reader, an unfortunate gap, especially since 1689 Federalism predates most of the systems covered in this book. Merkle's attention to detail is a strength, and it can be appreciated that he tackled classic dispensationalism and revised dispensationalism

in separate chapters even though they are admittedly similar (p. 53). If we separate these two closely related but distinct schools of dispensationalism, why not include and distinguish Baptist and Presbyterian forms of covenant theology?

Readers unfamiliar with 1689 Federalism could read Merkle's analysis of covenant theology and conclude that it was off limits for Baptists. Frequent references to the Westminster Confession and mentions of covenant children might push Baptist readers to alternative camps, even though they too have a rich history of covenant theology. Indeed, there does not seem to be any acknowledgement of a Baptist covenant theology in the text, footnotes, or bibliography of the book. It is possible that Merkle is unaware of this theological system's existence, but this would be surprising due to the thoroughness of the book's bibliography. If Baptist covenant theology made an appearance of any kind, however, this reader missed it entirely.

Still, Merkle's book is an excellent overview of (some of) the main views of dispensationalism and covenant theologies. A student could approach this text with no prior knowledge and leave with a firm grasp of the basic ideas pertinent to the debates. Before setting out on describing and analyzing the various positions, Merkle highlights four practical benefits that he hopes readers will gain from reading the book: know what we believe, appreciate the views of others, recognize that no theological system is perfect (including one's own), and become a person of the Book (1-4). If we use these proposed benefits to evaluate Merkle's book, then one must conclude that *Discontinuity to Continuity* succeeds at its goals.

Championship teams are typically made up of superstars and consistent role players. The superstars change the game and are continually referenced whenever the sport is mentioned. Role players may not receive the accolades, but they serve a crucial purpose. While the role players may not spark serious analytical debates, their fans will remember them fondly and know how they contributed to their team's success. If we apply this analogy to scholarship, then Benjamin Merkle's *Discontinuity to Continuity* is a bona fide role player. The scholarship concerning dispensational and covenant theology had a gap that needed to be filled, and this book accomplished exactly what it needed to do. Merkle's gracious tone, accessible presentation, and scholarly attention to detail will contribute to the ongoing discussion. Students wishing to learn more about dispensational and covenant theologies, a daunting topic at times, have found a helpful starting point.

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Cone, Christopher and James I. Fazio, eds. *Forged from Reformation: How Dispensational Thought Advances the Reformed Legacy*. El Cajon, CA: SCS Press, 2017, pp. 582, $39.95.

The Reformation is one of the most pivotal time periods in the development of the Church. The Reformers are largely credited with steering the Church back to faithfulness and fidelity to God's Word, which had been absent for centuries. The key principles which guided the Reformers in this mission are often identified as "the five *solas*" of the Reformation. These include *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone), *sola gratia* (grace alone), *sola fide* (faith alone), *solus Christus* (Christ alone), and *soli Deo Gloria* (to the glory of God alone). One of the crucial ideas of the Reformation is that the Church has not arrived at perfection and ought to keep reforming in line with these five principles. *Forged from Reformation: How Dispensational Thought Advances the Reformed Legacy*, contends that, although the Reformation gave a much-needed corrective to the faulty doctrines and interpretations of the Catholic Church, the task was not completed. It is the assertion of the authors of this volume that, as a system, dispensationalism carries on the idea of *semper reformanda* (always reforming), guiding the Church away from the problems which remained even beyond the Reformation.

In order to make this argument, the book presents eighteen chapters that highlight the significance of dispensational theology and hermeneutics. The first seven chapters are devoted to discussing dispensationalism within history. After an introductory chapter, Thomas Ice writes the second chapter which examines the Reformation in light of dispensational commitments. Ice argues that dispensational hermeneutics is an outworking of the hermeneutic promoted by the Reformers. In the third chapter, Patrick Belvill analyzes the life of Martin Luther and his *95 Theses*. Belvill argues that in Luther, one can see a "nascent form of the dispensationalist's literal grammatical-historical interpretive method" (p. 76). In the fourth chapter, James Fazio analyzes the life of J. N. Darby, arguing that Darby and Luther walked very similar paths in their lives, both "firmly bent on the task that they felt the Lord had entrusted to them" (p. 103). Cory Marsh contributes a fifth chapter to the volume, in which he argues that both Luther and Darby shared a similar argumentation against the established Church of the day. Marsh goes on to note the similarities between Luther and Darby in how they used the same principles and methods to argue against the established practices of Church polity. Marsh argues that Luther and Darby both shaped a future generation of ecclesiastical understanding in the way they argued. In the sixth chapter, Kevin Zuber discusses the doctrine of church autonomy. Zuber argues that dispensationalism carries on the Reformation's emphasis on local church autonomy. In the seventh chapter, Brian Moulton and Cory Marsh address the contentious issue of antisemitism, found especially in the writings of Martin Luther. Moulton and Marsh argue that, although one can appreciate Luther's

marvelous contribution to the Reformation, it is dispensationalism's insistence of a literal, grammatical-historical hermeneutic that counters antisemitism, allowing the Church to appreciate God's promises to national Israel.

