KINGDOM

through

COVENANT

A BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL
UNDERSTANDING *of the* COVENANTS

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CONTENTS

Chapter One

THE IMPORTANCE OF COVENANTS IN BIBLICAL AND SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

> The idea of covenant is fundamental to the Bible's story. At its most basic, covenant presents God's desire to enter into relationship with men and women created in his image. This is reflected in the repeated covenant refrain, "I will be your God and you will be my people" (Exodus 6:6-8; Leviticus 26:12 etc.). Covenant is all about relationship between the Creator and his creation. The idea may seem simple; however, the implications of covenant and covenant relationship between God and humankind are vast . . .[1]

The purpose of this book is to demonstrate two claims. First, we want to show how central the concept of "covenant" is to the narrative plot structure of the Bible, and secondly, how a number of crucial theological differences within Christian theology, and the resolution of those differences, are directly tied to one's understanding of how the biblical covenants unfold and relate to each other. In terms of the first claim, we are *not* asserting that the covenants are the centre of biblical theology. Instead, we assert that the covenants form the backbone of the metanarrative of Scripture and thus it is essential to "put them together" correctly in order to discern accurately the "whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27).[2] Michael Horton nicely captures this point when he writes that the biblical covenants are "the architectural structure that we

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[1] Alistair I. Wilson and Jamie A. Grant, "Introduction," in *The God of Covenant: Biblical, Theological, and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Jamie A. Grant and Alistair I. Wilson (Leicester, UK: Apollos, 2005), 12.

[2] We are not going to enter into the thorny issue of the centre of biblical theology. Many proposals have been given, and in the end they all tend toward reductionism. For example, see the discussion in Gerhard F. Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991); and the proposals of G. K. Beale, "The Eschatological Conception of New Testament Theology," in *"The Reader Must Understand": Eschatology in Bible and Theology*, ed. K. E. Brower and M. W. Elliott (Leicester, UK: Apollos, 1997), 11–52; and James M. Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010). Our claim is much more modest: the biblical covenants form the backbone of the metanarrative of Scripture, and apart from understanding each biblical covenant in its historical context and then in its relation to the fulfilment of all of the covenants in Christ, we will ultimately misunderstand the overall message of the Bible.

believe the Scriptures themselves to yield. . . . It is not simply the concept of the covenant, but the concrete existence of God's covenantal dealings in our history that provides the context within which we recognize the unity of Scripture amid its remarkable variety."[3] If this is the case, which we contend it is, then apart from properly understanding the nature of the biblical covenants and how they relate to each other, one will not correctly discern the message of the Bible and hence God's self-disclosure which centres and culminates in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Obviously this is not a new insight, especially for those in the Reformed tradition who have written at length about the importance of covenants and have structured their theology around the concept of "covenant."[4] In fact, almost every variety of Christian theology admits that the biblical covenants establish a central framework that holds the story of the Bible together. From the coming of Christ and the beginning of the early church, Christians have wrestled with the relationships between the covenants, particularly the old and new covenants. In fact, it is almost impossible to discern many of the early church's struggles apart from covenantal wrestling and debates. For example, think of how important the Jew-Gentile relationship is in the New Testament (Matt. 22:1–14, par.; Acts 10–11; Romans 9–11; Eph. 2:11–22; 3:1–13), the claim of the Judaizers, which centres on covenantal debates (Galatians 2–3), the reason for the calling of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), the wrestling with the strong and weak within the church (Romans 14–15), and the implications for the church on how to live vis-à-vis the old covenant now that Christ has come (Matthew 5–7; 15:1–20, par.; Acts 7; Romans 4; Hebrews 7–10). In reality, all of these issues are simply the church wrestling with covenantal shifts—from old covenant to new—and the nature of fulfilment that has occurred in the coming of Christ.

How Christians have understood the relationship between the biblical covenants has differed. This is one of the reasons why we have different theological systems and is probably best exemplified in our contemporary context by dispensationalism and covenant theology, even though it is certainly not limited to these views. Even though they agree on the main issues central to "the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3), at

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[3] Michael S. Horton, *God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006), 13.

[4] As we will discuss in more detail in chapter 2, Reformed theology or "covenant theology" has rightly understood that "covenant" is central to the organisation of Scripture and thus of all theologizing. In fact Horton, *God of Promise*, 11, states it this way: "*Reformed* theology is synonymous with *covenant* theology." However, it is not only Reformed theology that has argued this point. All Christian theology has rightly viewed the covenants as central to how the Scriptures unfold and how we think of what our Lord Jesus has accomplished as our new covenant head.

their heart these two systems differ on many matters which, in the end, are rooted in their different views on the nature of the biblical covenants and how these covenants relate to each other. Thus, beyond our basic agreement that the story of Scripture moves from Adam to Abraham to Sinai, which ultimately issues in a promise of a new covenant whose advent is tied with Jesus' cross work (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:23–26), there is disagreement on how to "put together" the biblical covenants. This disagreement inevitably spills over to other issues, especially the question of what from the old covenant applies to us today as new covenant believers. It is at this point, on such matters as the Sabbath, the application of the Old Testament law to the state, the application of various moral prohibitions, and many more issues, that we discover significant differences among Christians.[5]

For this reason, correctly "putting together" the biblical covenants is central to the doing of biblical and systematic theology and thus to the theological conclusions we draw from Scripture in many doctrinal areas. If we are going to make progress in resolving disagreements within Christian theology, especially in regard to dispensational and covenant theology, then how we understand the nature of the biblical covenants and their relationship to each other must be faced head on and *not* simply assumed. It is our conviction that the present ways of unpacking the biblical covenants across the Canon, especially as represented by dispensational and covenant theology (and their varieties), are not quite right. That is why we believe it is time to present an alternative reading which seeks to rethink and mediate these two theological traditions in such a way that we learn from both of them but also provide an alternative—a *via media*. We are convinced that there is a more accurate way to understand the relationship of the biblical covenants which makes better sense of the overall presentation of Scripture and which, in the end, will help us resolve some of our theological differences. If, as

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[5] Differences of viewpoint regarding the relation of the covenants not only distinguishes various Christian theological systems; it also distinguishes how Christians and Jews in the first century differed with one another, especially in regard to how they viewed the relationship between the Mosaic covenant and the coming of Christ. For first-century Judaism, the law was imperishable, immutable, eternal (e.g., *Wisd. Sol.* 18:4; *Ag. Ap.* 2.277; *Mos.* 2.14; *Jub.* 1:27; 3:31; 6:17). But Paul, for example, interprets the law-covenant differently than a Jew: he relativizes the importance of the law-covenant by arguing from the law's placement in the plot line of the Pentateuch (cf. Gal. 3:15–4:7). The promise to Abraham that in his seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed *antedates* Moses and the giving of the law by centuries, and that promise cannot be annulled by the giving of the law (Gal. 3:17), regardless of how much space is given over to the law in the text, or how large a role it played in Israel's history. What, then, was the purpose of the law? Ultimately, the entire New Testament argues, its function was to lead us to Christ (cf. Rom. 3:21). Obviously this Christian interpretation of the law-covenant is radically different from a Jewish one. On this point see D. A. Carson, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," in *NDBT*, 89–104; idem, "Mystery and Fulfillment: Toward a More Comprehensive Paradigm of Paul's Understanding of the Old and the New," in *Justification and Variegated Nomism: Volume 2—The Paradoxes of Paul*, ed. D. A. Carson, P. T. O'Brien, and M. A. Seifrid (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 393–436.

church history warns, that goal is too ambitious, minimally our aim is to help us become more epistemologically self-conscious in how we put our Bible together in relation to the biblical covenants. In so doing, hopefully the discussion among Christians can profitably progress as we compare and contrast our basic theological commitments in a variety of doctrinal areas.

"Kingdom through covenant" is our proposal for what is central to the narrative plot structure of the Bible, which we want to develop in detail in the following chapters. If we were to label our view and to plot it on the map of current evangelical discussion, it would fit broadly under the umbrella of what is called "new covenant theology,"[6] or to coin a better term, "progressive covenantalism."[7] Obviously the problem in attaching a label to any view is that we do not completely agree with all the proposals in the category.

In identifying our proposal as "progressive covenantalism," or a species of "new covenant theology," we are stressing two points. First, it is a *via media* between dispensational and covenant theology. It neither completely fits nor totally disagrees with either system. Second, it stresses the *unity* of God's plan which is discovered as we trace God's redemptive work through the biblical covenants. It is not our desire to focus on the new covenant to the exclusion of the other covenants; rather we are concerned with each and every biblical covenant. Yet, given the fact that God has progressively revealed his eternal plan to us over time and through the covenants, in order to discern God's plan correctly we must understand each biblical covenant in its own redemptive-historical context by locating that covenant in relationship to what precedes it and what comes after it. When we do this, not only do we unpack God's unfolding plan, but we discover how that one plan comes

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[6] There is a great amount of literature under the umbrella of "new covenant theology." We do not endorse all of it, but a good place to start is with the following literature: Tom Wells and Fred Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2002); Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008); Jason C. Meyer, *The End of the Law: Mosaic Covenant in Pauline Theology* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009); John G. Reisinger, *Abraham's Four Seeds* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 1998); Steven Lehrer, ed., *Journal of New Covenant Theology*; A. Blake White, *The Newness of the New Covenant* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2007). See also Michael F. Bird, "New Testament Theology Re-Loaded: Integrating Biblical Theology and Christian Origins," *Tyndale Bulletin* 60/2 (2009): 265–291. Even though Bird does not adopt the label "new covenant theology," he presents his own view as "a theology of the New Covenant." He rightly argues that the advent of the new covenant implies "*a continuing and yet transformed relationship between the new epoch of redemptive-history and the Old Covenant economy*" (284, emphasis his). The New Testament authors assume that the story of Israel is continued in the story of the church, but they also stress a strong element of discontinuity due to the superiority of the new covenant to the old because of the person and work of Christ.

[7] "Progressive covenantalism" was a term suggested to us by Richard Lucas, presently a PhD student at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky. Even though it is a new term, it nicely captures our basic proposal. "Progressive" seeks to underscore the progress or the unfolding of God's revelation from old to new, and "covenantalism" emphasises that God's plan across redemptive-history unfolds through covenants as all of these covenants are terminated, culminated, and fulfilled in Christ and the arrival of the promised new covenant age.

to fulfilment and culmination in Christ and the inauguration of the new covenant with all of its theological entailments (see Heb. 1:1–3; 7:1–10:18; cf. Eph. 1:9–10). Furthermore, given the fact that we live in light of the achievement of Christ's glorious work, we must apply the entire Scripture to us, including all of the previous covenants, through the lens of the achievement of our Lord and the new covenant realities he inaugurates. Hence the reason for the label "progressive covenantalism" or "new covenant theology."[8] Yet, regardless of the particular label, our intent is to propose an alternative way of understanding the nature of the biblical covenants and their relationship to the new covenant in Christ. We want to begin to spell out some of the implications of this view for various theological loci since one's understanding of the covenants is so foundational to how one "puts together" the entire Bible. In the end, how one approaches the very doing of biblical and systematic theology is greatly affected by one's comprehension of how the biblical covenants unfold and relate to each other in God's one plan of redemption.

Our procedure is to begin this study by establishing the importance of biblical covenants for biblical and systematic theology. There are numerous ways this point could be demonstrated but we will do so by setting our discussion of the covenants in the context of the two dominant theological systems within evangelical theology. Dispensationalism and covenant theology (along with their varieties) largely frame how evangelicals put their Bibles together. Each view attempts to serve as an interpretive grid for how to understand the metanarrative of Scripture. In this way, both systems function as examples of biblical theologies, i.e., "whole-Bible theologies," which then lead to various systematic theological conclusions. Yet, it is well known that each system draws vastly different conclusions—not so much on primary gospel issues—but on significant theological matters which lead to differences among us. Specifically we notice these differences in the doctrinal areas of ecclesiology and eschatology, but it is not limited to these matters, as we will seek to demonstrate. Thus it is helpful to establish the importance of biblical covenants by doing so through the lens of these two theological systems and discerning where they differ from each other especially in their understanding of these covenants. In this way, our proposal is viewed against the backdrop of current views in the church.

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[8] This view may also be thought of as a "Baptist theology" since we believe that it best provides the grounding to a Baptist ecclesiology over against other ecclesiologies. However, since our view has more implications than merely that of ecclesiology and since Baptists differ in matters of God's sovereignty, soteriology, and eschatology, "progressive covenantalism" is probably a more appropriate label.

Before we turn to that task, in chapter 1 we will first give a brief discussion on how we conceive of the nature of biblical theology and its relation to systematic theology. Since we are viewing dispensational and covenant theology as examples of biblical *and* systematic theologies it is important to describe our use of these terms, given that there is no unanimous agreement regarding their use.

Chapter 2 will describe the basic views of dispensational and covenant theology, noting variations and debates within each view. As one would expect, each view is not monolithic; however, in our description of these biblical-systematic theologies particular attention will be focused on their respective understanding of the biblical covenants and how it is that each view differs, given their specific way of relating the biblical covenants to each other.

Building on this description of the two theological systems, chapter 3 will conclude the introductory section in two ways. First, we will describe some basic hermeneutical assumptions we will employ in our reading of Scripture and thus describe something of our theological method in doing biblical and systematic theology. Second, we will then resume our discussion of dispensational and covenant theology by outlining some of the hermeneutical similarities and differences between them which need resolution in order to adjudicate these two systems and thus argue for a *via media*.

Chapters 4–15 will serve as the heart of the book. Here our proposal of "kingdom through covenant" is unpacked in detail as each biblical covenant is described in its own redemptive-historical context and then in its relationship to the dawning of the new covenant in the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ. Finally, chapters 16–17 will conclude the book by tying the loose ends together in a summary of the proposal and then briefly showing some of the theological ramifications of it which highlight how our understanding of "kingdom through covenant" affects the conclusions drawn from systematic theology for the various doctrinal loci, specifically, but not limited to, Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology.

Let us now turn to a brief discussion of our understanding of the nature of biblical theology and its relation to systematic theology. This will allow us to describe how we are using these terms and to explain why we view dispensational and covenant theology as examples of both biblical and systematic theology, even though we disagree with various aspects of each view.

THE NATURE OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

We believe this attempt to understand the biblical covenants across redemptive-history and to unpack their relationship to one another and to their ultimate fulfilment in Christ is an exercise in "biblical theology." It is also the first step in drawing legitimate theological conclusions from Scripture and thus applying the "whole counsel of God" to our lives, which is the task of "systematic theology." But given the fact that people mean different things by "biblical" and "systematic" theology, let us explain how we are using these terms and how we conceive of the relationship between them.

At the popular level, for most Christians, when the term "biblical theology" is used it is probably heard as expressing the desire to be "biblical" or "true to the Bible" in our teaching and theology. Obviously, to be "biblical" in this sense is what all Christians ought to desire and strive for, but this is *not* exactly how we are using the term. In fact, in church history, "biblical theology" has been understood in a number of ways.[9]

Generally speaking, before the last two or three centuries, biblical theology was often identified with systematic theology, even though many in church history practised what we currently call "biblical theology," that is, an attempt to unpack the redemptive-historical unfolding of Scripture.[10] One can think of many examples, such as Irenaeus (c. 115–c. 202), John Calvin (1509–1564), and Johannes Cocceius (1603–1669). In this important sense, biblical theology is not entirely new, since the church has always wrestled with how to put the whole Canon together, especially in light of the coming of Christ. Any position, then, that seeks to think through the canon of Scripture is doing "biblical theology" in some sense. Granting this point, it is still accurate to note that, in the past, there was a tendency to treat the Scripture in more logical and atemporal categories rather than to think carefully through the Bible's developing story line as it was forged across time. Even in the post-Reformation era where there was a renewed emphasis on doing a "whole-Bible theology," biblical theology was mostly identified

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[9] For a helpful overview of the history of biblical theology, see C. H. H. Scobie, "History of Biblical Theology," in *NDBT*, 11–20. See also Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 867–888; Robert W. Yarbrough, *The Salvation Historical Fallacy? Reassessing the History of NT Theology* (Leiden, Netherlands: Deo, 2004); H. G. Reventlow, "Theology (Biblical), History of," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, 6 vols. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1992), 6:483–505; G. E. Ladd, "Biblical Theology, History of," and "Biblical Theology, Nature of," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, rev. ed., ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 1:498–509.