The second part of the book references the five *solas* of the Reformation, analyzing how dispensationalism ostensibly carries on the Reformation legacy on each of these points. Beginning with a discussion of *sola Scriptura*, in chapter eight Andy Woods argues that the Reformation, although marked by a return to literalism, applied literal interpretation inconsistently to a variety of doctrines (such as the promises to national Israel). Woods argues that the dispensational paradigm of literal interpretation leads to a revival of key doctrines, such as a distinction between Israel and the Church. In chapter nine, Ron Bigalke contends that, although the hermeneutic of the Reformers largely abandoned the allegorical interpretation of the Catholic Church, there was one glaring exception—eschatology. Bigalke argues that a futuristic dispensationalism is the natural outcome of a literal application to eschatological and prophetic texts. In chapter ten, Thomas Baurain analyzes and compares the presuppositions of a literal interpretation framework. He then compares how the system of covenant theology is, in his opinion, inconsistent with how it applies its hermeneutic, in contrast to the consistent literalism of dispensationalism. In chapter eleven, James Fazio returns to Luther and analyzes Luther's Christocentric method of interpretation, concluding that by applying a Christocentric method of interpretation, Luther actually undermined the principles of hermeneutics which he attempted to apply elsewhere. Jeremiah Mutie concludes the section on *sola Scriptura* with a twelfth chapter, discussing how the literalism of dispensationalism differs from a wooden literalism of other groups like the Millerites, which laid the foundation for Seventh-Day Adventism.

In chapter thirteen, Grant Hawley connects dispensationalism with the Reformation principle of *sola gratia*. Hawley argues that whereas the Reformers applied the biblical doctrine of grace to soteriological passages, dispensationalism expands the concept of grace alone to the promises given to Israel, to whom God is faithful, despite her unfaithfulness. In chapter fourteen, Glenn Kreider discusses and clarifies how dispensationalism recognizes salvation being by faith alone (*sola fide*) in every dispensation. In chapter fifteen, Paul Scharf discusses the dispensational contribution to *solus Christus* (Christ alone). One of the arguments Scharf makes is that dispensationalism recognizes the unique experience of the New Covenant believer being "in Christ"—a concept which brings great glory and honor to Christ. In chapter sixteen, Christopher Cone discusses *soli Deo Gloria* as the "pinnacle" of the dispensational system. Cone notes that dispensationalism moves beyond a soteriological emphasis only and emphasizes that "God does all things for the expression of His own glory" (p. 521). Luther Smith writes the seventeenth chapter, which discusses the same theme as the previous chapter. Smith traces the theme of *soli Deo Gloria* since the Reformation (Luther, Calvin, etc.), and concludes that this desire to see God glorified in every aspect of creation is the defining mark of

dispensationalism. Cone provides a concluding chapter pointing to the idea of *semper reformanda*, advocating for the idea that we should not expect the Reformers to have gotten everything right, but we should expect that the Church would continue to diligently apply the principles the Reformers themselves advocated to areas that the Reformers themselves neglected.

Forged from Reformation is a volume which purports to show that dispensationalism should not be thought of as a novel innovation that breaks from the Reformers. Dispensationalism as a system may have been formulated relatively recently, but the authors of this volume would contend that the core tenets of dispensationalism are themselves a natural outcome of the principles of the Reformation. One of the most important contributions of this volume is in analyzing the hermeneutics of the Reformers and proposing that there was an inconsistency during their day by selectively applying certain hermeneutical principles. This volume provides a clear presentation of why dispensationalism sees itself not as something new, but as a recovery of something old—a recovery of what the Reformers themselves were attempting to do. The authors of this volume present a scholarly case for that assertion, and the reader will surely enjoy assessing that argument.

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Stallard, Mike, editor. *Dispensational Understanding of the New Covenant.* Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 2012, 285 pages, $24.99, paper.

In *Dispensational Understanding of the New Covenant,* several contributors present their understanding of the New Covenant in Dispensational theology. As a helpful introduction to the arguments, there are two introductory essays that set the parameters of the discussion. First, David Fredrickson (Western Seminary) answers the question, "Which Are the New Covenant Passages in the Bible?" Fredrickson's essay provides a grammar for discerning which OT passages can be utilized in this discussion. Then, Mike Stallard (Baptist Bible Seminary) gives an historical overview in "The Interpretation of the New Covenant in the History of Traditional Dispensationalism." Stallard's essay traces the development and progress of dispensational thought from its inception nearly exhaustively. These two chapters allow even the uninitiated to participate in the debate. Some readers might quibble with the fact that it takes over one hundred pages to get to the stated purpose of the book, but the strength of the introductory essays should quell this concern.