[10] For a fine example of this approach to biblical theology see Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

with systematic theology, and systematic theology was identified more with "dogmatic" concerns.[11]

With the rise of the Enlightenment, biblical theology begins to emerge as a distinct discipline. Some have argued, and rightly so, that this is tied to the Enlightenment's "historical consciousness."[12] However, one must carefully distinguish the emergence of biblical theology in the Enlightenment era along two different paths, one path serving as an illustration of an illegitimate approach to biblical theology tied to the Enlightenment's *Zeitgeist* and the other path a legitimate one seeking to develop previous insights in church history but now in a more precise, detailed, and historically conscious manner, dependent upon the Bible's own internal presentation. Let us first think briefly about the illegitimate development of biblical theology associated with the Enlightenment and classic liberal theology before we discuss what we believe is the legitimate view of biblical theology.

During the period of the Enlightenment there was a growing tendency to approach Scripture *critically* and thus uncoupled from historic Christian theology.[13] This resulted in approaching the Bible "as any other book,"[14] rooted in history but, unfortunately, also open to historical-critical methods. This meant that the Bible was not approached on its own terms, i.e., as God's Word written. Instead, the idea that Scripture is God-breathed through human authors—a text which authoritatively and accurately unfolds God's redemptive plan centred in Christ—was rejected as the starting point of biblical theology.

The person first associated with this path of biblical theology is Johann Philipp Gabler, often viewed as the father of "biblical theology." In his inaugural lecture at the University of Altdorf on March 30, 1787—"An Oration on the Proper Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Specific Objectives of Each"—he defined biblical theology as an inductive, historical, and descriptive discipline, in contrast to systematic theology, which he viewed as a deductive, ahistorical, and normative discipline. It

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[11] See D. A. Carson, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," 89–104, who makes this point. Carson notes that the first occurrence of the expression "biblical theology" is in 1607 by W. J. Christmann, who used it to refer to a compilation of proof texts supporting Protestant systematic theology (90).

[12] See Carson, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," 89–94.

[13] For a brief description of the Enlightenment era see W. Andrew Hoffecker, ed., *Revolutions in Worldview: Understanding the Flow of Western Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 240–280; cf. Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996); cf. D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 13–137.

[14] This is Benjamin Jowett's expression. For a discussion of the Enlightenment's reading of the Bible see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998); cf. idem, "Exegesis and Hermeneutics," in *NDBT*, 52–64.

is crucial to note that Gabler used the term "historical" in a more histor-ical-*critical* sense. He did *not* use the term in the sense that we ought to read Scripture as God's authoritative, trustworthy Word, rooted in history, and along its redemptive-historical axis. In its *critical* use, he meant that we ought to read Scripture in light of Enlightenment rationalist presuppositions, which minimally assumed the following points: (1) in doing biblical theology we do *not* need to assume the Scripture's inspiration; (2) biblical theology involves the work of carefully collecting the ideas and concepts of individual biblical writers, and this task is accomplished by means of historical, literary, and philosophical criticism (tied to a rationalist epistemology); and (3) as a historical discipline, biblical theology must distinguish between the several periods of the old and new religion, which, for Gabler, is basically following the "history of religions" approach to Scripture, thus assuming from the outset that Scripture is not authoritatively and accurately given in its totality. In Gabler's understanding of biblical theology, then, his overall goal was to uncouple the study of Scripture from dogmatic or doctrinal aims and to study Scripture historically-*critically* to determine what was legitimately true and what was not. In so doing, he opened the door to the drift toward the denial of a high view of Scripture and the increasingly atomistic reading of Scripture, given the fact that he did not believe Scripture was a unified, God-given revelation.[15]

As this path of biblical theology developed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, practitioners increasingly made use of the historical-critical method, which for the most part, assumed a *methodological* naturalism.[16] Over time the end result of such an approach was the fragmentation

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[15] For a more detailed treatment of Gabler's significance, along with his approach to biblical theology, see Carson, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," 89–90; Vanhoozer, "Exegesis and Hermeneutics," 53; J. V. Fesko, "On the Antiquity of Biblical Theology," in *Resurrection and Eschatology: Theology in Service of the Church*, ed. L. G. Tipton and J. C. Waddington (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 443–477. Fesko (447–448) nicely summarises Gabler's approach to Scripture in the following steps: (1) He viewed Scripture as "inspired" but we must still decide what is truly divine versus what is not. All of Scripture, then, is not God-given; (2) How do we decide what is God-given? We ask whether the portion of Scripture we are reading is consistent with "eternal universal religion" or whether it merely reflects the opinion, time, and culture of the biblical author; and (3) He denied that Scripture was a unified, organic, historically unfolding divine revelation which in its totality gives us God's authoritative revelation. For a contrary yet not convincing view of Gabler see Michael F. Bird, "Biblical Theology: An Endangered Species in Need of Defense," http://euangelizomai.blogspot.com/2008/01/biblical-theology-endangered-species-in.html.

[16] "Methodological naturalism" is the view that approaches our study of history (including our study of the Bible) and science without considering God's involvement in the world and divine action as represented by divine revelation and miracles. Methodological naturalism does *not* necessarily require a commitment to atheism, even though it is consistent with it. Deism and panentheism (both Enlightenment views) also assume methodological naturalism, given their denial of divine action in an effectual, supernatural sense. For a helpful discussion and critique of methodological naturalism see Alvin Plantinga, "Methodological Naturalism?" *Origins and Design* 18/1, accessed at http://www.arn.org/docs/odesign/od181/methnat181.htm; and "Methodological Naturalism? Part 2" *Origins and Design* 18/2 accessed at http://www.arn.org/docs/odesign/od182/methnat182.htm.

of Scripture, and biblical theology as a discipline became nothing more than merely a "descriptive" discipline, governed by *critical* methodologies and alien worldview assumptions. As a result, this approach to biblical theology emphasised more "diversity" than "unity" in Scripture, and ultimately, as a discipline which sought to unpack the unified plan of God, it came to an end.[17] In the twentieth century, there were some attempts to overcome the Enlightenment straightjacket on Scripture. In theology, the work of Karl Barth is notable. He is often seen as the forerunner of narrative theology and the post-liberal school, a school which broadly attempts to read Scripture as a unified canon, but which, when all is said and done, does not operate with a traditional view of the authority and accuracy of Scripture. In biblical studies there was also the "Biblical Theology Movement."[18] Its goal was to overcome the more negative results of the historical-critical method and allow the biblical text to come alive for the contemporary church although, sadly, it did not return to the assumptions of historic, orthodox Christianity. In Old Testament theology, for example, Walther Eichrodt, who was part of this movement, wrote an Old Testament biblical theology centred on the notion of the covenant. Others in the movement wrote a biblical theology centred on different corpora or themes. However none of these wrote or attempted to write a "whole Bible theology" because, given their view of Scripture and theological commitments, very few of them believed that there was a unified message in the whole Canon.[19] As a result, just as Geerhardus Vos, the evangelical pioneer of a legitimate approach to biblical theology, had warned at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Biblical Theology Movement failed. Vos had warned that one cannot truly do a biblical theology in the

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[17] See Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980). In the nineteenth century, "biblical theology" was eventually identified with "classic liberalism" as represented by various schools of thought associated with such people as F. C. Baur, J. Wellhausen, the history of religions school, and so on. On these people and movements see Stanley J. Grenz and Roger Olson, *20th Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992).

[18] For a survey of this movement see Gerhard F. Hasel, "The Nature of Biblical Theology: Recent Trends and Issues," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 32:3 (1994); 211–214; and James Barr, "Biblical Theology," in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: Supplementary Volume*, ed. K. Crim (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 104–106.

[19] For this assessment see Carson, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," 90. Carson writes, "With more and more emphasis on close study of individual texts, and with less and less emphasis on serious reflection on the relationship of these findings to historic Christian faith, the tendency was toward atomization. . . . the tendency was away from whole-Bible biblical theology, and toward Old Testament theology and New Testament theology. By the 20th century, these works most commonly divided up their subject matter into smaller corpora (Pauline theology; Matthean theology; Q-theology; theology of the major prophets; *etc.*) or into organizing structures (the covenant for W. Eichrodt; a specialized understanding of salvation history for G. von Rad; a form of existentialism for R. Bultmann; *etc.*)." But what they did not produce were whole-Bible theologies which sought to unpack the unity of God's plan amidst its diversity.

grand scale if one denies the full authority of Scripture and dismisses the historic Christian theology that grounds this view.[20]

Today in non-evangelical theology there are a variety of options that attempt to read Scripture as a unified whole, but most of them are weak on Scripture and do not operate under consistent Christian assumptions.[21] This is why for most non-evangelicals "biblical theology" in the sense of doing a "whole-Bible" theology is viewed as impossible. Given their rejection of the unity of Scripture as a divine revelation and the methodological naturalistic assumptions of the historical-critical method which questions the integrity of the narrative of biblical history, Scripture is viewed, more often than not, simply as an anthology of religious writings put together by the religious communities of Israel and the church.

In our opinion, this is *not* the proper way to *view*, let alone to *do* biblical theology. Already this approach to biblical theology stands in antithesis to historic Christian theological convictions, especially in regard to theology proper and the doctrine of Scripture. In the history of the church, and particularly in the post-Reformation and post-Enlightenment era, there was another path taken which provides a legitimate way to view and do biblical theology. This path also emphasised a renewed attempt to root the Bible in history by stressing the "literal sense" (*sensus literalis*) tied to the intention(s) of the divine and human author(s), and by seeking to discern how God had disclosed himself through the biblical authors across redemptive-history, grounded in a larger Christian theology and worldview. Mention has already been made of Johannes Cocceius, who sought to read Scripture in terms of the focus on "covenant" throughout redemptive-history, and who operated

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[20] For a more detailed discussion of these movements see the articles by Scobie, "History of Biblical Theology," 11–20; Vanhoozer, "Exegesis and Hermeneutics," 52–64; Carson, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," in *NDBT*, 89–104; also see David L. Baker, *Two Testaments, One Bible: The Theological Relationship between the Old and New Testaments*, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 42–165. On the contribution of Geerhardus Vos, see Fesko, "On the Antiquity of Biblical Theology," 449–453.

[21] One can think of the recent movement known as the "Theological Interpretation of Scripture" (TIS). This movement is fairly diverse and encompasses evangelicals and non-evangelicals alike. For the non-evangelicals, generally speaking, their commitment to the unity of Scripture is not tied to Scripture's own self-attestation as God's Word written but to decisions of the church to choose these texts as Scripture. In this regard, one thinks of the canonical approach of Brevard Childs, who chooses to read texts in their final form and canonical shape. However, as Paul Noble, *The Canonical Approach: A Critical Reconstruction of the Hermeneutics of Brevard S. Childs* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill Academic, 1995), has astutely argued, unless Childs grounds his preference for final form and canonical shape in the doctrine of inspiration and divine authorship, it is a view hanging in midair. See Vanhoozer, "Exegesis and Hermeneutics," 60–61, who makes this same point. See also a more detailed critique of post-liberalism and their view and use of Scripture in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005). For a helpful introduction to the TIS movement see Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008). As helpful as TIS is in its attempt to recapture the voice of Scripture for the church, given that it is comprised of such a diverse number of people with such divergent views of Scripture, one wonders how long it can be sustained without a return to orthodox convictions and theology.

self-consciously within Christian theological presuppositions. However, this was also true of John Calvin before him and the post-Reformation Reformed Protestant scholastics after him.[22]

Probably the best-known twentieth-century pioneer of biblical theology, who sought to follow the path distinct from that of the Enlightenment, was Geerhardus Vos, who developed biblical theology at Princeton Seminary in the early twentieth century.[23] Vos, who was birthed out of the Dutch Calvinistic tradition, along with such figures as Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck, sought to do biblical theology with a firm commitment to the authority of Scripture.[24] Vos defined biblical theology as "that branch of Exegetical Theology which deals with the process of the self-revelation of God deposited in the Bible."[25] In contrast to Gabler, Vos argued that biblical theology, as an exegetical discipline, must not only begin with the biblical text but must also view Scripture as nothing less than God's own self-attesting Word, fully authoritative and reliable. Furthermore, as one exegetes Scripture, Vos argued, biblical theology seeks to trace out the Bible's unity and multiformity and find its consummation in the coming of Christ and the inauguration of the new covenant era. Biblical theology must follow a method that reads the Bible on its own terms, following the Bible's own internal contours and shape, in order to discover God's unified plan as it is disclosed to us over time. The path that Vos blazed was foundational for much of the resurgence of biblical theology within evangelicalism, in the twentieth and now the twenty-first century.[26]

We reject the former view despite its label of "biblical theology." Accordingly, in light of this history, we define "biblical theology" by employing Brian Rosner's helpful definition: "Biblical theology" is "theological interpretation of Scripture in and for the church. It proceeds with

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[22] For a detailed treatment of the post-Reformation Protestant scholastics see Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003). See also the application of some of the insights of the Protestant scholastics for biblical and systematic theology in Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002); and Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993).

[23] See Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1948; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2004); idem, *Pauline Eschatology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1979); Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., ed. *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001).

[24] See Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," *Westminster Theological Journal* 38 (1976): 281–299, especially 286–288 for his discussion of Kuyper, Bavinck, and Vos.

[25] Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 5.

[26] Vos' influence is directly seen at Westminster Theological Seminary in the work of John Murray, Richard Gaffin, Jr., Sinclair Ferguson, Vern Poythress, and so on. But it was also felt in the larger evangelical world in such people as Graeme Goldsworthy, G. K. Beale, D. A. Carson, T. R. Schreiner, and so on.

historical and literary sensitivity and seeks to analyse and synthesize the Bible's teaching about God and his relations to the world on its own terms, maintaining sight of the Bible's overarching narrative and Christocentric focus."[27] In this definition, Rosner emphasises some important points crucial to the nature and task of biblical theology. Biblical theology is concerned with the overall message of the whole Bible. It seeks to understand the parts in relation to the whole. As an exegetical method, it is sensitive to literary, historical, and theological dimensions of various corpora, as well as to the interrelationships between earlier and later texts in Scripture. Furthermore, biblical theology is interested not merely in words and word studies but also in concepts and themes as it traces out the Bible's own story line, on the Bible's own terms, as the plot line reaches its culmination in Christ. In a similar way, D. A. Carson speaks of biblical theology as an inductive, exegetical discipline which works from biblical texts, in all of their literary diversity, to the entire Canon—hence the notion of *intertextual*. In making connections between texts, biblical theology also attempts to let the biblical text set the agenda. This is what we mean by saying that we are to read Scripture *on its own terms*, i.e., *intratextually*. Scripture is to be interpreted in light of its own categories and presentation since Scripture comes to us as divinely given, coherent, and unified.[28] In other words, all theologizing starts with the Bible's own presentation of itself as we seek to live under its authority and teaching and not over it.[29]

With these basic ideas in mind, let us now summarise what we believe biblical theology to be. Simply stated, it is the *hermeneutical* discipline which seeks to do justice to what Scripture claims to be and what it actually is. In terms of its claim, Scripture is nothing less than *God's* Word written, and as such, it is a unified revelation of his gracious plan of redemption. In terms of what Scripture actually is, it is a *progressive* unfolding of God's plan, rooted in history, and unpacked along a specific redemptive-historical

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[27] Brian Rosner, "Biblical Theology," in *NDBT*, 10 (italics removed from original).

[28] For these points see Carson, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," 89–104.

[29] To start with the Bible's presentation of itself, or to read the Bible *on its own terms* is at the heart of biblical theology. Even within evangelical biblical theology this point is not always followed. For example, some argue that biblical theology is the approach by which redemptive-history is divided into various historical epochs and then the development between those epochs is traced. Or, others view biblical theology as merely thinking through the large themes of Scripture. Still others approach the discipline by working through the Bible book by book. All of these approaches have their place but, in our view, they fall short. Their fundamental problem is that they do not follow the Bible's own presentation of itself, or, in other words, they do not carefully trace out the Bible's own literary plot structure. If we are going to read the Bible *on its own terms*, we have to ask, how has God given Scripture to us, what are the Bible's own internal structures, and how ought those structures shape our doing of biblical theology? We are convinced that working through the biblical covenants is tracing out the Bible's own internal structures and learning to read Scripture as God intended it to be read.

plot line primarily demarcated by covenants. Biblical theology as a herme-neutical discipline attempts to exegete texts in their own context and then, in light of the entire Canon, to examine the unfolding nature of God's plan and carefully think through the relationship between *before* and *after* in that plan which culminates in Christ.[30] As such, biblical theology provides the basis for understanding how texts in one part of the Bible relate to all other texts, so that they will be read correctly, according to God's intention, which is discovered through the individual human authors but ultimately at the canonical level. In the end, biblical theology is the attempt to unpack the "whole counsel of God" and "to think God's thoughts after him," and it provides the basis and underpinning for all theology and doctrine. With this understanding of biblical theology in place, let us now briefly reflect on what systematic theology is, before we think through the relationship between the two methods.

THE NATURE OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

As with "biblical theology," there are various understandings of what "sys-tematic theology" is. In this book, it is not necessary to delve into all of these diverse views; rather, we simply want to state how we conceive of the disci-pline of systematic theology.[31] As with biblical theology, generally speaking, one's construal of systematic theology is tied to one's larger theological, worldview commitments, and any differences between various definitions

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[30] Two words that helpfully describe how biblical theology seeks to interpret texts first in their immediate and then in their canonical context are *synchronic* and *diachronic*. *Synchronic* refers to viewing events occurring at a given time (sometimes referred to as a "cross-cut" approach to interpretation). Hence reading texts synchronically refers to reading them in their immediate context. As we exegete texts we place them in their redemptive-historical context, we interpret them according to the grammatical-historical method, and we inquire about the theology of a particular prophet, book, or corpus. This is called a "cross-cut" approach because it involves our cutting across the progressive revelation and taking a look at what is going on at any given point in time. Biblical exegesis begins at this level as it involves an analytical examination of the "parts." But our interpretation of Scripture does not end here. The unity of Scripture drives us to say more, which introduces the notion of diachronic. *Diachronic* refers to viewing events over time (sometimes referred to as the "long-cut" approach to interpretation). Texts must be read not only in terms of their immediate context but also in terms of the "whole." Scripture is both unified and progres-sive. Thus biblical theology is concerned to read the "parts" in terms of the "whole" and to trace out how God's plan develops *throughout* redemptive-history, leading us to its fulfilment in Christ and ultimately to the consumma-tion. For more on this see Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics: Foundations and Principles of Evangelical Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 268–272; and Lints, *Fabric of Theology*, 293–310, who likewise addresses the relationship between the "parts" and the "whole" in his discussion of how to interpret biblical texts.

[31] For a helpful discussion on the nature of systematic theology and its relation to biblical theology see Gaffin, "Systematic and Biblical Theology," 281–299. See also Gerhard F. Hasel, "The Relationship between Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology," *Trinity Journal* 5 (1984): 113–127. For a current discussion of systematic theology and how it is viewed in the larger theological orbit, see John Webster, "Principles of Systematic Theol-ogy," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11/1 (2009): 56–71; idem, "Systematic Theology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1–18.

can be traced back to this. For our purposes, we will employ as our basic definition the one given by John Frame: systematic theology is "the application of God's Word by persons to all areas of life."[32]

In our view, this entails at least two key components. First, in order to *apply* Scripture properly, we must first interpret Scripture correctly, which requires the doing of biblical theology, as described above, namely, unpacking the biblical story line and letting the Bible, on its own terms, describe for us how God's plan unfolds, centred in Christ. This is why we have argued that biblical theology provides the basis and underpinning for all theologizing and doctrine, since we are not doing theology unless we are correctly understanding the entire canon of Scripture and rightly applying it to our lives.[33] Second, systematic theology is more than just the doing of biblical theology since it involves the *application* of Scripture *to all areas of life*. Systematic theology, then, inevitably involves theological construction and doctrinal formulation, grounded in biblical theology and done in light of historical theology, but which also involves interacting with all areas of life—history, science, psychology, ethics, and so on. In so doing, systematic theology leads to worldview formation as we seek to set the biblical-theological framework of Scripture over against all other worldviews and learn "to think God's thoughts after him," even in areas that the Bible does not directly address. In this important way, systematic theology presents a well-thought-out worldview, over against all of its competitors, as it seeks to apply biblical truth to every domain of our existence. As a discipline, systematic theology is also *critical* in seeking to evaluate ideas within and outside of the church. Outside the church, systematic theology takes on an apologetic function as it first sets forth the faith to be believed and defended and then critiques and evaluates views that reject the truth of God's Word. In this sense, apologetics is rightly viewed as a subset of systematic theology. Within the church, theology is *critical* by analysing theological proposals first in terms of their fit with Scripture and secondly in terms of the implications of these proposals for other doctrines. In all these ways, systematic theology is the discipline which attempts "to bring our entire thought captive to Christ" (see 2 Cor. 10:1–5) for our good, for the good of the church, and ultimately for God's glory.

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[32] John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1987), 76.

[33] We can also add that unpacking the biblical-theological framework of Scripture, on its own terms, then becomes our interpretive matrix (metanarrative) by which we interpret the world. All of our thought and life is subsumed under Scripture, so that we are continually transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom. 12:1–2).

With this basic understanding in mind, what is the best way to think of the relationship between biblical and systematic theology? As presented here, obviously we view them as intimately related and central to the *theological* task to conform our thinking and lives to God's Word. As also noted, we think it best to view biblical theology as primarily a *hermeneutical* discipline since it is the discipline which seeks to handle correctly the word of truth (2 Tim. 2:14–15).[34] This is why the conclusions of systematic theology must first be grounded in the exegetical conclusions of biblical theology. But then systematic theology goes further: on the basis of biblical theology it attempts to construct what we ought to believe from Scripture for today, to critique other theological proposals within the church, and also false ideas of alien worldviews outside the church, so that we learn anew to live under the lordship of Christ.[35]

How does all of this discussion apply to what we are doing in this book? Basically we are setting forth a proposal for a better way of understanding the nature of biblical covenants and how those covenants relate to each other. In reality, we are doing systematic theology by first grounding our proposal in biblical theology. Our argument is that the traditional ways of putting together the biblical covenants is not quite right, biblically speaking. In order to make our case, we want to describe how others have put the covenants together, discern the key points of differences between the views, set

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[34] In a similar way, Carson, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," 95, calls biblical theology a "bridge" discipline since it is the bridge "between the texts of Scripture and the larger synthesis of systematic theology," what he calls the culminating discipline. This is a helpful way of thinking of the relation between the two disciplines. However, Carson, in his "New Testament Theology," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 808, also tends to think of biblical theology as a discipline which works primarily within a temporal framework, i.e., the redemptive-historical unfolding of Scripture, while systematic theology primarily asks of biblical texts more atemporal and logical questions, "thereby eliciting atemporal answers." We are not completely pleased with this way of stating the relationship between the two disciplines. It is better to think of biblical theology as the hermeneutical discipline which allows us to draw *biblical* conclusions for systematic theology, and that systematic theology as the *application* of Scripture must stay true to the Bible's own framework, structure, and categories as she draws theological conclusions and constructs a Christian worldview. In this way, biblical theology is not only foundational to systematic theology but is also a subset of it, and systematic theology does not necessarily have to organise itself in atemporal categories.

[35] Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics*, 258–272, says something very similar as he speaks of the interrelationship and interdependence between biblical and systematic theology. He rightly argues that we should not view the direction from text to theological formulation in a straight-line, i.e., exegesis → biblical theology → systematic theology. Instead, he views the relationship more in terms of a "hermeneutical spiral." He writes, "From one point of view, biblical theology is what makes dogmatics [systematic theology] necessary. If it were not for the progressive nature of revelation, then all texts would stand in the same general relationship to the believer. Dogmatics is the discipline of saying what the total redemptive and revealing activity of God means for us now. It recognises that all texts do not stand in the same relationship to us now, but that in view of the unity of revelation they do stand in some identifiable relationship to all other texts and therefore to us. Biblical theology examines the diversity within the unity. . . . The dogmatic basis of biblical theology lies in the fact that no empirical datum of exegesis has independent meaning, and no datum of theology or interpretation has independent meaning" (270–271). Systematic theology, then, is rooted in biblical theology but it is different in the sense that it is the final product of what we believe as the church and what we say to the world.

over against those views an alternative theological proposal, and argue that our proposal makes better sense of the entire canon of Scripture. In addition, we want to argue that the theological conclusions drawn from other ways of "putting together" the covenants go awry at a number of points and that ultimately, in order to correct this, we must return anew to Scripture and make sure our understanding of the covenants is true to how Scripture unpacks those covenantal relations across redemptive-history.

Let us now turn to this task by first setting the context for our proposal. We will begin in chapter 2 by describing the two predominant biblical-theological systems within evangelical theology in order to understand the nature of the biblical covenants and their relations to each other, which will be the subject matter of chapter 3.

Chapter Two

COVENANTS IN BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL SYSTEMS: DISPENSATIONAL AND COVENANT THEOLOGY

Within evangelical theology, dispensational and covenant theology largely frame how people "put together" their Bible and, as such, function as dominant theological viewpoints. Each "system" serves as an interpretive grid for understanding the story line of Scripture and thus functions as "whole-Bible theologies" (i.e., biblical theologies) which lead to systematic theological conclusions. In this way, both views are similar in their attempt to discern the overall unity of God's revelation, from creation to the new creation. Despite their differences, both views acknowledge some notion of "progressive revelation," redemptive epochs (or "dispensations"), fulfilment in Christ, change in God's plan across redemptive-history, and so on. They differ, however, over the specifics of God's plan, the kind of changes that result, and especially over the role of national Israel in that plan. Obviously, one must be careful *not* to overplay the differences between these views, for when it comes to a basic understanding of the gospel, they agree more than they disagree. At crucial points, however, they differ on how to think through the "whole counsel of God," and much of that disagreement centres on their understanding of the nature of the biblical covenants and their relationships to each other. This is why it is helpful to compare and contrast them in order to discover precisely how they relate the biblical covenants one to another and thus where the two views differ from each other.

Additionally, in order to provide a context to our proposal of "kingdom through covenant" as a better way of unfolding the biblical covenants, it is helpful to set our view over against these two biblical-systematic theologies. If we disagree with each view at various points, we need to know where and why. Thus, in what follows, even though our discussion of each view

is brief, we have a twofold goal. First, we want to demonstrate how central one's understanding of biblical covenants is to each view. Second, we want to set the stage for an alternative way of thinking through the relationships of the biblical covenants as they find their *telos* in Christ.

DISPENSATIONALISM AND ITS VARIETIES[1]

Dispensationalism as a movement first took shape in the Brethren movement in early nineteenth-century England.[2] Originally it was associated with such names as John Darby (1800–1882), Benjamin Newton (1807–1899), and George Müller (1805–1898), and in North America with such names as D. L. Moody (1837–1899), J. R. Graves (1820–1893), and C. I. Scofield (1843–1921) and the famous *Scofield Reference Bible*, which provided various notes for its readers on how to interpret Scripture and put the whole Canon together through the lens of dispensational theology. Probably the most extensive systematic theology written from a dispensational viewpoint was Lewis Sperry Chafer's eight-volume *Systematic Theology*.[3]

Over the years, dispensational theology has gone through a number of revisions even though it remains united by a common core, which we will discuss below. As Craig Blaising observes about the movement, "There has been no standard creed freezing its theological development at some arbitrary point in history,"[4] even though it continues to maintain specific doctrinal distinctives.[5] This has made it difficult to classify all the differences among dispensationalists, yet, as Blaising notes, we can classify "three broad forms of

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[1] For helpful summaries of dispensational theology see Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton, IL: BridgePoint, 1993); Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, eds., *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church: A Search for Definition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992); Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993); Herbert W. Bateman IV, ed., *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1999); Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master, eds., *Issues in Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody, 1994); John S. Feinberg, ed., *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship between the Old and New Testaments* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1988); Ron J. Bigalke, Jr., ed. *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Analysis of the Movement and Defense of Traditional Dispensationalism* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2005). For a helpful covenantal treatment of dispensationalism see Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1994).

[2] On the history and development of dispensationalism see Craig A. Blaising, "The Extent and Varieties of Dispensationalism," in Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 10–13; Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 2007), 69–88; Ron J. Bigalke, Jr. and Thomas D. Ice, "History of Dispensationalism," in *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Analysis of the Movement*, xvi-xlii; cf. Michael Williams, *This World Is Not My Home: The Origins and Development of Dispensationalism* (Fearn, Ross-shire, UK: Mentor, 2003).

[3] Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (1948; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1993).

[4] Blaising, "Extent and Varieties of Dispensationalism," 22.

[5] Ibid., 13–21, lists eight common features of dispensationalism which unite it as a theological tradition: the authority of Scripture, dividing up redemptive-history into dispensations, the newness and uniqueness of the church over against Israel, the significance of the universal church, a literal understanding of biblical prophecy, premillennialism, the imminent return of Christ, and a national future for Israel in the land of Israel.

dispensational thought"[6] which are important to distinguish in order to grasp the theological development of the view: "classic" (e.g., John Darby, Lewis S. Chafer, *Scofield Reference Bible*), "revised" (e.g., John Walvoord, Charles Ryrie, J. Dwight Pentecost, revised *Scofield Bible*), and "progressive" (e.g., Craig Blaising, Darrell Bock, John Feinberg, Robert Saucy, Bruce Ware).

The term "dispensationalism," similar to "covenant theology," can rightly argue for biblical support. "Dispensation" is a word derived from *oikonomia* (see Eph. 1:10; 3:2, 9; Col. 1:25), which means "to manage, regulate, administer, and plan the affairs of a household."[7] Behind this term is the idea of God's plan or administration being accomplished in this world and how God arranges and orders his relationship to human beings. "Dispensation," then, as Blaising explains, "refers to a distinctive way in which God manages or arranges the relationship of human beings to Himself."[8] Dispensationalists are probably best known for how they divide redemptive-history into a number of distinct "dispensations" and how, during each of these periods of time, they believe God works out a particular phase of his overall plan. However, as Vern Poythress rightly notes, there is a sense in which the word "dispensation" is *not* completely helpful for distinguishing dispensationalism from other views, since "virtually all ages of the church and all branches of the church have believed that there are distinctive dispensations in God's government of the world, though sometimes the consciousness of such distinctions has grown dim. The recognition of distinctions between different epochs is by no means unique to D-theologians."[9]

Most current dispensationalists also acknowledge this point. For example, John Feinberg agrees that one's defense of the uniqueness of dispensationalism is *not* tied merely to the word "dispensation," or even to the idea behind the word. If this were the case then all Christians would be "dispensationalists" in this broad sense, since everyone recognises that God's salvific plan across redemptive-history involves various "dispensations" and that, as his plan reaches its fulfilment in Christ, there are various changes that have taken place. Feinberg correctly notes, "Since both dispensationalists and nondispensationalists use the term and concept of a dispensation,

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[6] Ibid., 22.

[7] See Craig A. Blaising, "Dispensations in Biblical Theology," in Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 106–111; John S. Feinberg, "Systems of Discontinuity," in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 68–69; cf. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, 9–13. Technically the word "dispensation" is the anglicized form of *dispensatio*, the Latin Vulgate rendering of *oikonomia*.

[8] Blaising, "Extent and Varieties of Dispensationalism," 11.

[9] Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, 9–10.

that alone is not distinctive to dispensationalism. It is no more distinctive to dispensationalism than talk of covenants is distinctive to covenant theology. Dispensationalists talk about covenants all the time."[10]

This observation, then, raises the important question: what is unique to dispensational theology, especially given its diversity over the years? What is its *distinctive* feature, or, what is its *sine qua non*? Much discussion and debate has taken place over this question, and people answer it differently.[11] It is our conviction, however, that the *sine qua non* of the view is the Israel-church distinction, which is largely tied to their understanding of the cove-nantal differences between the ethnic nation of Israel under the old covenant and the church as God's people under the new covenant. For all varieties of dispensationalism, "Israel" refers to a physical, national people and it is *not* the case that the church is the New Testament replacement of historic Israel in God's plan of salvation, as, for example, covenant theology teaches. Thus, for dispensationalists, the salvation of Gentiles in God's plan is not the fulfil-ment of the promises made to Israel as a nation, particularly those associated with the specific land promise to them. Rather the "church" is distinctively new in God's redemptive purposes and it finds its origin in Christ and par-ticularly in the baptism of the Spirit that Christ has bestowed equally upon all in the church at Pentecost. Thus, what constitutes the church as "new" are these blessings of the Holy Spirit connected to the coming of Christ which are *qualitatively* different from the blessings of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament. That is why, for dispensational theology, the salvation experi-ence of the person under the new covenant is qualitatively different from the salvation experience of the Israelite under the old covenant.[12]

It is for this reason that dispensational theology, given the Israel-church distinction, sees more *discontinuity* from the old to the new covenant vis-à-vis the nature of the covenant communities. Furthermore, coupled with the Israel-church distinction is God's unchanging promise to Israel of a literal land, ultimately to be fulfilled in the millennial reign of Christ. It is probably at these two points—ecclesiology and eschatology—that we see the greatest differences between dispensational and covenant theology.