This volume presents and debates three views. First, Roy E. Beacham (Central Baptist Theological Seminary) argues "The Church Has No Legal Relationship to or Participation in the New Covenant." Second, Elliot E. Johnson (Dallas Theological Seminary) argues, "The Church Has an Indirect Relationship to the New Covenant." Third, Rodney J. Decker (Baptist Bible Seminary) argues, "The Church Has a

Direct Relationship to the New Covenant." Finally, Bruce Compton (Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary) provides an epilogue, "Dispensationalism, the Church, and the New Covenant."

Beacham argues exegetically from key passages (e.g., Jer 31; Eze 36) while focusing on the historical setting and genre of the texts (pp. 112 ff.). Beacham emphasizes the importance of the ancient Near Eastern context when analyzing the nature of the new covenant, insisting we must consider it a contract rather than merely a promise or prophecy (p. 108). In this discussion, Beacham conflates contract and covenant, frequently using them interchangeably. This is seen in his thesis, "The chapter argues that the new covenant is fundamentally a legal instrument whereby God will contract specific indivisible benefits with national Israel exclusively, the covenant being formally ratified by the oath of the stated parties once in human history at a clearly specified eschatological time and place yet future to today, precisely as foretold by prophetic Scripture" (p. 109). Readers will find Beacham's argument comprehensive.

Johnson focuses his argument primarily on an exposition of Jeremiah 31:31–34 to apply this covenant to the church in Hebrews and Paul's writing (p. 165). Johnson seeks to answer two questions. First, *"Is the church a covenant community?"* second, "*What does it mean to have the promised blessings of the new covenant?"* (164, italics original). Johnson takes Paul in Romans 9:4 and Ephesians 2:13-22 to mean that the church is not a covenant community (p. 164) and the blessing of the covenant is, in part, the blessing promised in the gospel applied individually to believers (p. 175).

Decker presents the last view. His treatment deals narrowly with Hebrews 7-10 and is the most technical. Decker shows how Hebrews relates the promises of the new covenant to the church through the sacrifice of Christ. Being that there is no "distinction of multiple covenants here" (p. 219), there must be a relationship the church has, not merely the future Israel, to the new covenant. Decker explains how the new covenant is the basis by which Christians draw near to God that is put into effect by the sacrifice of Christ (p. 222).

The contributors to *Dispensational Understanding of the New Covenant* provide a clear and thorough presentation of the dispensational view of the new covenant. Their arguments are based on a careful analysis of biblical texts and are consistent with the broader dispensational framework, and they are clearly experts on the topic. Each essay is exegetically founded and fits squarely within the strictly literal (originalist) hermeneutic of dispensational theology. The essays have different focuses, which leads to a disparity in the length of the treatments. For instance, Beacham's essay is ten pages longer than Decker's and over twenty-five pages longer than Johnson's (even Beacham's response to Johnson is longer than Johnson's essay) making Beacham's position the most substantive. This is a major weakness of the book. If Decker's claim is true that the "no legal relationship" view is "not the majority position" (p. 154), the majority of this book (including Masters' foreword) argues for

a position held by the minority of dispensationals. Unlike the two other views that have a narrow focus, Beacham focuses broadly and leaves no detail overlooked in pursuit of his thesis. Decker's response to Beacham admits as much (p. 163), though Decker remains unpersuaded.

A further weakness is that this book is a dispensational, in-house discussion. As such, there is no substantial engagement with other positions and there is a lack of interaction with opposing views. While the contributors engage with each other's arguments, there is little interaction with alternative views outside of the dispensational framework, even as a point of reference to clarify their argument. The authors do not address some of the key challenges that their view of the new covenant faces. For example, they do not address the problem of the relationship between Israel and the church in the context of the new covenant. While they argue that the church has not replaced Israel, they do not provide a clear explanation of how the promises of the new covenant apply to Israel and the church. This lack of clarity limits the usefulness of the volume for those who are seeking a comprehensive understanding of the dispensational view of the new covenant. This is particularly concerning because the book claims to be a comprehensive guide to dispensationalism's understanding of the new covenant. Without engaging with opposing views, the book risks presenting a one-sided perspective and failing to fully address criticisms of dispensationalism's interpretation of the new covenant. This is seen further in that the question posed has little import to other systems because of the broader hermeneutical structure presupposed by dispensationalism. Two dispensational presuppositions prevent much agreement with other systems: national Israel as the focus and the employment of a strictly literal (originalist) hermeneutic. Other systems allow room for typological interpretations that a strictly literal hermeneutic would not. This allows Jeremiah 31 to have an application beyond national Israel to a spiritual application to the church. The literal hermeneutic prevents them from seeing the promises of Jeremiah 31 as applicable beyond the immediate audience.