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[10] Feinberg, "Systems of Discontinuity," 69. In addition, Feinberg helpfully notes two other important points: (1) to prove "dispensationalism" requires more than showing the biblical evidence for "dispensations" (68–69), and (2) the number of "dispensations" one holds to is not essential to "dispensationalism" (70).

[11] For example, see the discussions regarding a proper definition of dispensationalism in such works as Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 27–55, and Craig A. Blaising, "Dispensationalism: The Search for Definition," in *Dispensa-tionalism, Israel, and the Church*, 13–34.

[12] See Feinberg, "Systems of Discontinuity," 71–85, and Blaising, "Extent and Varieties of Dispensationalism," 13–21, who unpack the unique features of dispensational theology primarily in terms of the Israel-church relation.

With regard to ecclesiology, since the church is distinctively *new* in the divine dispensations due to the coming of Christ and the *newness* of the Spirit's permanent indwelling in the believer, dispensationalists view the nature of the church, along with its structure and ordinances, as distinct from the nation of Israel under the old covenant. For example, in terms of the nature of the church, contra covenant theology, dispensational ecclesiology views the church as comprised of a regenerate community, born of and permanently indwelt by the Spirit, and not as a "mixed" community of believers and unbelievers.[13] Furthermore, it is for this reason that dispensational theology affirms credobaptism, contra paedobaptism, since one cannot equate the sign of the old covenant with the sign of the new, given the fundamental distinction between Israel and the church and what the sign of baptism signifies under the new covenant. In contrast, covenant theology does *not* draw the same Israel-church distinction and instead argues for more of a continuity between Israel and the church, not only in terms of the nature of the covenant community (and thus similarity of salvation experience) but also in regard to the similarity in meaning of the covenant signs of circumcision and baptism. In all of these ways, dispensational ecclesiology differs from covenant theology's ecclesiology.

Regarding eschatology, given the Israel-church distinction and God's unchanging promise to Israel of living out her existence in a physical land ruled by the Davidic King (who we now know is our Lord Jesus Christ), dispensational theology affirms a distinct national future for Israel in a future millennial age. Much of the rationale for this is that the physical land promise given to national Israel under the Abrahamic covenant has not yet been realised, hence the need for a future millennial kingdom where the specific land promise to national Israel will be fulfilled in a manner distinct from the church. It is for this reason, at the popular level, that dispensationalism is often identified with a distinctive eschatology which has been promulgated through books, movies, and other forms of media.[14] By contrast, covenant

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[13] The "mixed" nature of the covenant communities refers to the belief that under both the old and new covenants, the locus of the covenant community and the locus of the elect are distinct. As we will note in chapter 17, on the basis of this "mixed" view of the church, covenant theology maintains the invisible-visible church distinction. In their view, the church is constituted of believers *and* unbelievers or, as covenant theologians like to say, "believers and their children"—children who may or may not be among the elect. Dispensational theology has argued for the unique, new nature of the church as a regenerate community and thus structurally different from Israel of old.

[14] One has only to think of such books as Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1973); idem, *There's a New World Coming* (Santa Ana, CA: Vision, 1974); Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 1996); and the entire "Left Behind" series of books and movies.

theology rejects a dispensational, premillennial eschatology for a variety of reasons but mainly because they believe that the land promise given to Israel is ultimately fulfilled in the church and the dawning of the new creation.[15] For our purposes, it is important to note that the differences between dispensational and covenant theology on these points is directly related to their different understanding of the Israel-church relationship and thus how they relate the biblical covenants to each other in redemptive-history.

Let us now briefly discuss some of the varieties within dispensational theology as described by the terms classic, revised, and progressive, and note how each one attempts to understand the relationships between the biblical covenants, especially in light of the Israel-church distinction.

CLASSIC DISPENSATIONALISM

At the heart of classic dispensational theology is a dualistic conception of redemption linked to God's pursuit of two different purposes, one related to heaven and one related to earth, and tied to two different groups of people, a heavenly and an earthly humanity.[16] In terms of God's earthly purpose in redemption, it is God's plan to redeem the creation from its curse and to grant immortality to an earthly humanity who will exist on the earth forever. This immortal earthly humanity first appears in the millennial age. It consists of those who are living on the earth when the Lord returns and reaches its completion in the new creation. They will not experience a final resurrection since they will not experience death, but they will continue to live on the earth forever. But alongside God's earthly purpose is his heavenly purpose, which is centred in a heavenly humanity. This heavenly people consist of all the redeemed from all dispensations (a transdispensational people) who have died prior to Christ's millennial return. They still await the final resurrection, and when they are resurrected they will experience a "heavenly" inheritance.[17]

Classic dispensationalists are also famous for dividing redemptive-history into seven different dispensations: Innocence (Eden); Conscience

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[15] Covenant theology holds to a variety of millennial viewpoints, ranging from historic premillennialism to amillennialism and postmillennialism, but dispensational theology always maintains a distinctive dispensational form of premillennialism tied to their understanding of the Israel-church relationship. For a helpful description of covenant theology's treatment of the land promise, see Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

[16] See Blaising, "Extent and Varieties of Dispensationalism," 23; cf. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, 19–29.

[17] For a more detailed description of this point see Lewis S. Chafer, "Dispensationalism," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 93 (1936): 390–449; cf. Blaising, "Extent and Varieties of Dispensationalism," 23–24.

(fall to flood); Human Government (Noah to Babel); Promise (Abraham to Egypt); Law (Moses to John the Baptist); Grace (church age); and Kingdom (millennium).[18] They viewed these dispensations as *different* arrangements under which human beings are tested. As Blaising notes in regard to these different dispensations, "God arranged the relationship of humankind to Himself to test their obedience to him."[19] In the early dispensations, God gave promises regarding earthly life, but we failed, due to our sin, to obtain these promises. The present dispensation of the church is the first dispensation that clearly presents God's "heavenly" purpose, and as a result, the church, unlike people in previous dispensations, is to know that it is a heavenly people destined for an eternal inheritance in heaven. Given this view of the church, classic dispensationalists argued that the church was a parenthesis in the history of God's earthly purpose of redemption—an earthly purpose which was revealed in the previous dispensations and covenants.[20] In this sense, the primary purpose of the church as a heavenly people was to pursue spiritual and not earthly matters and concerns.

How did classic dispensationalists correlate the biblical covenants? Similar to all forms of dispensational theology, they argued that the foundational covenant of Scripture is the Abrahamic and not the Adamic (or covenant with creation), since they did not recognise such a covenant. In the Abrahamic covenant God's earthly purpose was primarily revealed as involving physical descendants who would become a great nation in a specific land, and Israel, as a nation and as the offspring of Abraham, was given the important role of mediating God's blessing to the Gentile nations. Classic dispensationalists did not deny that one could interpret the Abrahamic covenant *spiritually* (which they argued the New Testament does to reveal God's heavenly purpose), but they strongly asserted that in relation to Israel the Abrahamic covenant was to be interpreted "literally," thus showing God's early purpose for an earthly people.[21] The same point is asserted in relation to the other biblical covenants, which were all interpreted as "earthly" covenants (e.g., the Palestinian, i.e., the land promise to Israel, the Mosaic, and the Davidic covenants). Interestingly, their "literal" hermeneutic, when

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[18] See *Scofield Reference Bible*, note on Genesis 1:28; cf. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, 21–22.

[19] Blaising, "Extent and Varieties of Dispensationalism," 24.

[20] Ibid., 27; cf. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, 21–22.

[21] Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, 24, nicely captures classic dispensationalism at this point. He says, "Scofield is a (*sic*) not a pure literalist, but a literalist with respect to what pertains to Israel. The dualism of Israel and the church is, in fact, the deeper dualism determining when and where the hermeneutical dualism of 'literal' and 'spiritual' is applied."

applied to the "new covenant" of Jeremiah 31, led them to affirm that it applied only to Israel and *not* to the church. As their argument went, Jeremiah 31:31 clearly states that the new covenant is made "with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah," and since Israel, as an earthly people, is *not* the church, it cannot apply to the church. What about when the New Testament applies the new covenant to the church (e.g., Hebrews 8–10)? They argued that it must refer to an entirely different covenant, which, as critics rightly pointed out, is a difficult view to maintain given the New Testament teaching at this point.[22] Ultimately, for classic dispensationalists, all of the biblical covenants, including the new covenant, find their fulfilment in an earthly people—first in the millennium and then in the final state—but they do not apply to the church. The new covenant, then, must not be applied to the church other than in a *spiritual* or *allegorical* sense. In this way, the biblical covenants are tied to God's earthly purpose for his earthly people and not to God's heavenly purpose or people.

This understanding of the biblical covenants was also linked to classic dispensationalists' view of the kingdom. Classic dispensationalism famously made a distinction between the "kingdom of heaven" (i.e., the fulfilment of the covenant made to David, in which God promised to establish the kingdom of his Son) and the "kingdom of God" (i.e., the moral rule of God in the hearts of his subjects). The kingdom of "heaven" begins to appear with Christ, but since Israel rejected it initially, the parenthesis age of the church was established. Ultimately the kingdom of "heaven" will culminate in the millennium and the final state, where it merges with the kingdom of "God" in the hearts of his earthly people.[23] Interestingly, this understanding of "kingdom" was the first thing revised by the next generation of dispensationalists.

REVISED DISPENSATIONALISM

Probably the greatest change that occurred within dispensationalism began in the 1950s with the abandonment of the distinction between the "earthly" and "heavenly" peoples of God. As Blaising notes, revised dispensationalists "did not believe that there would be an eternal distinction between one humanity in heaven and another on the new earth."[24] In its place, they argued

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[22] See Blaising, "Extent and Varieties of Dispensationalism," 28–29. One has only to note how Jesus applies the new covenant to his death and thus to the church (Matt. 26:27–28, par.), let alone the book of Hebrews (Hebrews 7–10).
[23] For a more detailed treatment of the relationship between the kingdom and the covenants in classic dispensationalism, see Blaising, "Extent and Varieties of Dispensationalism," 30–31.
[24] Ibid., 31.

for two peoples of God along more dispensational lines, namely, "Israel" as an ethnic, national entity tied to the covenants of the Old Testament, and the "church" as a distinct international community. In this way, people belonged to either one or the other, but not to both at the same time, and each group was "structured differently, with different dispensational prerogatives and responsibilities."[25] Revised dispensationalists were also quick to point out that the salvation each group ultimately received was the same (thus avoiding the charge of two plans of salvation), namely, eternal life in a glorified, resurrection state, yet they maintained an eternal distinction between the two groups, since "the church is always church, Israel is always Israel."[26]

In addition, revised dispensationalists simplified their understanding of the number of dispensations across time. Even though most retained the classic understanding of seven dispensations, they primarily distinguished between God's purposes in the dispensations prior to grace (i.e., prior to the church), the dispensation of grace (i.e., the church age), and the kingdom viewed as the millennial reign of Christ on earth. In the era prior to grace, God worked through the nation of Israel to the Gentile nations. Through Israel, God achieved political, national, and spiritual purposes, but now in the church age, God's purpose in and through the church is primarily spiritual. Even though Israel's and the church's spiritual experiences are similar, it is not the same; the church experiences the qualitatively *new* reality of the baptism, sealing, and permanent indwelling of the Spirit—something not experienced by Israel under the old dispensation. But it is not only in salvation that we see differences between Israel and the church; it is also in terms of the *nature* of the church as a regenerate community in contrast to the "mixed" composition (i.e., believers and unbelievers) of the people of Israel. In all these ways, revised dispensationalists spoke of the differences between Israel and the church, and thus the discontinuity in God's plan of salvation.[27]

In regard to the biblical covenants there was also another crucial revision that took place, especially in respect to the dispensationalists' understanding of the new covenant and its relationship to the church. As noted above, in classic dispensational thought the new covenant prophesied in Jeremiah 31

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[25] Ibid., 32.

[26] Ibid. Between revised dispensationalists there was a debate over the precise location of the eternal state. A. McClain, D. Pentecost, and H. Hoyt argued for a resurrected, glorified state on earth, while J. Walvoord and C. Ryrie argued for that state in heaven and not on the earth.

[27] For a more complete view of the Israel-church relation see Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 143–157, and S. D. Toussaint, "Israel and the Church of a Traditional Dispensationalist," in *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism*, 227–252.

(and in Isaiah and Ezekiel) was either only for Israel as a national, ethnic people and thus not for the church, or there were two new covenants: one for Israel (e.g., Jeremiah 31) and one for the church (Hebrews 8–10). The problem with this view is that it was virtually impossible to sustain biblically. How does one make sense of our Lord's understanding of his death as a ratification of the new covenant (e.g., Luke 22:20 par.), or the book of Hebrews, which clearly applies Jeremiah 31 to the church? It is at this point that revised dispensationalists rightly rejected the idea that the "new covenant" of Jeremiah was not for the church. No doubt, they continued to maintain, along with their classic colleagues, that the Abrahamic covenant was the foundational covenant and that tied to it were the Mosaic, Palestinian (e.g., land promise), and Davidic covenants, along with the new covenant, as earthly, political, and national covenants. However, they now admitted that the church was to be viewed minimally as the "spiritual" seed of Abraham (Gal. 3:16–29), and that the Abrahamic covenant was fulfilled *spiritually* in the church because the church is related to Messiah Jesus. Yet they strenuously argued that the national, political terms of these Old Testament covenants, particularly associated with the land promise, had to be fulfilled in a "literal" way, i.e., Israel must receive her land once again under the rule of Christ, the Davidic King, in the future millennial age. The Old Testament covenants, then, are all unconditional, and it is God himself, in his Messiah, who would bring them to pass. But, as Elliot Johnson says,

> God does not *replace* Israel in accomplishing her share when Israel rejects Him. . . . Nor does God *reinterpret* Israel's share . . . . Nor does God *expand* those who share in fulfillment of Israel's role temporarily when Israel rejects Him. . . . Rather, God *sets aside* the nation temporarily and incorporates believing Gentiles along with a believing Jewish remnant to continue the ministry of the Servant until He returns as the Son of David and the Son of Abraham for judgment and rule. *That ministry is based on the provisions of the new covenant* received by faith in the provision of Christ. . . . This setting aside of the nation-servant creates the discontinuity in the fulfillment of covenant agreements with Israel.[28]

In a similar fashion, as Blaising summarises, proponents of revised dispensationalism argued that the new covenant "was being fulfilled *spiritually* in the church today" but this did not preclude that "Israel would experience

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[28] Elliott E. Johnson, "Covenants in Traditional Dispensationalism," in *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism*, 155 (emphasis mine).

the national and political aspects (the earthly features) of the covenant in the future,"[29] which, as we shall note below, distinguishes this view sharply from covenant theology's understanding of the Israel-church relationship.

This revised way of thinking about Israel and the church was an important change which eventually led to the church being viewed as "standing in the line of a *historical* fulfilment of the new covenant promise to Israel"[30] and not merely as a parenthesis in the plan of God. Interestingly, in this change, dispensationalists were moving slightly closer to covenant theology's understanding of the Israel-church relationship except that they maintained that Israel, as a national, ethnic people would still experience God's promises to her in terms of specific land promises that had not yet been realised in their fullness. Thus, in this revised trajectory, dispensationalists were now able to speak of the fulfilment of the promises made to Israel in a "literal" way, while simultaneously applying the Abrahamic and new covenant to the church in a "spiritual" way or fulfilment. It is at this point that we see one of the sharpest disagreements between dispensational and covenant theology. For dispensationalism, God's promise to Israel as an ethnic, national entity involves a "literal" land promise which is fulfilled only by God giving to this nation a specific land in the millennial age and beyond. For covenant theology, given their view that there is much more *continuity* between Israel and the church, i.e., Israel is the church and the church is the new Israel, the promise of land to Israel is also a promise of land to the church, which is now fulfilled either spiritually in terms of our eternal inheritance, or more commonly today, typologically in the new creation, which is now "already" here in Christ, but which still awaits the "not yet."

Finally, it is important to mention how revised dispensationalists modified their understanding of the "kingdom" with respect to their classic colleagues. The classic view had made a sharp distinction between the "kingdom of heaven" (i.e., earthly kingdom) and the "kingdom of God" (i.e., the spiritual, moral rule in God's people). However, due to the influence of George Ladd, the classic distinction was dropped. Even though there were a number of alternative kingdom views proposed, most began to talk in terms of the "universal" kingdom (i.e., God's sovereignty over all things) and the "mediatorial" kingdom (i.e., God's rule over the earth through a God-chosen

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[29] Blaising, "Extent and Varieties of Dispensationalism," 38.
[30] Ibid. 38.

mediator such as the Davidic kings and ultimately culminating in Christ). In terms of the latter kingdom, most argued that since Christ was not presently on earth, the mediatorial kingdom will appear again only when Christ returns, and after the millennial reign we will see the universal and mediatorial kingdoms become one. However, Charles Ryrie and John Walvoord began to speak of a *spiritual* kingdom in this present dispensation, i.e., the rule of Christ over believers today in the church, even though the political, national, and earthly fulfilment of the Davidic kingdom is not realised until Christ returns.[31] As Blaising notes, this was an important revision, since this allows dispensationalists to now begin to define "Christ's relation to the church as a kingdom,"[32] something not done by previous dispensationalists. It is this last revision which has paved the way for a further revision within the movement, a view to which we now turn.

PROGRESSIVE DISPENSATIONALISM

In contrast to the dualism of "classic" dispensational thought and the sharp separation of the church from Israel of "revised" thought, progressive dispensational theology argues that the church is more organically related to God's one plan of redemption. The appearance of the church, due to the coming of Christ, does not signal a secondary redemption plan, either to be fulfilled in heaven apart from the new earth or in a class of Jews and Gentiles who are forever distinguished from the rest of redeemed humanity.[33] Instead the church today is a revelation of spiritual blessings which all of God's people throughout the ages will share while preserving their distinctive ethnic and national differences.

The term "progressive" is used by its advocates in the progressive revelation sense, i.e., to underscore the unfolding nature of God's plan and the *successive* (not *different*) arrangements of the various dispensations as they ultimately culminate in Christ. In this way, progressive dispensationalists stress the *continuity* of God's plan across redemptive-history, and in this regard, they are much closer to how covenant theology understands the unfolding nature of God's plan, yet with important differences. Blaising describes it this way:

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[31] For a discussion by Ryrie, see *Dispensationalism*, 182–183, and for Walvoord see John F. Walvoord, "Biblical Kingdoms Compared and Contrasted," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, 75–91.
[32] Blaising, "Extent and Varieties of Dispensationalism," 41.
[33] See ibid., 46–48. Cf. J. Lanier Burns, "Israel and the Church of a Progressive Dispensationalist," in *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism*, 263–291.

> The plan of redemption has different aspects to it. One dispensation may emphasize one aspect more than another, for example the emphasis on divinely directed political affairs in the past dispensation and the emphasis on multi-ethnic spiritual identity in Christ in the present dispensation. But all these dispensations point to a future culmination in which God will *both* politically administer Israel and the Gentile nations *and* indwell all of them equally (without ethnic distinctions) by the Holy Spirit. Consequently, the dispensations *progress* by revealing different aspects of the final unified redemption.[34]

However, progressives are quick to point out, in contrast to much of covenant theology, that as one moves across redemptive-history there is a "*qualitative* progression in the manifestation of grace" which underscores a fundamental *discontinuity* in God's redemptive plan.[35] That is why the dispensations are "not simply different historical expressions of the *same* experience of redemption (as in some forms of covenantalism), although they do lead to and culminate in one redemption plan."[36] This is also why progressives continue to view the church as a *new* entity in God's unfolding plan and hence different from Israel but *not* new as previous dispensationalists thought. Blaising comments,

> Earlier dispensationalists viewed the church as a completely different kind of redemption from that which had been revealed before or would be revealed in the future. The church then had its own future separate from the redemption promised to Jews and Gentiles in the past and future dispensations. Progressive dispensationalists, however, while seeing the church as a new manifestation of grace, believe that this grace is precisely *in keeping with* the promises of the Old Testament, particularly the promises of the new covenant in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. The fact that these blessings have been inaugurated in the church distinguishes the church from Jews and Gentiles of the past dispensation. But, only *some* of those blessings have been inaugurated. Consequently, the church should be distinguished from the next dispensation in which *all* of the blessings will not just be inaugurated, but completely fulfilled (which fulfillment will be granted to the saints of all dispensations through the resurrection of the dead).[37]

For progressives, then, the church should be viewed in light of its place in redemptive-history. It is *not* the same as Israel prior to Christ; it is

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[34] Blaising, "Extent and Varieties of Dispensationalism," 48.
[35] Ibid., 48 (emphasis mine).
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid., 49.

something *new*. It is tied to this dispensation, namely, the coming of Christ, and it is comprised of both redeemed Jews and redeemed Gentiles. Yet even though in this "new man" (Eph. 2:15), the church, there is only one people of God and as such there is no distinction in the salvation blessings they receive, God's specific promises to the nation of Israel centred on the land are *not* nullified. The prophetic promises given to Israel and the Gentiles will be realised according to each person's national identities. So, for example, a Jewish Christian today, who is a member of the church alongside Gentile believers, does not lose his relationship to Israel's future promises. Both Jews and Gentiles, now and in the future, share the same salvation blessings, but "the same redeemed Jews and Gentiles will be directed and governed by Jesus Christ according to their different nationalities,"[38] tied to God's promises to each nationality. In this way, progressives preserve the New Testament emphasis on the one people of God throughout the ages and the one plan of redemption centred in Christ, but also the fulfilment of the "literal" promise of land to the nation of Israel in the future age.

Interestingly, progressives, in order to support these differences from previous dispensationalists, began to argue that typology is more than merely a "spiritual" interpretation.[39] Similar to covenant theology, typology was viewed as that which "refers to patterns of resemblance between persons and events in earlier history to persons and events in latter history."[40] Thus, for example, the Davidic kingdom can serve as a type of the future, eschatological kingdom, or the nation of Israel as a type of the church. By moving in this direction, progressives were able to avoid such a sharp distinction between dispensations and see much more of the progressive, successive, unified unfolding of God's redemptive plan.

How does all of this relate to the biblical covenants? Progressive dispensationalists want to take seriously the unfolding, organic nature of the biblical covenants as they lead to Christ. Similar to earlier dispensationalists, they argue that the Abrahamic covenant, in all of its diverse dimensions, national and spiritual, is foundational to all the biblical covenants.[41]

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[38] ibid., 50.

[39] See ibid., 52–53. Older dispensationalists equated typology with spiritual interpretation. Blaising gives the example of how oil was thought to be a type of the Holy Spirit in that the "oil" was symbolic of the Spirit. However, older dispensationalists did not view typology as a divine planned and purposed "person, event, or institution" which pointed beyond itself to something greater in God's unfolding plan and which over time came to be recognised as such.

[40] Ibid., 52.

[41] See Craig A. Blaising, "The Structure of Biblical Covenants: The Covenants Prior to Christ," in Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 134–135; cf. Eugene H. Merrill, "The Covenant with Abraham: The

It is through the Abrahamic promise that we learn of God's promise to bless all life on earth, including the nations. Following a fairly standard way of thinking about covenants today, based on covenant patterns from the ancient Near East, Blaising interprets the Abrahamic covenant as a "royal grant" or unconditional covenant in contrast to a bilateral or conditional covenant.[42] Even though Abraham is required to obey God and his obedience functions "as *the means* by which he experiences God's blessing"[43] and the commands to Abraham "condition the *how* and the *when* of the blessing,"[44] God's promise is guaranteed ("unconditional") in the sense that God has promised to take the initiative unilaterally to bless the nations by resolving the problem of human sin.

Additionally, given the foundational nature of the Abrahamic covenant, all biblical covenants must be viewed in relation to it. God's blessing and the mediation of that blessing is passed to Abraham's descendants as they are chosen by God to inherit the covenant. In the Mosaic covenant, which Blaising views, along with much of contemporary scholarship, as a "bilateral" or "conditional" covenant, a new dispensation for blessing is established.[45] The descendants of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob are constituted as a nation, a nation which is to function as the means by which the blessing of God is brought to the nations. However, given the bilateral nature of the covenant, it is possible for Israel to break the covenant by their dis-

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Keystone of Biblical Architecture," *Journal of Dispensational Theology* 12 (2008): 5–17; Darrell L. Bock, "Covenants in Progressive Dispensationalism," in *Three Crucial Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism*, 169–203. Blaising begins his analysis of the structure of the biblical covenants with the Noahic covenant although recognising the links to the divine intentions in Genesis 1–2 ("Structure of Biblical Covenants," 128–129). However, Merrill does recognise an Adamic covenant in Genesis 1:26–28. See Eugene H. Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion: A Theology of the Old Testament* (Nashville: B&H, 2006), 239–241; and idem, "Covenant and the Kingdom: Genesis 1–3 as Foundation for Biblical Theology," *Criswell Theological Review* 1/2 (1987): 295–308.

[42] A "royal grant" covenant is an "unconditional" or "unilateral" covenant. The king enters into a relationship with his subjects and guarantees a certain gift to his subjects regardless of whether or not they obey. In contrast, a "bilateral" or "conditional covenant" is a covenant similar to the suzerain-vassal treaties of the ancient Near East. In such an arrangement the suzerain or king enters into relationship with his vassals or subjects. The king promises certain things to the subjects and the subjects in return promise to obey the terms of the covenant. They also agree that if they disobey the king, the king has the right to bring punishment upon them, but if they obey, then the king must keep his promises to them. Merrill also identifies the Abrahamic covenant as a royal grant; see *Everlasting Dominion*, 239; idem, "Covenant with Abraham," 8. For a more detailed discussion of these various kinds of covenants see Paul R. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God's Unfolding Purpose*, NSBT 23 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 17–43; Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975); cf. George E. Mendenhall, *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Pittsburgh: The Biblical Colloquium, 1955).

[43] Blaising, "Structure of Biblical Covenants," 133. See also Merrill, "Covenant with Abraham," 10–11.

[44] Blaising, "Structure of Biblical Covenants," 134.

[45] A "bilateral" covenant is a covenant similar to the suzerain-vassal treaties of the ancient Near East. In such an arrangement the suzerain or king enters into relationship with his vassals or subjects. The king promises certain things to the subjects, and the subjects in return promise to obey the terms of the covenant. If they disobey, the king will bring punishment upon them, but if they obey, then he promises to keep his side of the bargain and bless them. In contrast, a grant covenant is an unconditional covenant in that the king guarantees a certain gift to his subjects regardless of whether or not they obey.

obedience and thus come under the covenant's curse, which, unfortunately, is what occurred in history and is what led to the exile. Yet, Israel's disobedience did not overturn God's unilateral promise found in the Abrahamic covenant to bless the whole world. As Blaising notes, "The Mosaic covenant is dependent upon it [the Abrahamic covenant]. This means that even though a certain generation (or generations) fails the terms of the Mosaic covenant and experiences the curse instead of the blessing, the opportunity still exists for a renewed offer of blessing to that generation or later descendants of Abraham,"[46] which is precisely what occurs in the later biblical covenants, especially the new covenant.

Under the Davidic covenant, which Blaising interprets, similar to the Abrahamic, as a royal grant covenant, "the role of mediating blessing was politically restructured as a function of the Davidic king. A covenant was made with David to bless him and his son(s) with rulership over Israel and the rest of the nations, an intimate and blessed relationship with God, and the mediation (even priestly mediation) of *blessing* to Israel and to all peoples and nations."[47] But given the failure of the Davidic kings, the prophets looked forward to the coming of a new dispensation in which a new covenant would replace the Mosaic and would bring the Abrahamic blessing to its ultimate consummation.

In this new covenant, then, God would bring about full forgiveness of sin, the giving of the Spirit, and a transformation of the people of God culminating in resurrection life. It is this new covenant which Jesus has inaugurated in his cross work for us. However, not all the promises and blessings of that covenant have been fully realized in Christ's first coming and thus it must be interpreted in terms of the "already–not yet" tension. As Blaising notes, "There are features promised in that covenant whose fulfillment has been delayed until the return of Christ (such as the national and territorial promises in Jer. 31:31, 36 and Ezek. 36:28 and 37:14)."[48] But since these latter features, specifically Israel's land promise, go back to the Abrahamic covenant, they still await their fulfilment when Christ returns. In this sense, the new covenant should be viewed as "*the form* in which the Abrahamic covenant has been inaugurated in this dispensation, and will be fulfilled

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[46] Blaising, "Structure of Biblical Covenants," 144.
[47] Ibid., 173. For a detailed discussion of the Davidic covenant and kingdom promise, see Darrell L. Bock, "Current Messianic Activity and OT Davidic Promise: Dispensationalism, Hermeneutics, and NT Fulfillment," *Trinity Journal* 15 (1994): 55–87.
[48] Blaising, "Structure of Biblical Covenants," 202.

in full in the future."[49] But the present form of the new covenant does not exhaust the Abrahamic promises which still await their fulfilment in the future, when the specific national promises to Israel are finally realized.[50]

In regard to how progressives understand the kingdom and its relation to the covenants there is a lot of similarity, as we will note below, with covenant theology. For one thing, there is no major distinction between the terms "kingdom of heaven" and "kingdom of God." Further, as Blaising notes, in contrast to earlier forms of dispensationalism, "Instead of dividing up the different features of redemption into self-contained 'kingdoms,' progressive dispensationalists see one promised eschatological kingdom which has both spiritual and political dimensions."[51] For progressives the stress is on the eternal kingdom for understanding all previous forms of it including the millennial kingdom. Yet, unlike most proponents of covenant theology, progressive dispensationalists view the future consummation of the kingdom, i.e., the "not yet" aspect of the kingdom, as bringing about the specific promises to Israel as a nation in regard to her inheritance of the land, first in the millennium and then continuing in the eternal state. It is only when this takes place that the Abrahamic covenant is truly and fully realized and achieved.

SUMMARY OF DISPENSATIONALISM AND ITS VARIETIES

Over the years there has been quite a bit of development within dispensational theology, and in our view, for the better. Any theological view which is willing to correct itself by Scripture should receive our appreciation. But with that said, in order to clarify what is at the heart of these varieties of dispensational theology, we return to where we began. It seems that what is at the heart of all forms of dispensationalism is the "Israel-church" distinction. Hopefully this is evident not only from our description of the varieties of dispensational theology but also when dispensationalists themselves summarise what they believe are the distinctive features of their view. Even

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[49] Blaising, "Extent and Varieties of Dispensationalism," 53.

[50] As noted above, progressives appeal to the "already–not yet" tension of inaugurated eschatology to explains this. In Christ and the arrival of the new covenant, God's promises "already" are beginning to reach their fulfilment, yet, as Blaising comments, "The fact that the fullness of new covenant blessing awaits the return of Christ is not surprising since the prophecies of the new covenant envisioned Messiah reigning upon the earth over a transformed people. Included in that vision was the political restoration of Israel in peace with all other nations" (Craig A. Blaising, "The Fulfillment of the Biblical Covenants through Jesus Christ," in Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 210). But what is important to note is that progressives are convinced that there is still a future land promise for Israel tied to the Abrahamic covenant—a covenant which is irrevocable and not yet fully realized in all its promises.

[51] Blaising, "Extent and Varieties of Dispensationalism," 54.

though a number of features are listed, dispensationalists eventually return to the crucial Israel-church distinction.

For example, Craig Blaising lists eight distinctive features of dispensational theology and John Feinberg lists six.[52] However when these distinctive or essential features are probed deeper, either they are shown not to be distinctive to dispensational theology alone (e.g., the authority of Scripture, dispensations in redemptive-history, the newness of the church, or even premillennialism), or they reduce to the Israel-church distinction. Given this fact, it seems safe to say that the *sine qua non* of the view (in all of its varieties) is the Israel-church distinction. Furthermore, and intimately related to this distinction, there is the dual conviction that: (1) Israel, as a national, ethnic people, still awaits the "literal" fulfilment of the land promise in the future millennial and eternal age, which has theological implications for eschatology; and (2) "God's relationship to the church differs in some significant ways from the dispensation with Israel"[53] which has theological implications for soteriology and ecclesiology.

At this juncture it is important to ask how dispensationalists hermeneutically ground this crucial Israel-church distinction which is so central to their view. This question is especially vital in light of how covenant theologians will attempt to argue their view. But before we address some of these crucial hermeneutical-theological differences between the two systems we will finish the current discussion by describing the alternative biblical-theological view of covenant theology. We do so not only to set it over against dispensational theology but, more importantly, to set the larger context by which we will argue for a *via media*—"kingdom through covenant."

COVENANT THEOLOGY AND ITS VARIETIES[54]

Covenant theology, as a biblical-theological system, has its roots in the Reformation (e.g., Ulrich Zwingli [1484–1531]; Heinrich Bullinger [1504–1575], John Calvin [1509–1564]) and, in the post-Reformation era,

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[52] See ibid., 13–21; and Feinberg, "Systems of Discontinuity," 71–85.