In conclusion, *Dispensational Understanding of the New Covenant* provides a thorough examination of dispensationalism's understanding of the new covenant. The book is well-organized, well-written, and provides a clear articulation of dispensationalism's position. However, the book's lack of engagement with opposing views and recent scholarship on the new covenant is a weakness that should be addressed. Despite this, the book is an important contribution to the study of dispensationalism and its understanding of the new covenant.

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Marsh, Cory M. and James I. Fazio, eds. *Discovering Dispensationalism: Tracing the Development of Dispensational Thought from the First to the Twenty-First Century.* El Cajon, CA: SCS Press, 2023, pp. 377, $29.95.

Critics of dispensationalism often contend that one of the reasons dispensationalism should be rejected is because it is a novel approach to understanding Scripture without historical precedent. Dispensationalism is often associated with John Nelson Darby (1800–1882), who is, according to the detractors of dispensationalism, the initiator of the doctrines and movement which would go on to be defined as dispensationalism. However, dispensationalists have long argued that the doctrines which compose the system of dispensationalism are neither novel nor unique to Darby. Rather, dispensationalists have argued that the key doctrines of dispensationalism (e.g., the millennium, the rapture, and the difference between Israel and the Church, etc.) are all to be found in Church history prior to Darby.

The newest (and most robust) argument against the novelty of dispensationalism is *Discovering Dispensationalism: Tracing the Development of Dispensational Thought from the First to the Twenty-First Century*. Edited by Cory Marsh and James Fazio, this work consists of eleven chapters which are authored by dispensational advocates from around the world in a variety of academic positions. The outline of the book traces the presence of dispensational thought from the ancient world of the New Testament to the modern day.

The first three chapters deal with dispensational thought in the ancient Mediterranean world. James Fazio writes about the New Testament Era (AD 30–90), Paul Hartog discusses the Patristic Era (100–250), and Jeremiah Mutie analyzes the Nicene Era (250–400). The initial chapter by Fazio primarily discusses the term "dispensation," analyzing how the New Testament authors used the corresponding Greek terminology. Fazio also compares the New Testament usage with how various dispensational authors have understood the term, authors such as Darby, Scofield, and Chafer. This initial chapter concludes with a relatively concise definition of dispensationalism, providing the reader with a benchmark of what should be explored in the following chapters. Hartog's chapter is a helpful analysis of two scholarly perspectives on premillennialism in the patristic era. Hartog compares the research and publications of Larry V. Crutchfield and Charles E. Hill, who both have written extensively on eschatology in the early patristic period. Ultimately, Hartog's chapter demonstrates that the patristic evidence is multifaceted and complex. With all the variation, Hartog proposes that the key factor in understanding patristic era eschatology is to observe the foundational role of one's hermeneutical approach. Where Hartog concludes, Mutie's third chapter begins. Mutie selects a variety of early Church sources based on their use of a literal hermeneutic. Mutie carefully qualifies that the sources he selects would not necessarily qualify as full-blown dispensationalists today, but that they follow the rules of literal interpretation which

ultimately results in viewing God as dealing differently with people in different dispensations. Mutie examines the work of Cyprian of Carthage, bishop Nepos of Egypt, Lactantius, Methodius, Hilary of Poitiers, Jerome, Augustine of Hippo, Hesychius, and Sulpicius Severus. Mutie concludes that while hermeneutic tendencies were shifting during this time period, many of these individuals exhibited a tendency for literal interpretation, resulting in an expectation of an imminent return of Christ and an expectation of a literal millennial reign of Christ.

Chapters four through seven deal with dispensational thought in vintage Europe. William Watson contributes a chapter on the Medieval era (430–1450), Ron Bigalke looks at the Reformation Era (1450–1600), Mark Snoeberger delves into the Pre-Darby Era (1600–1700), and Max Weremchuk concludes with a valuable analysis of the circumstances surrounding John Nelson Darby (1800–1882). Watson's well-researched chapter is one of the most formidable of the volume. Watson highlights some key sources in late antiquity and the medieval centuries (5th–15th). Watson points out that during this time period there were individuals who held to a literal Antichrist, a restoration of Israel, a pretribulational rapture of God's people, and a future period of tribulation preceding the Messiah's return, along with a literal millennium during which time Christ rules earth with His saints. Bigalke reviews the time of the Reformation and concludes that, although there were few premillennialists in the early part of the Reformation, in the late 1500s and early 1600s, the Reformation's emphasis on a literal hermeneutic led to a revival of the once-prevalent viewpoint, breaking away from the Catholic Church's eschatology of amillennialism. Snoeberger argues that while there are many criteria one could use to evaluate dispensationalism (he refers to Ryrie and Feinberg's lists), perhaps the most consistent defining factor of a dispensationalist is viewing a distinction between Israel and the Church. Snoeberger points out that even in the midst of postmillennialism, some Puritans, like Jonathan Edwards, believed that a restoration of Israel to the land of Canaan was a prophetic necessity. Snoeberger argues that this sensitivity to a distinction between Israel and the Church was the fertile ground which gave birth to the systematization of dispensationalism during the time of Darby. Weremchuk concludes this section by taking a thorough look at the life and contribution of John Nelson Darby, who everyone agrees was a key figure in the systematization of dispensationalism.

The final four chapters (8–11) deal with dispensational thought in modern America. Larry Pettegrew discusses the transition across the Atlantic (1875–1910), Phillip Long looks at the Mid-Acts movement (1880–1930), Thomas Ice recounts the golden years of the dispensational movement (1900–1970), and Darrell Bock finalizes the section with a look at the progressive dispensational movement (1980–Present). Pettegrew's chapter emphasizes the key development of American dispensationalism through such conferences as the Niagara Bible Conference and a variety of revivals. He traces how the doctrines of premillennialism and a pretribulational rapture

went from being virtually unknown during that time to being popular topics of conversation and belief. Long's chapter discusses a form of dispensationalism sometimes called hyper- or ultra-dispensationalism. Long writes that this "Mid-Acts" dispensationalism emerged at the end of the 19th century and has continuing ramifications for some denominations today. Ice discusses the dispensationalism of the 20th century, emphasizing the popular influence of Scofield and Lindsey. Ice notes how dispensational thought advanced to a prominent position in American evangelicalism within the 20th century. Bock concludes the section on American dispensationalism with an analysis of progressive dispensationalism, a development which emerged in the 1980s, headed by the names of Bock, Blaising, and Saucy. One helpful point Bock makes in his chapter is the emphasis that it is impossible to view systems like dispensationalism monolithically. Due to the natural development of dispensationalism, many dispensationalists today would look quite a bit different from a Darby or a Brookes of the past.

Marsh and Fazio fittingly conclude the book with a summary chart which reviews the various "dispensational" teachings that this volume presents. They conclude that where the Church puts an emphasis on the literal interpretation of Scripture, dispensationalism will exist among the various denominations. They end with a note of optimism with regard to the future continuation and flourishing of the dispensational hermeneutic.

Dispensationalists have long argued that the beliefs of dispensationalism have been present at various times in history. Time will tell whether this work will convince non-dispensationalists of that truth. One thing is certain. *Discovering Dispensationalism* is a work which will have to be considered by the non-dispensationalist who wants to argue that the beliefs of dispensationalism originated with Darby. In the eyes of this author, the conversation seems primed to move beyond that point of contention.

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Vlach, Michael J. *Dispensational Hermeneutics: Interpretation Principles that Guide Dispensationalism's Understanding of the Bible's Storyline*. North Haven, CT: Theological Studies Press, 2023, pp.111, $10.95, paperback.

Michael Vlach is Professor of Theology at Shepherds Theological Seminary (Cary, NC). He has also served on the faculty at The Master's Seminary (Sun Valley, CA) and as managing editor of *The Master's Seminary Journal*. He has written extensively on the topics of dispensationalism, hermeneutics, and systematic theology as a proponent of dispensationlism. Vlach is a well–known Bible teacher and has spoken regularly in churches, conferences, and on national radio broadcasts.

Dispensational Hermeneutics is a short, easy-to-read introduction to the interpretive principles of dispensationalism that makes dispensationalism unique in hermeneutical principles. Vlach helps the reader understand how dispensationalists view the overarching story of the Bible, which starts with the traditional understanding of the Bible's storyline as (1) Creation; (2) Fall; (3) Redemption; and (4) Restoration (p.11) but is then expounded on throughout the first chapter. The remainder of chapter one then describes some key ideas that are integral to dispensationalism such as an earthly kingdom of God (pp. 12–13), different aspects of Biblical covenants (pp. 13–16), ethnic/national Israel and its distinction from the church (pp. 16–19), the significance of geo–political nations (p. 19), and Premillennialism (pp. 20–21).

Vlach then spends the next three chapters explaining how dispensationalists interpret Scripture and he emphasizes what he considers the key hermeneutical principles for dispensationalists. He argues that dispensationalists are the only theologians consistently utilizing the grammatical–historical method of hermeneutics (p. 23) and he explains how this consistent utilization of the grammatical-historical method applies within the study of Scripture (pp. 23–39). Chapters three and four then provide examples of how exactly the grammatical-historical method is utilized to interpret Scripture, particularly concerning the literal interpretation of Old and New Testament prophecies (pp. 32–33).