[53] Blaising, "Extent and Varieties of Dispensationalism," 15.

[54] For some introductory books on covenant theology see Michael S. Horton, *God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006); Peter Golding, *Covenant Theology: The Key of Theology in Reformed Thought and Tradition* (Fearn, Ross-shire, UK: Mentor, 2004); Geerhardus Vos, "The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology," in Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., ed. *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1979); O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1980); William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1984); Vern Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, 39–51; Willem VanGemeren, "Systems of Continuity," in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 37–62.

was systematized by Herman Witsius (1636–1708) and Johannes Cocceius (1603–1669). It is ably represented in the Westminster Confession of Faith (1643–1649) as well as other Reformed confessions.[55]

As the name suggests, *covenant* theology not only organises the history of the world in terms of covenants, it also contends that what brings together all of the diverse themes of Scripture is the theme of covenant. Michael Horton, in answering the question, "What brings all of the themes of Scripture together?" says it this way: "What unites them is not itself a central dogma but an architectonic structure of biblical faith and practise. That particular architectural structure that we believe the Scriptures themselves to yield is the covenant. It is not simply the concept of the covenant, but the concrete existence of God's covenantal dealings in our history that provides the context within which we recognize the unity of Scripture amid it remarkable variety."[56] Continuing to speak of the importance of covenants for covenant theology, Horton writes, "The covenant is the framework, but it is far from a central dogma. The various covenants are visible and significant, in some 'rooms' (ie., topics) more than others. The covenant of redemption is prominent in discussion of the Trinity, Christ as mediator, and election, while the covenant of creation is more obvious when we talk about God's relationship to the world (especially humanity), and the covenant of grace is most visible when we take up the topics of salvation and the church. However, whenever Reformed theologians attempt to explore and explain the riches of Scripture, they are always thinking *covenantally* about every topic they take up."[57]

Historically, covenant theology has maintained that all of God's relations to human beings are understood in terms of three covenants—the pretemporal "covenant of redemption" (*pactum salutis*) between the persons of the Godhead; the "covenant of works" (*foederus naturae*) made with Adam before the Fall on behalf of the entire human race; and the "covenant of grace" (*foederus gratiae*) made through Christ with all who are to believe, namely, the elect.[58] Covenant theology subsumes all of the subsequent bibli-

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[55] Of course, no theological viewpoint arises without historical precedents. Thus R. Scott Clark, "Theses on Covenant Theology," in http://www.wscal.edu/clark/covtheses.php is right to argue that although covenant theology arose in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there are elements of it in the Patristic era as well. See also Golding, *Covenant Theology*, 13–45, who discusses some early thinkers who move in the covenantal direction.

[56] Horton, *God of Promise*, 13; cf. idem, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), for a more extensive development of this idea.

[57] Horton, *God of Promise*, 14.

[58] As we will note below, there is disagreement within covenant theology as to exactly with whom the covenant of grace is made, i.e., whether it is the elect alone or the elect and their children.

cal covenants under the overarching theological category of the "covenant of grace." It views the relationships between the biblical covenants in terms of an overall unity or continuity tied to their conviction that the biblical *covenants* are merely an expression of the *one* covenant of grace. No doubt, they acknowledge that throughout redemptive-history the one covenant of grace is administered differently, but overall it is substantially the same in all eras in history.[59] However, as we will note below, the nature of the continuity in the covenant of grace varies among covenant theologians, and as Vern Poythress correctly acknowledges, "Covenant theology has always allowed for a diversity of administration of the one covenant of grace. This diversity accounted in large part for the diversity of epochs in biblical history. But the emphasis was undeniably on the unity of *one* covenant of grace."[60]

It is for this reason, contra dispensationalism, that covenant theology has always seen much more *continuity* in God's plan across the ages, especially in regard to the "Israel-church" relationship. In fact, it is at this precise point that we see a major difference between these two theological systems which leads to corresponding differences in how each views aspects of ecclesiology and eschatology. For example, covenant theology has always insisted that God has one plan of redemption and one people of God and that the similarities between Israel and the church as covenant communities are significant. Unlike dispensational theology, "Israel" is viewed as "the church" and vice versa.[61] That is why covenant theology has argued that there is continuity between Israel and the church in many ways—e.g., the nature of the covenant communities as comprised of both believers and unbelievers (i.e., a "mixed" community),[62] the continuity in covenant signs (i.e., circumcision spiritually signifies the same realities as baptism), as well as sameness in relationship to the salvation experience of old and new covenant believers, with some modifications made for the final realities that Christ has achieved. In this way, within covenant theology, "Israel-church" are so linked that it

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[59] See Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, 40, who makes this point.

[60] Ibid.

[61] If one asks the question, "When did the church begin?" dispensational and covenant theology answer differently. For dispensational thought, the church is new in redemptive-history and thus begins at Pentecost. For covenant theology, the church begins immediately after God's first promise of redemption in Genesis 3:15, acknowledging redemptive-historical difference but basically conceiving of the two communities as the same.

[62] As noted above, the "mixed" nature of the covenant communities refers to the belief that, under both the old and the new covenants, the locus of the covenant community and the locus of the elect are distinct, hence covenant theology's important emphasis on the "visible" versus "invisible" church. Against a believers' view of the church, i.e., that the church is constituted by regenerate people, covenant theology contends that the church is constituted by both believers and unbelievers or, as they like to say, "believers and their children"—children, who may or may not be a part of the elect.

becomes hard not to say that the only major difference between the old and new covenant people of God is that the New Testament "church" is a racially mixed and non-national Israel, and that the "church" is a more knowledge-able version of the old covenant people of God. But the work of the Spirit in terms of regeneration, indwelling, and sealing is basically the same across redemptive-history.

With this general introduction in place, let us now describe the basic contours of covenant theology, especially in regard to their understanding of the biblical covenants. We will focus on three areas: how covenant theology understands the nature and relations among the biblical covenants, the nature of the church in relationship to Israel, and the nature of the covenant signs in the old and new covenants. By focusing on these three areas we will then be in a better position to compare and contrast the differences between dispensational and covenant theology.

COVENANT THEOLOGY AND THE BIBLICAL COVENANTS

For covenant theology the theme of "covenant(s)" is probably the most impor-tant unifying theme in Scripture, but what precisely is a covenant? Throughout the ages, "covenant" has been variously defined, but we will use Michael Horton's definition as a place to start: "a covenant is a relationship of 'oaths and bonds' and involves mutual, though not necessarily equal, commitments."[63] For Horton, the emphasis on "not necessarily equal, commitments" is impor-tant since he rightly contends that in redemptive-history there is a "substantial variety of covenants in Scripture"[64] and not all of the biblical covenants are exactly the same. How, then, should we think of the relationship between the diverse biblical covenants? As noted above, the answer to that question is that covenant theology views the biblical covenants under two larger theological headings—the covenant of works and the covenant of grace—both of which are grounded in the eternal covenant of redemption.[65]

The Covenant of Redemption

Some theologians have questioned the use of the term "covenant" to refer to the eternal pact between the persons of the Trinity since Scripture is silent

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[63] Horton, *God of Promise*, 10. See also Paul R. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath*, 34–43, for a more detailed discussion of how to define covenant biblically.
[64] Horton, *God of Promise*, 10.
[65] For a helpful summary see Horton, *God of Promise*, 77–110; cf. Peter Golding, *Covenant Theology*; Geerhardus Vos, "The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology," 234–267; John Murray, "Covenant Theology" in *Collected Works*, vol. 4 (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1982), 216–240; and Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*.

about such an eternal covenant and sometimes covenants are defined too narrowly.[66] However, Horton is correct to argue that, "If we hold simultaneously to the doctrine of the Trinity and unconditional election, it is unclear what objection could be raised in principle to describing this divine decree in terms of the concept of an eternal covenant between the persons of the Godhead."[67] Historically, this is precisely what covenant theology has done. Furthermore, as covenant theology has contended, one cannot deny that the triune God has an eternal plan which is then executed in history (e.g., Eph. 1:4–14)—a plan conceived before the foundation of the world, made known on the stage of human history, and which involves the work of all three persons of the Godhead. Scripture speaks of this plan in terms of the Father giving a people to the Son (e.g., John 6:39; 10:29; 17:2, 6–10; Eph. 1:4–12), the Son accomplishing that plan by his life and death (John 6:37–40; 10:14–18; Heb. 10:5–18), and the Spirit's work to bring those same people to faith union in Christ (Rom. 8:29–30; Eph. 1:11–13; 1 Pet. 1:5). Given this fact and given that Scripture speaks of these kinds of arrangements, plans, and promises under the category of "covenant," it is legitimate to think in terms of an intra-Trinitarian covenant.

When it comes to the covenants *in history*, covenant theology locates all of the biblical covenants under the theological headings of "the covenant of works" and "the covenant of grace."

The Covenant of Works

The covenant of works was made with Adam as the head and representative of the human race. To him and his entire posterity, eternal life was promised upon the condition of perfect obedience to the law of God. However, due to his disobedience, he, along with entire human race, was plunged into a state of sin, death, and condemnation (see Rom. 5:12–21). But God, due to his own free and sovereign grace, was pleased to make another covenant—"the covenant of grace"—with human beings (specifically, the elect) wherein

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[66] If one defines covenants completely in terms of ancient Near Eastern suzerain-vassal treaties then obviously the eternal plan of God is not covenantal in this sense, since Scripture knows of no suzerain-vassal arrangement between the persons of the Godhead. As Horton, *God of Promise*, 81–82, rightly notes, "After all, each person [of the Trinity] is equally divine: there are no lords and servants in the eternal trinitarian relationship. Furthermore, there is no formal treaty structure to this covenant in Scripture—no historical prologue, stipulations, sanctions, and so forth . . . . Only an overly restrictive definition of covenant would seem to justify the claim that the covenant of redemption is speculative rather than biblical."

[67] Horton, *God of Promise*, 79. Cf. also Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (1852, repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 2:354–373; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (1941; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 265–283; Murray, "Covenant Theology," 216–240.

God freely offered to sinners life and salvation through the last Adam, the Lord Jesus Christ.

At this point, it should be noted that within covenant theology there is disagreement over the precise nature of the "covenant of works."[68] Some have sought to avoid the idea of "works" and instead opt for "covenant of creation" or "covenant of nature" to underscore the fact that grace is fundamental to any divine-human relationship including the relationship with Adam in the original situation, even though this is a minority view within covenant theology.[69] More commonly, Reformed theology has referred to this original arrangement as a "covenant of works" with Adam, the head of the human race, who was created in a state of integrity (moral goodness) but not glorification, with the ability to obey God and thus be confirmed in righteousness, yet also able to disobey and thus bring about a state of death and condemnation upon the entire human race, which unfortunately he did. This understanding of Adam's role is not only foundational for Reformed orthodoxy's understanding of the active obedience of Christ, who, as the last Adam, obeys God's commands (the law) and thus wins righteousness for us; it is also foundational in establishing the "law-gospel" pattern of Scripture. "Law" refers to the covenant of works and "gospel" refers to the covenant of grace, and for many within covenant theology, this becomes the means by which various biblical covenants are divided up: "law" associated with Adam and Sinai (i.e., the old covenant, which is viewed as the republication of the original covenant of creation) and "gospel," associated with Abraham, David, and the new covenant in Christ.[70]

It is important that this distinction not be misunderstood. Often the "law-gospel" contrast is understood in terms of a negative-positive relation. But as Horton explains, this is not correct. "In creation (and in the institution of the theocracy at Sinai), law as the basis for the divine-human relationship is wholly positive. In fact, this republication of the law is itself *gracious*, even if the principle of the two covenants (works and grace) fundamentally differs."[71] As this is applied to the Sinai covenant, even though it begins with God's act of liberation of Israel from bondage—a gracious and powerful act indeed—Sinai must still be viewed as primarily a law covenant, following the suzerain-vassal pattern of blessings tied to obedience and curses if the

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[68] See Horton, *God of Promise*, 83–104, for a helpful discussion of the debate within covenant theology.
[69] See Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*, 56; cf. Murray, "Covenant Theology."
[70] See Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 612; cf. Horton, *God of Promise*, 77–110.
[71] Horton, *God of Promise*, 88.

parties of the covenant disobey. God's way of salvation was always tied to his promises, by grace through faith, but Israel's national status in God's land depended on their obedience to the covenant; apart from that obedience, they came under the curses of the covenant.

The Covenant of Grace

As for the "covenant of grace" (i.e., gospel, promise), it began immediately after the Fall with the promise of grace in Genesis 3:15. This promise was then progressively revealed and fulfilled in history through variously administered covenants with Noah, Abraham, Israel, and David. Ultimately it was brought to fulfilment in the new covenant inaugurated by our Lord in his victorious cross work on our behalf. But it is important to stress that even though there are different covenants described in Scripture, there is, in reality, only *one* overarching covenant of grace. That is why one must view the relationships between the covenants in terms of an overall continuity. Randy Booth underscores this point in his comments on the "newness" of the new covenant. He says, "the new covenant is but a new—though more glorious—administration of the same covenant of grace."[72] Thus, under the old covenant, the covenant of grace was administered through various promises, prophecies, sacrifices, rites, and ordinances (e.g., circumcision) that ultimately typified and foreshadowed the coming of Christ. Now, in light of our Lord's coming and work, the covenant of grace is administered through the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. But in God's plan there are not two covenants of grace, one in the Old Testament and the other in the New Testament, but one covenant differing in substance but essentially the same across the ages.

At this point it is legitimate to ask, are there any changes in the covenant of grace across time? Covenant theology answers in the affirmative, especially in light of the coming of Christ. However, these changes are only changes that God himself has explicitly revealed to us, and even in these changes there is a basic underlying continuity from age to age. Hermeneutically speaking, unless God has specifically abrogated something from the Old Testament then it is still in force in the New Testament era. Interestingly, this hermeneutic is similar to dispensational theology except that each system employs it in different areas. For example, for dispensationalism the land

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[72] Robert R. Booth, *Children of the Promise: The Biblical Case for Infant Baptism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1995), 9; cf. Murray, "Covenant Theology," 223–234.

promise to Israel, grounded in the Abrahamic covenant, has not been abrogated in the coming of Christ and is thus still in force, hence the fulfilment of it in the millennial age for national Israel. Covenant theology does *not* argue for the land promise in the same way,[73] yet it does appeal to the circumcision-baptism relationship in a similar way linked to the genealogical principle—"to you and your children." Circumcision, as a covenant sign, was given in the Abrahamic covenant and it carries over, now in baptism, as the new covenant sign, but underneath both signs is the unchanging genealogical principle. In the new covenant the sign of the covenant (baptism) does reflect one of the several administrative changes that have taken place, yet it still carries the same *spiritual* significance as circumcision in the old administration, given the continuity of the covenant of grace and the fact that the genealogical principle is not specifically abrogated in the New Testament. Booth emphasises this point when he writes, "under the old administrations of the covenant of grace, circumcision was the sign and seal of covenant admission. Under the final administration of the covenant of grace (the new covenant), water baptism has replaced circumcision as the sign of covenant admission."[74] Yet, even though the form of the covenant sign has changed, given the underlying unity of the covenant of grace, the meaning and application of the signs remains essentially the same in all eras.

For covenant theology, then, what is *new* about the new covenant, given its stress on continuity in the one covenant of grace? What is the main difference, if any, between the older and newer administrations of the covenant of grace? Within Reformed theology the answer to this question is not monolithic. However, despite various nuances, covenant theology agrees that the main difference is that of "promise-fulfilment," i.e., what the older administration promised through types, ceremonies, and sacrifices, has now come to fulfilment in Jesus Christ. It is with this understanding that most covenant theologians view the "newness" of the new covenant in terms of a *renewal* rather than a replacement or a strong sense of fulfilment that leads to a

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[73] Covenant theology views the land promise in a twofold way: first it is tied to the Sinai covenant, which was broken by the nation of Israel. Horton, *God of Promise*, 47, states it this way: "It is hardly anti-Semitic to observe that the covenant with Israel as a national entity in league with God was conditional and that the nation had so thoroughly violated that covenant that its theocratic status was revoked. Dispensationalism . . . treat[s] the land promise as eternal and irrevocable, even to the extent that there can be a difference between Israel and the church in God's plan . . . . [This fails] to recognize that the Hebrew Scriptures themselves qualify this national covenant in strictly conditional terms." Second, covenant theology also views the land as typological of the new creation which has now come in Christ. On this point see O. Palmer Robertson, *The Israel of God: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000), 3–31.
[74] Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 10.

discontinuity with the previous covenants.[75] That is why most argue that the new covenant administration simply expands the previous era by broadening its extent and application and bringing with it greater blessing, yet leaving intact the fundamental elements of the covenant of grace—hence the assertion of the continuity of the covenant of grace across the ages. Specifically, but not limited to these points, covenant theology views the "newness" of the new covenant in the following ways:[76]

> 1. On the basis of Christ's cross and through the application of it by the Spirit, a greater power of obedience is possible in the new covenant.
> 2. Under the new covenant there is an extension of the knowledge of God to all nations. In the new covenant more people will know more about the Lord, which fulfills the Abrahamic promise of blessings to the nations.
> 3. The promise of redemption is now accomplished in Christ with the full payment of sin. The old Levitical administration, along with the ceremonial law, has now been fulfilled.
> 4. The new covenant is the final manifestation of God's redemptive plan. There are no more covenant administrations to be revealed.