In the remaining chapters, Vlach contrasts the hermeneutics of dispensationalism with the hermeneutics of non–dispensational systems. The author does not focus on any one non–dispensational hermeneutical system. When speaking of non-dispensational ideas, he explains that he "includes but is not limited to the systems of Covenant Theology and Progressive Covenantalism, and the millennial views of Amillennialism, Postmillennialism, and Laddian Historic Premillennialism" (p. 77) and he starts with, "By 'non–dispensational,' we refer generally to Covenant Theology, Progressive Covenantalism, Amillennialism, Postmillennialism, Preterism, Laddian Historic Premillennialism, and others. We are not singling out any one system or person." (p. 8) He is contrasting dispensational hermeneutics with all alternative hermeneutical theories. In the chapters focused on contrasting dispensationalism with non-dispensational hermeneutics, he presents his understanding of the non–dispensational hermeneutical principle and then he rebuffs that principle with a dispensational response.

Vlach does an excellent job at explaining the primary principles of dispensational hermeneutics, which is his intent. He writes that the whole point of this book is to explain the ten interpretive principles at the heart of Dispensationalism before contrasting dispensational hermeneutics with non-dispensational hermeneutics (p. 8). However, a major weakness of the book is his contrast of dispensationalism with non-dispensationalism. Vlach does not give sufficient space to contrast the different systems and often resorts to generalizing or oversimplifying alternative hermeneutical principles. In other words, the book does a great job of describing

dispensationalism, but it does not always treat non–dispensational ideas fairly. For instance, he makes the argument that Covenant Theology places its primary emphasis on the redemption of individuals, it is unfair to assume that all Covenant Theologians believe that the primary emphasis of Scripture is individual redemption-this oversimplifies the issue (pp. 11, 13, 14, 19, 21). Or, for instance, he equates Grammatical–Historical Hermeneutics with dispensationalism when there are non–dispensational theologians that would also espouse a Grammatical–Historical Hermeneutic-the difference would be how certain passages are interpreted within the Grammatical-Historical Hermeneutic (p. 23).

For a biblical theological student, this book provides a simple and easy-to-read primer for dispensational hermeneutics, but it is not a comprehensive study of dispensationalism or non-dispensational hermeneutics (nor is it intended to be, pp. 8–9). Because it is not a comprehensive study, this book provides a good start for understanding dispensational hermeneutics, but any student would need to utilize other, more technical sources for in-depth research concerning dispensationalism and hermeneutical principles. *Dispensational Hermeneutics* would be a great resource for a lay-person seeking to understand how dispensationalism is one way to view and understand the Bible's storyline or for a student to see how dispensationalists typically view the overarching storyline of Scripture in contrast to how dispensationalists sometimes view non–dispensationalist ideas.

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***Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture* (Spectrum Multiview Book Series). Edited by Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2022, 280 pp., $30.00, softcover.**

This worthy addition to IVP's Spectrum Multiview Book Series is edited by Brent Parker and Richard Lucas, designed to be a friendly in-house dialogue between evangelical theologians concerning major evangelical systems of theology (p. 112). It has often been observed that the last thing a fish would consider is the water—just so, the last thing many Christians would consider is their theological system, yet these systems often function as the lenses through which we interpret Scripture. This IVP volume explores four central theological systems within evangelicalism: Covenant Theology (Michael Horton), Progressive Covenantalism (Stephen Wellum), Progressive Dispensationalism (Darrel Bock), and Traditional Dispensationalism (Mark Snoeberger). These perspectives describe how the Bible fits together, progressing in the above order from those expressing greater continuity in the narrative of Scripture to those with greater discontinuity. Four chapters of

the presentation are followed by four chapters of author interaction with the other presented views, in an effort to encourage dialogue and discussion.

Michael Horton presents the view of Covenant Theology (author of *Introducing Covenant Theology*), emphasizing a strong degree of continuity in the biblical narrative. Horton recognizes covenant as a primary organizing principle of Scripture (p. 36), primarily consisting of the covenants of Redemption, Works, and Grace (p. 41). Horton also recognizes the motif of *inaugurated* fulfillment in Scripture (i.e., the *already* and *not-yet*), a theme present in three of the four views discussed (absent in Traditional Dispensationalism).

Stephen Wellum advances Progressive Covenantalism (author of *Kingdom Through Covenant*), which bears many similarities of continuity with Covenant Theology while insisting on a biblical progression of six main covenants: Creation, Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and New (pp. 89-98). Progressive Covenantalism also departs from Covenant Theology on key distinctives such as regenerate covenant community, rejection of the tripartite distinction, and non-Sabbatarianism.

Darrel Bock presents the view of Progressive Dispensationalism, which shares common foundational roots with Traditional Dispensationalism while also retaining a distinct measure in common with Progressive Covenantalism. Progressive Dispensationalism recognizes three main biblical covenants: the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New (p. 113). Bock retains such dispensational distinctives as a future for national Israel (pp. 115, 122), a firm distinction between Israel and the church (while recognizing some continuity, p. 133), and a general hermeneutical suspicion of typology (p. 116).