Interesting and very important for highlighting theological differences, especially in the area of ecclesiology, is any discussion of "newness" in the new covenant in terms of the changes which have occurred in the *nature and structure* of the new covenant community. For those who argue that the church is substantially different from Israel, as do many dispensationalists and those in the believers church tradition (including Baptists), what makes the new covenant "new" is that *all* those within the "new covenant community" are, by definition, people who presently have experienced

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[75] See, for example, Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 51; Jeffrey D. Niell, "The Newness of the New Covenant," in Gregg Strawbridge, ed. *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 127–155; cf. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987), 25–26. In stating that covenant theology views the new covenant in *renewal* terms, I am highlighting their emphasis on continuity in the covenant of grace. No doubt, as I will discuss below, covenant theologians such as Michael S. Horton do talk about the "newness" of the new covenant in qualitatively different terms, especially when contrasted with the Sinai (old) covenant. As Horton, *God of Promise*, 53, states, "The point could not be clearer [from Jer. 31:31–34]: the new covenant is not a renewal of the old covenant made at Sinai, but an entirely different covenant with an entirely different basis." Yet it is important to acknowledge that Horton views the Sinai covenant more in terms of the covenant of works and not the covenant of grace. When it comes to viewing the new covenant in relation to the Abrahamic and other biblical covenants, which he believes are "gospel" covenants given their unconditional, royal grant nature, he does see much more continuity between the Old Testament covenants and the new covenant.
[76] These points are taken from a variety of sources. See Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 63–66; Douglas Wilson, *To a Thousand Generations: Infant Baptism—Covenant Mercy for the People of God* (Moscow, ID: Canon, 1996), 22–34; Niell, "Newness of the New Covenant," 127–155; Richard L. Pratt, Jr. "Infant Baptism in the New Covenant," in *Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, 156–174; Geoffrey W. Bromiley, "The Case for Infant Baptism," *Christianity Today* (October 9, 1964), 7–10; Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 299–301; and R. Scott Clark, "A Contemporary Reformed Defense of Infant Baptism," http://public.csusm.edu/public/guests/rsclark/Infant_Baptism.html, 1–29.

regeneration of heart and the full forgiveness of sin. Jeremiah 31:29–34 certainly seems to point in this direction, and it is here that various understandings of the nature of the church begin to part paths. Obviously this latter view of "newness" implies a *discontinuity* at the structural level between the old and new covenants, a view which covenant theology rejects given their understanding of the unity of the covenant of grace. That is why Reformed theology continues to view the church like Israel of old, i.e., as a mixed community which includes within it simultaneously both the elect (covenant keepers) and the non-elect (covenant breakers). Thus how one understands the *nature and structure* of the new covenant in relation to the previous biblical covenants is a crucial matter which needs to be resolved in order to make headway in theological areas that divide us, especially in our understanding of ecclesiology.

At this point, it is necessary to pause for a moment and address two important differences within covenant theology in regard to their understanding of the biblical covenants vis-à-vis the one covenant of grace. Both of these issues have been widely discussed within covenant theology. The first issue deals with the *nature* of the covenant of grace, particularly the issue of whether the covenant of grace is unconditional and/or conditional. The second issue raises the question, with whom does God enter into a covenant relation in the covenant of grace? Let us look at each of these issues in turn in order to highlight not only these different viewpoints within covenant theology but also important points that illustrate its overall position.

First, is the covenant of grace unconditional and/or conditional? For the most part, covenant theology has argued that the covenant is *unconditional*. God acts in a sovereign and unilateral fashion to establish the covenant. Furthermore, he not only sovereignly establishes the covenant relation but he also maintains and fulfills completely the promises that he makes to his people. In the end, everything God demands of his people in terms of repentance, faith, and obedience, he graciously grants them by sovereign grace in Christ and by the power of the Spirit. As Cornelius Venema nicely summarises,

> Not only are the covenant's obligations preceded by God's gracious promise, but these obligations are fulfilled for and in believers by the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—in their respective operations. God's demands are born of grace and fulfilled in us by grace. In these respects, the covenant of grace is unconditional, excluding every possible form of

merit, whereby the faith and obedience of God's people would be the basis for their obtaining life and salvation.[77]

With that said, however, within covenant theology, and related to the above discussion on the relation between the covenants of works and grace, some have wanted to distinguish the biblical covenants further in terms of the unconditional/conditional category. For example, Michael Horton following Meredith Kline argues that the old covenant (i.e., Sinaitic or Mosaic) is predominately a law-covenant and republication of the "covenant of works" with Adam and is thus conditional, while the Abrahamic, Davidic, and new covenants are unconditional covenants. He argues this based on the assumption that the Adamic and Sinaitic (old) covenants follow the ancient Near East's suzerain-vassal pattern, while the other biblical covenants are grounded in God's unconditional promise to act unilaterally on behalf of his people. It is for this reason, now that the new covenant has been inaugurated in Christ, that the Sinai covenant is no longer in force, even though the Abrahamic covenant is, given its unconditional nature.[78] It is also for this reason that he argues, contra dispensational thought, that the land promise is tied to the Sinai covenant and is thus conditional. Israel, then, in disobeying the covenant, forfeited the land and as such, "its theocratic status was revoked."[79]

On the other hand, covenant theology has also argued that the covenant of grace (including the new covenant) is *conditional* in at least two senses. The first sense is in terms of the blessings of the covenant being totally dependent on the work of Christ, the last Adam, fulfilling the conditions of obedience first set down in the covenant of works as both the representative and substitute of his people. The second sense of viewing the covenant of grace's conditionality is in terms of the covenant obligations placed on us in order to benefit from the covenant, namely, the requirements of repentance, faith, and obedience. No doubt, these covenant obligations are not viewed as meritorious grounds for our justification; rather they are "necessary

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[77] Cornelius P. Venema, "Covenant Theology and Baptism," in *Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, 211.

[78] For a development of this argument see Horton, *God of Promise*, 23–76. Horton, as did Blaising in his discussion of the covenants, follows a fairly standard way of categorising the covenants today: royal grant and suzerain-vassal. A royal grant covenant, as represented by the Noahic, Abrahamic, Davidic, and new covenants, is unconditional. They all represent a promise of God to fulfill unilaterally the covenant regardless of what the covenant parties do. On the other hand, a suzerain-vassal covenant is conditional and bilateral and thus dependent upon the parties of the covenant keeping its obligations. In this category Horton places Adam and Israel and their respective covenants.

[79] Horton, *God of Promise*, 48.

responses to the covenant's promises" and, as such, are "instrumental to the enjoyment of the covenant's blessings."[80] Even Horton, who strongly argues that the new covenant is an unconditional or a royal grant covenant, contra the bilateral covenant of Sinai, maintains both of these kinds of conditionality within the new covenant.[81]

It is at this place in the discussion that most covenant theologians contend that the covenant of grace always involves a "conditional promise" "*with blessings for those who obey the conditions of the covenant and curses for those who disobey its conditions*."[82] In principle, then, the covenant of grace, which includes the new covenant, is conditional in the second sense described above and is thus *breakable*.[83] It is at this point that most covenant theologians argue for the "mixed" nature of the covenant of grace, that is, the covenant community is comprised of both covenant keepers and covenant breakers. That is why, given the mixed nature of the covenant community, the circle of the covenant community, whether in the old or new era, is wider and larger than the circle of election.[84] For example, Horton insists on this precise point: the covenant of grace, including the new covenant, "in its *administration* involves conditions," since "It is a covenant made with believers and their children."[85] As Horton and all covenant theologians acknowledge, not everyone in the covenant of grace is elect. It is possible, as in the nation of Israel under the old covenant, to have those within the church who are believers as well as those who are unbelievers, with all of them being new covenant members. Appealing to the often-cited parable of the weeds (Matt. 13:24–30, 36–43), Horton and covenant theology argue that "not everyone who belongs to the covenant community will persevere to the end. Some are weeds sown among the wheat, seeds that fell on rocky soil or that is choked by the weeds. . . . Not everyone in the covenant of grace is

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[80] Venema, "Covenant Theology and Baptism," 211. For a further discussion of this point see Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 280–281; and Murray, "Covenant Theology," 223–234.

[81] See Horton, *God of Promise*, 182–186. Horton argues that the new covenant has a vast array of conditions attached to it for final salvation. These conditions involve not only initial repentance and faith, but perseverance in both, as well as holiness of life. However, within the new covenant, since it is a covenant of promise, "everything that God *requires* in this covenant is also *given* by God!" (184).

[82] Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 24 (emphasis his).

[83] For a development of the "conditional" and "breakable" nature of every biblical covenant including the new covenant see Wilson, *To a Thousand Generations*, 81–96; Pratt, "Infant Baptism in the New Covenant," 169–174.

[84] On this point see Venema, "Covenant Theology and Baptism," 214.

[85] Horton, *God of Promise*, 182. Horton's more complete statement is this: "Nevertheless, the covenant of grace in its *administration* involves conditions. It is a covenant made with believers and their children. Not everyone in the covenant of grace is elect: the Israel below is a larger class than the Israel above. Some Israelites heard the gospel in the wilderness and responded in faith, while others did not—and the writer to the Hebrews uses this as a warning also to the New Testament heirs of the same covenant of grace (Heb. 4:1–11)."

elect."[86] In fact, it is due to this understanding of the nature of the "covenant of grace" that covenant theology argues for their "mixed community ecclesiology," which also grounds their argument for paedobaptism. In principle, they argue, there is nothing objectionable in viewing unregenerate people as part of the covenant community and thus to apply to them the covenant sign, contra the believers church tradition (and those in the dispensational tradition) who contend that baptism ought to apply only to believers, i.e., those who profess faith in Christ.[87] At the heart of this difference between these two ecclesiologies is a larger covenantal debate regarding the similarity and difference between the old and new covenant communities.

This understanding of the nature of the covenant flows directly into the second important issue discussed within covenant theology, namely, the question, in the covenant of grace, with whom does God enter into covenant relation? Given the "conditionality" of the covenant of grace, and the fact that not everyone in the covenant of grace is elect, who exactly are the parties of the covenant? Does God covenant with the elect only, or does he covenant with "believers and their children"—children who may or may not be the elect? It would seem that, given their view of "conditionality," the answer would be the latter, given the mixed nature of the community. However, within covenant theology, there has been a significant debate over this question. For example, the Westminster Confession of Faith (7.3) and the Westminster Larger Catechism (question 31) opt for the first option, namely, that God covenants with the elect only in the covenant of grace. Cornelius Venema succinctly summarises the Confession at this point when he writes, "In the strictest sense of the covenant as a saving communion with God, the parties of the covenant of grace are the triune God and his elect people"[88] and the condition of reception into that covenant is repentance and faith. Thus, all those who reject the free offer of the gospel stand *outside* the covenant of grace and, it would also seem to imply, they are also outside the covenant community.

If this is so, however, then why do so many covenant theologians argue that the covenant of grace also embraces "all believers and their children"—children who, we know in reality, are not necessarily brought to saving faith and thus may constitute the non-elect. This is what is referred to as the "dual

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[86] Horton, *God of Promise*, 185, 182.
[87] See also Pratt, "Infant Baptism in the New Covenant," 170, for an affirmation of this point.
[88] Venema, "Covenant Theology and Baptism," 212.

aspect" of the covenant. As Venema correctly notes, "These theologians, while acknowledging that the life and salvation promised in the covenant of grace are inherited only by the elect, argue that the covenant promise, together with its accompanying obligation, is extended to Abraham and his seed."[89] How do we make sense of this seemingly contradictory answer? This is not a minor point. Theologically speaking, much of the argument for a covenantal view of the church and ordinances, especially its defense of paedobaptism, centres on this very issue. That is why a standard contention of paedobaptists is the following: "the children of believers were always included in the covenant of grace under the older covenant administrations. In deference to this established biblical pattern, *we must assume that, apart from explicit biblical warrant to the contrary*, the children of believers are still included in the covenant of grace."[90] Thus, infants, like their adult believing parents, are to be circumcised and now baptized because they are both members of the covenant community.

Regardless of whether one thinks this "dual aspect" of the covenant is biblical, especially in regard to the nature of the new covenant (an issue we will return to in chapter 17), what is instructive in this debate is how covenant theologians understand the relationship between the biblical *covenants* in relation to the *one* covenant of grace. The only way they can justify the "dual aspect" of the covenant, especially in regard to the new covenant community, is by viewing the "covenant of grace" (an overarching theological category) through the lens of the Abrahamic covenant (a specific historical covenant which includes within it national, typological, and spiritual aspects).[91] That is why the genealogical principle found in the Abrahamic covenant and linked to circumcision—"to you and your children"—continues *unchanged* across redemptive-history, even with the inauguration of the new covenant era. A common complaint against covenant theology at this point is that it tends to reduce the national (physical) and typological aspects of the Abrahamic covenant to the *spiritual* aspects, which, in turn, becomes the grid by which all other biblical covenants are viewed, specifically the

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[89] Ibid., 214. For a further discussion of this "dual aspect" see Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 272–289.

[90] Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 10 (emphasis mine).

[91] Interestingly and a bit ironically, covenant theology appeals to the Abrahamic covenant similarly to the way dispensational theology does but with different conclusions. As noted above, dispensationalism argues that the Abrahamic covenant is foundational to all the other covenants and that, hermeneutically speaking, the specific promises which were given and not explicitly abrogated in the New Testament (particularly the land promise) are now still in force. Covenant theologians do *not* view the land promise in exactly the same way, but they argue in a similar fashion for the "genealogical principle" across the Canon starting with the Abrahamic covenant. We will return to this point in chapters 3 and 17.

new covenant. Thus, to speak of the "covenant of grace" is really to speak of the Abrahamic covenant reduced to its spiritual aspects alone. That is why in the discussion regarding the parties of the "covenant of grace," covenant theologians can speak of the "dual aspect" of the parties of the covenant, even though "believers and their children" is a genealogical formula specifically tied to the Abrahamic covenant (primarily interpreted in physical terms). This genealogical principle is certainly picked up in later covenants, but, as we will contend (along with the dispensational tradition), it is highly questionable whether there is no modification of it now that Christ has come and inaugurated the new covenant. Additionally, it is at this point that covenant theology also displays the tendency to marginalize the national elements of the Abrahamic covenant and to interpret them solely in spiritual terms—another point dispensational thought has criticised repeatedly.

Examples of the equation of the "covenant of grace" with the "Abrahamic covenant" abound in covenant theology. For example, Louis Berkhof admits that, at least in theory, the Abrahamic covenant has both national and spiritual aspects to it,[92] but in reality the national aspects of the covenant fall by the wayside and the *spiritual* aspects are treated as primary. That is why he can say that circumcision is "the initiatory sign and seal of *the covenant of grace*" (when in truth it is the sign of the Abrahamic covenant and not of all of the biblical covenants) and that "this covenant [Abrahamic] is still in force and is *essentially identical* with the 'new covenant' of the present dispensation"[93] with little regard for the redemptive-historical *distinctions* between the biblical covenants. Or, this is why John Murray argues that since "the new covenant is the fulfillment and unfolding of the Abrahamic covenant" and "the covenant made with Abraham included the infant seed, and was signified and sealed by circumcision," and "that circumcision is the sign of the covenant in its deepest spiritual significance,"[94] we are under divine command, derived

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[92] See Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 632.

[93] Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 633 (emphasis mine). In fact, Berkhof argues that what is normative for Christians today is not the Mosaic (Sinaitic, old) covenant but the Abrahamic covenant (interpreted in light of its spiritual aspects). The Sinaitic, argues Berkhof, "is an interlude, covering a period in which the real character of the covenant of grace, that is, its free and gracious character, is somewhat eclipsed by all kinds of external ceremonies and forms, which, in connection with the theocratic life of Israel, placed the demands of the law prominently in the foreground, cf. Gal. 3. In the covenant with Abraham, on the other hand, the promise and the faith that responds to the promise are made emphatic" (296–297). In a similar fashion, R. Scott Clark argues that the new covenant is "new" because it is contrasted with Moses (old covenant), but not with Abraham (or Adam), and it is the covenant with the latter that continues in the new covenant ushered in by our Lord Jesus Christ. See "Contemporary Reformed Defense of Infant Baptism," 4. Cf. Horton, *God of Promise*, 40–57, who makes this same point.