Mark Snoeberger represents Traditional Dispensationalism, which views Scripture as consisting of several different *dispensations* (economies or periods), while *covenant* is of secondary import (p. 12). The primary differentiating mark of dispensationalism remains a manifest distinction between Israel and the church (pp. 106, 13). Four main covenants are recognized: the Noahic (the only universal covenant), the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic (all applying to Israel alone), with the addition of the yet-future new covenant (p. 168).

Concisely demonstrating theological systems is challenging, as there are inevitable variances and nuances within each perspective (while avoiding the *no-true-Scotsman* impasse). Allowances aside, this work is a robust overview of the significant perspectives within theology, which gives the reader a practical introduction to the significant issues at play. The interaction portion at the end of the book is particularly helpful, which generated more heat than its academic subject matter may suggest. Allowing the authors to interact with one another's perspectives and critiques was a beneficial feature for those learning the contours of this broad theological conversation. The overall writing level is accessible to a broad audience, while those interested in more extensive study on these perspectives will find plentiful help in the footnotes and references.

This work is an effort at theological clarity and explanation. However, theologians frequently feel that their respective view is misunderstood and misrepresented by the opposing side, and this current work does not escape this dynamic—particularly in its latter sections. The four response sections and their substantive discussion reveal an ongoing need for dialogue. There is an excellent benefit through clearly defining the language articulated by each system—which may essentially prove the continuing need for books such as this.

For a work of theological overview, the author's responses generated a fair amount of disagreement and debate. Polemical language frequently surfaces in such debates and certainly has its place, though its use often risks confusing the novice reader in a work seeking clarity among conflicting positions. A few areas may be noted where this discussion thereby generated ample incentive for further study.

Hermeneutics is a critical factor in interpreting Scripture, so it should be no surprise that hermeneutics is inseparable from this project. Accordingly, there are frequent (and perhaps pp. inevitable) claims to hermeneutical superiority that would benefit from further discussion (cf. pp. 184, 211, 233-5). In general, dispensational views differ from covenantal reading by advocating a "literal" reading of Scripture that resists any New Testament progression on Old Testament passages (p. 16), generally rejecting typology (pp. 116, 158). Some essays began with a more pointed focus on the hermeneutic approach (so Wellum, pp. 76ff.), while others made appeals to authorial intent that would benefit from further exploration (Snoeberger, cf. p. 244n7). Hermeneutics is a broad category, though the substantive defense of interpretive decisions without begging the question is always helpful.

Much of the dialogue involves the relationship between Israel and the church—a topic the editors stipulated would not be central to this current work (p. 3), yet one that generates noticeable intensity. Both dispensational views maintain a firm division between Israel and the church (pp. 106, 115, 13), while the Traditional perspective views the church as a non-covenanted parenthesis in God's redemptive plan (save the Noahic, a covenant made with all creation)—one which begins and ends with national Israel (pp. 177-178). Therefore, Israel is the conduit of God's blessings to the church and the world (including the future new covenant, pp. 177-178), something tenaciously affirmed by Traditional Dispensationalism (p. 168). This is undoubtedly a distinctive position that should anticipate some scholarly debate, warranting a robust theological defense beyond a bifurcation that casually labels continuity between Israel and church as supersessionism (or abandoning Israel; cf. pp. 122-123, 222).

The category of *covenant* looms large in this discussion, and footnoted works will help the reader navigate this topic further after this overview (p. 6). The editors noted that *covenant* might not be the central theme or organizing principle of Scripture (p. 3), yet it illuminates degrees of continuity and discontinuity (p. 4). The dispensational views organize Scripture in relation to *dispensations* (though the definition on p. 113 risks etymological anachronism) since *covenant* primarily applies

to Israel and is of secondary import in this view (pp. 12, 176). The covenantal views present *covenant* as a primary backbone of Scripture (pp. 36, 74), though they differ on precisely how those covenants progress through the biblical narrative (p. 203). The covenantal construction advanced by Horton leads to some distinctives among the views offered, such as covenant baptism as furtherance of circumcision (p. 60).

This volume is an excellent overview of a broad topic, a topic that informs our foundational interpretation of Scripture. This volume engages with related issues ranging from the *pactum salutis* to hermeneutical methodology and is written accessibly while also maintaining sufficient depth for further study.

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Perkins, Harrison. *Reformed Covenant Theology.* Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2024, 520 pages, $49.99, hardcover.

Harrison Perkins earned a Master of Divinity at Westminster Seminary California and a Ph.D. at the Queen's University in Belfast, United Kingdom. Perkins is a visiting lecture in systematic theology for Edinburgh Theological Seminary and online faculty in church history at Westminster Theological Seminary. He is the author of *Catholicity and the Covenant of Works* as well as several articles both at the popular and academic levels. He served in various pastoring roles in the United Kingdom before accepting his current role as the lead pastor of Oakland Hills Community Church (OPC) in the Detroit area.

Perkins' aim in *Reformed Covenant Theology* is to cover under-discussed aspects of covenant theology from the perspective of systematic theology. The book attempts to show through its five major divisions that covenant theology is essential for the life of the church and that it developed out of the Catholic tradition rather than the Reformed tradition, making it the way the church has read the Bible through all of history. Each chapter discusses categorical elements of covenant theology and ends with the pastoral use of the doctrines covered. The thesis of the book is that human beings are "creatures made for communion with God, and covenants are the way that God facilitates that communion" with them (p. 1). Part one lays the groundwork by discussing the covenant of works where God creates a context "for God and Adam to demonstrate their love for one another," specifically through Adam's obedience to the moral law (p. 19). Part two covers the inter-trinitarian covenant of redemption, which anticipated Adam's failure to obey God. The author dedicates the final three parts of the book to the covenant of grace, where he examines substance and administration before unpacking what it means to live as the people of God within the covenant of grace. The final chapter contains six clear theses that Perkins was trying to prove through his writing with short explanations thus neatly summarizing the contents of the volume.

Perkins should be commended for several elements of *Reformed Covenant Theology*. First, he chews through numerous confessional texts supplemented with works from major early church theologians such as Irenaeus and Justin Martyr and confessional texts such as the *Westminster Confession*, the *Heidelberg Catechism,* and the *Belgic Confession*. This foundation of the argument grounds his research in both Scripture and history. Second, a comparison between Adam and Christ is made continuously throughout the volume, demonstrating how Jesus was able to complete every obligation placed upon Adam but that Adam failed to do so, thus making Jesus the most glorious Savior. This feature of the book should leave the academic, the pastor, and the layman marveling in the glory of such a profound salvation in Christ. Third, the author meticulously explains how Christ is the Substance of each historical covenant. This helps draw the Scriptures together in a way that satisfies the questions one might have about the unity of the Bible. Finally, the pastoral charges at the end of each chapter are welcome applications to aid in moving theology from the head and the heart to the real life of the church. Pastors will greatly appreciate these conclusory sections.

Despite these praises, there are several areas for criticism that need to be addressed. First, the pattern of Perkins' argumentation feels uncomfortable at times. He will explain an element of a covenant, then follow it with proof texts from confessional documents and reformed theologians before addressing Scriptural data. This causes one to question whether the author is organically arriving at his covenantal conclusions from Scripture alone, or whether he is attempting to prove that Reformed theologians have been correct in their reading of Scripture. A second criticism tied to this is the use of pre-Reformation theologians. While Perkins cites several texts from the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th centuries, these texts are sparser than anticipated, given that he hoped to show how covenant theology was deeply rooted in church history rather than a Reformation development (p. xvii). Furthermore, Medieval theologians are almost entirely absent, leaving the reader in the dark about covenant theology's presence in the Middle Ages.

A more acute critique and personal curiosity of the reviewer concerns the address of Old Testament progressive sanctification. Perkins defines sanctification as "our present experience of resurrection life" and that "the Spirit has been active throughout the whole covenant of grace to work in God's people to bring them to faith and produce newness of life in them" (pp. 236, 239). The author then quotes Irenaeus, who says those who died before Christ "had in them the Spirit of God" (p. 239). When viewed in contrast with the section "A Covenantal Ethic" in chapter 16 where virtue ethics are applied to the concept of a continuous and developing pursuit of holiness, readers are left uncertain about how the word *sanctification* is being used by the author. Did Old Testament saints have the indwelling Holy Spirit? Is the meaning of sanctification different in the Old and New Testaments? There are Old Testament figures such as Abraham, Moses, and David who were commended by God for their

faithfulness at times only to have serious moral lapses after their commendation. The author may explain the seeming lack of progressive sanctification to improve the work. Perkins may have helped his argument about the unity of the covenants with Christ as their substance by sharpening the definition of sanctification as it pertains to Old and New Testament use and how it concerns both Old Testament saint and Christian holiness as a progressive development.

Criticisms aside, Perkins' work is a welcome contribution to those seeking a more robust understanding of covenant theology. The address of covenant theology from a systematic and pre-Reformation historical perspective is a needed contribution since covenant theology is usually addressed via a biblical theological pathway. Academics, pastors, and laymen partial to covenant theology will find this volume helpful given its detailed articulation of the intricacies related to the covenantal perspective. Those who disagree with a covenantal perspective of the Bible will still find Perkins' work helpful for sharpening their own thinking on the unity and diversity of Scripture. The volume will instantly become a necessary point of interaction for any student or professor writing on the covenants. This book is highly recommended for those interested in unpacking the doctrines of covenant theology.

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