[94] See John Murray, "Baptism," in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 4 vols. (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1977), 2:374. See also this same emphasis in Venema, "Covenant Theology and Baptism," 222; and Bryan Chapell, "A Pastoral Overview of Infant Baptism," in *Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, 11–18.

from the continuity of the covenant of grace, to baptize our infant children, thus making them full members of the church. In the end, what Berkhof, Murray, and most covenant theologians do is to strip the Abrahamic covenant of some of its aspects, identify it as a pure gospel covenant, and then equate it, almost in a one-to-one fashion, with the new covenant.

The huge question that remains, though, is whether this understanding of the relationship between the biblical covenants and the "covenant of grace" is legitimate. No doubt, within covenant theology, this construction explains why there is continuity across redemptive-history—even a continuity which helps establish their view of the church and her ordinances. But does it do justice to the biblical *distinctions* between the covenants which lead us to affirm some crucial covenantal *discontinuities*—all of which have massive theological implications in many areas, not least ecclesiology. Let us now develop in more detail covenant theology's view of the nature of the church as it pertains to their understanding of the biblical covenants.

COVENANT THEOLOGY AND THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

We have already stated that covenant theology insists that, in the administration of the covenant of grace across time, there are many who belong to the covenant community, with all of the covenant privileges pertaining thereto, who are not among the elect. That is why covenant theologians have admitted that the circle of the covenant community is wider than the circle of election.[95] What is crucial to note is how this view of the nature of the church is directly linked to their understanding of the covenant of grace.

Intimately related to the unity of the covenant of grace is the unity of the people of God across the ages. Instead of viewing the relationship between "Old Testament Israel" and the "New Testament church" in ways that preserve an emphasis on continuity *and* discontinuity, covenant theology tends to emphasise the element of *continuity* at the expense of discontinuity, even though, it must be admitted, there are fine nuances within the system.[96] Randy Booth, for example, strongly asserts that a covenantal understanding of the people of God entails that "God has had one people throughout all the ages. Although this *one church* has developed through various stages, she is still the *same church*

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[95] See Venema, "Covenant Theology and Baptism," 214; cf. Horton, *God of Promise*, 182.
[96] See, for example, the very nuanced discussion of the relationship between Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church in Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church: Sacraments, Worship, Ministry, Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 27–70; and Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*, 271–300; and idem, *Israel of God*, 33–51.

from age to age."[97] One of the crucial ecclesiological conclusions drawn from this view is a justification for infant baptism. As covenant theology contends, if God, in the Old Testament, included "believers and their children" into the membership of the covenant community (Israel) then nothing has changed in the New Testament era (in the church). Booth draws this exact conclusion when he says, "*Since God has not changed the terms of church membership, new covenant believers and their children are likewise included in his church.*"[98]

This stress on the *continuity* of the people of God across redemptive-history reminds us of an earlier observation we noted regarding the *nature* of the church: covenant theology not only views the Old Testament covenant people of God (Israel) and the new covenant people of God (church) as one people, they also view the New Testament church, in its very nature, to be like Israel of old, that is, as a "mixed" community comprised of believers and unbelievers simultaneously. Thus, parallel to Old Testament Israel, the circle of the church is wider than the circle of true believers, born of the Spirit of God, united to Christ by faith, justified, and sanctified.

It is at this point in the discussion that covenant theology employs the famous "invisible-visible" distinction so important to their ecclesiology. The *invisible* church refers to the church as God sees it, that is, the elect—those from all times and places whom the Lord knows are his and his alone, perfectly and infallibly. In this sense, the church, whether under the old or the new covenant, is a spiritual entity, invisible to the natural eye—the one people of God throughout the ages. Louis Berkhof states it this way: "The Church is said to be invisible, because she is essentially spiritual and in her spiritual essence cannot be discerned by the physical eye; and because it is impossible to determine infallibly who do and who do not belong to her. The union with Christ is a mystical union; the Spirit that unites them constitutes an invisible tie; and the blessings of salvation, such as regeneration, genuine conversion, true faith, and spiritual communion with Christ, are all invisible to the natural eye—and yet these things constitute the real *forma* (ideal character) of the Church."[99]

However, it must be quickly added that the invisible church manifests itself in history in a *visible*, local form. As John Murray reminds us, "The

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[97] Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 73 (emphasis mine). For this same point see Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:549–552; Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 565–572; Bromiley, "Case for Infant Baptism," 8–9; and John Murray, *Christian Baptism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), 31–44.

[98] Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 73 (emphasis his).

[99] Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 566. For a similar discussion of the invisible-visible distinction as applied to the church see Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 88–90; and Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 31–33.

church may not be defined as an entity wholly invisible to human perception and observation. The church is the company or society or assembly or congregation or communion of the faithful."[100] The church is a divinely created bond between God and his people and between other human beings. It becomes visible in the ministry of the Word, in the practise of the sacraments, and in external organisation and government.[101] But as a visible entity it is a "mixed" one, including within it both believers and unbelievers.

How does this understanding of the nature of the church lead covenant theology to draw the crucial theological entailment of infant baptism? As the argument goes, since, in the Old Testament, infants of believing households were included in the *visible* church (Israel) by their circumcision and *prior to a personal profession of faith* and, additionally, by that act were considered full members of the covenant community even though they were not yet regenerate members, the same is true under the new covenant. Hence the rationale to apply the covenant sign of baptism to the infants of believing parents even though these infants have not yet exercised faith, and even though this practise disrupts the biblical order of baptism in the New Testament, namely, first repentance toward God and faith in Christ, and then, secondly, a confession of that faith publicly in water baptism.[102]

Obviously, covenant theology's view of the *nature* of the church differs substantially from that of many in the dispensational tradition, including Baptists, who identify themselves as part of the believers church tradition. In a believers church view, at least in the one we will defend, even though there is only one people of God throughout the ages, there is, at least, a redemptive-historical difference between Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church. No doubt there is a significant amount of continuity in the one people of God, but there is a significant amount of discontinuity as well by virtue of the our Redeemer's work which has inaugurated the entire new covenant age, and who has brought to fulfilment all of the promises, types, and covenants of the Old Testament. That is why, in this view of the church, what is unique about the nature of the new covenant community is that it is comprised of a regenerate, believing people, not a mixed people like Israel of old. That is why Baptists, for example, view those who are true members

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[100] Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 32.
[101] See Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 566.
[102] On the issue of the biblical order of baptism, namely, first conversion then baptism, and the close relationship between the two, see the excellent treatment in G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1962), 93–305; and Robert H. Stein, "Baptism and Becoming a Christian in the New Testament," *SBJT* 2/1 (1998): 6–17.

of the new covenant community as only those who have actually entered into faith union with Christ by regeneration, repentance, and faith, and as such are partakers of all of the benefits and blessings of the new covenant age. Furthermore, it is for this reason that baptism, which is the covenant sign of the new covenant church, is reserved only for those who have entered into these glorious realities by the sovereign work of God's grace in their lives. However, in contrast to this view, covenant theology argues for a "mixed" nature of the church tied to their understanding of the nature of the covenants. The members of the visible church are all those who "are marked out by baptism and actual membership in a local church"[103]—which, in the end, includes "all believers and their children."

What evidence is typically given for covenant theology's view of the church? For our purposes, there are at least three pieces of biblical and theological evidence often cited.[104]

1. The most foundational evidence is the appeal to the essential continuity of the covenant of grace across redemptive-history. For them, this entails two truths. First, it entails that there is only *one* people of God throughout the ages. Second, it entails that the nature of the covenant community is essentially the same. Hence, what may be said about the nature of the covenant community with Abraham and his children and the nation of Israel is also true of the nature of the new covenant community, the visible church, which includes within it both believers and unbelievers.

2. The corroboratory evidence given to support this claim is an appeal to the warning passages of Scripture, especially those warnings that speak of the possibility of apostasy (e.g., Heb. 6:4–6; 10:28–30). Why are these warning texts cited as corroboratory evidence? For the simple reason that these texts seem to imply that it is possible for a person to be a member of the new covenant community (i.e., the visible church), but then, sadly, to depart from the faith, thus demonstrating that they never were a regenerate, believing person even though they were externally and objectively members of the covenant community. Thus, whether one thinks of the nature of the covenant community in the Old Testament (Israel) or in the New Testament (church), it is essentially the same in both eras. That is why Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church may include within it the elect and non-elect, believers and

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[103] Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 88.
[104] These three pieces of evidence are fairly standard in covenant theology literature. See, for example, Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 632–635; Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 31–68; Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 71–95; and Wilson, *To A Thousand Generations*, 13–96.

unbelievers, that is, those who by receiving the covenant sign (circumcision or baptism) are externally and objectively brought into covenant membership but who may never exercise saving faith. Covenant theology then applies this understanding to infant baptism and contends that there is nothing objectionable in applying the covenant sign of baptism to infants and viewing them as full members of the church apart from explicit faith in Christ.

Obviously, at this point someone could dispute this particular interpretation of the warning and apostasy passages. In fact, one could contend that this line of argument leads to the interpretation that it is possible for true, regenerate Christians to lose their salvation. After all, has not Arminian theology repeatedly argued this exact point from these texts?[105] Needless to say, covenant theologians counter by arguing that the Arminian understanding of these texts is unbiblical *as applied to the elect*.[106] The Bible does not teach that true Christians (elect) can lose their salvation. Ironically, however, they agree with the Arminian exegesis and conclusion *as applied to full covenant members who are not the elect*. Thus, in the hands of most covenant theologians, these texts do not imply that it is possible for the elect to lose their salvation; rather they demonstrate that "unregenerate members of the visible church can be covenant breakers in the new covenant"[107] and that the new covenant is a breakable covenant like the old. In commenting on the implications of the warning texts for understanding the nature of the church, Doug Wilson confidently asserts, "the *elect* and the *covenant members* are not identical sets of people."[108] Hence, accordingly, the warning texts of Scripture are corroboratory evidence supporting their view that the covenant community across the ages is a "mixed" community. Wilson nicely summarises this view when he writes,

> The baptistic assumption [those who reject a mixed view] is that the covenants are *unlike* in this respect. Some Old Covenant members were regenerate, some were not. All New Covenant members are regenerate. The paedobaptist [covenant theology] assumption is that the covenants are *alike* in this respect. Some Old Covenant members were regenerate, some were not. Some New Covenant members are regenerate, some are not. The paedobaptist holds that the *difference* between the covenants is that the promises in the New are much better—meaning that the ratio of believer to

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[105] For example, see Clark H. Pinnock, ed., *Grace Unlimited* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1975); and idem, *The Grace of God, the Will of Man* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989).
[106] See Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 545–549; Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 781–794.
[107] See Gregg Strawbridge, "Introduction," in *Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, 4–5.
[108] Wilson, *To a Thousand Generations*, 34.

unbeliever will drastically change. The history of the New Israel will not be dismal like the Old Israel.[109]

3. Further supporting evidence to buttress the data already cited is found in the promise given in Acts 2:39—"for you and your children"—as well as in the household theme across the Canon, and the household baptisms in the New Testament (see Acts 16:15; 32–33; 18:8; 1 Cor. 1:16). Covenant theology is not bothered by the fact that there is no unambiguous example of infant baptism in the New Testament; rather they are convinced that passages such as Acts 2:39, alongside the importance of family relations in Scripture and the recording of household baptisms in the New Testament, provide a strong biblical warrant to ground the practise of infant baptism. Why? Because it is almost unthinkable that infants would not be considered part of the church through the covenantal sign of baptism given the continuity of the covenant of grace and given the importance of households and family solidarity in the Old Testament. Infants, in the church, especially of Jewish-Christian parents, would naturally be regarded as subjects of baptism, just as they were of circumcision in the Old Testament. Since infants of believers were always included in the covenant under older covenant administrations, then we must assume that, apart from explicit biblical warrant to the contrary, infants of believers are still included in the church today. We do not need a specific command to baptize infants nor do we need any unambiguous example of infant baptism in the New Testament. The principle of continuity leads us to assume that infants are included in the church unless we are explicitly told they are not. As noted above, ironically, this is a similar hermeneutical argument that dispensational theology makes, yet in different areas. Dispensational thought makes it in regard to the land promise while covenant theology makes it in regard to the genealogical principle, both of which are tied to the Abrahamic covenant![110]

Given what has been stated, it should not surprise us that this has important implications for how covenant theology views the nature and

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[109] Ibid., 34–35.

[110] John Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 48–50, makes this precise point. He writes, " . . . are we to believe that infants in this age are excluded from that which was provided by the Abrahamic covenant? In other words, are we to believe that infants now may not properly be given the sign of that blessing which is enshrined in the new covenant? Is the new covenant in this respect less generous than was the Abrahamic? Is there less efficacy, as far as infants are concerned, in the new covenant than there was in the old? . . . If infants are excluded now, it cannot be too strongly emphasized that this change implies a complete reversal of the earlier divinely instituted practice. So we must ask: do we find any hint or intimation of such reversal in either the Old or the New Testament? More pointedly, does the New Testament revoke or does it provide any intimation of revoking so expressly authorized a principle as that of the inclusion of infants in the covenant and their participation in the covenant sign and seal? . . . In the absence of such evidence of repeal we conclude that the administering of the sign and seal of the covenant to the infant seed of believers is still in operation and has perpetual divine warrant."

function of the covenant signs since, given the continuity of the covenant of grace and the covenant community, it is assumed that the covenant signs (circumcision and baptism) signify the same realities. Let us now turn to this last point.

COVENANT THEOLOGY AND COVENANT SIGNS

Given the continuity of the covenant of grace and the covenant community across the ages, covenant theology also contends that the covenant signs carry essentially the same meaning. In fact, it is this understanding which is part of the overall defense of infant baptism since the relationship between circumcision and baptism is viewed in terms of *replacement*. No doubt, in replacing circumcision, baptism signifies that the promised era of the Old Testament has come to fulfilment in Christ. In this sense, the new covenant brings with it change. However, the basic underlying meaning and significance of circumcision and baptism is essentially the same thing.[111]

What, then, is the essential meaning of the two covenantal signs? Primarily the signs signify entrance into the covenant community and all the blessings pertaining thereto. Thus, for example, covenant theology argues that in the Old Testament circumcision was the outward "sign and seal" of entrance into the covenant of grace and the covenant community. It was a "sign" in the sense that it signified something; it was a "seal" in that it confirmed the binding nature of the covenant, grounded in God's promises to his covenant people.[112] Circumcision was administered to all infant male children when they were eight days old. However, circumcision was not effective on its own in any kind of *ex opere operato* fashion; it always had to be combined with faith. If it was not, one showed himself to be covenant breaker instead of a covenant keeper. This explains why many Israelites who were circumcised externally showed themselves in the end to be covenant breakers as they failed to persevere in an obedient faith. Furthermore, it was for this reason that one could legitimately distinguish between the covenant members (those who were externally circumcised) and the spiritual remnant or elect (those who were externally circumcised and internally regenerated) within the covenant community of Israel. What may be said about circumcision, so the argument goes, is also true of baptism. In the New Testament,

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[111] For examples of this assertion see Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 96–119; Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 45–68; Wilson, *To a Thousand Generations*, 39–80; and Bromiley, "Case for Infant Baptism," 8–9.

[112] For a helpful discussion of "sign and seal" see Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 98–99.

baptism *replaces* circumcision as the covenant "sign and seal." In baptism, as with circumcision, we are brought into the *visible* church, identified with Christ, and considered full covenant members. But, as with circumcision, baptism does not effect a saving union in and of itself. It is only by God's grace, when God's Spirit makes us alive, grants us faith and repentance, and unites us with Christ that we experience true salvation—the reality to which baptism points. That is why, parallel to the Old Testament, even if infants are baptized under the new covenant and considered covenant members, they are truly the remnant or part of the *invisible* church only if they exercise saving faith in our Lord and persevere in him.

For our purposes, what is important to observe regarding this discussion of circumcision is that most of the argument attempts to demonstrate the *spiritual* meaning and significance of the rite.[113] Why? Because central to the covenantal argument is the *continuity* of the covenantal signs—a continuity that seeks to point to the *spiritual* realities of such things as regeneration, justification, union with Christ, and ultimately the cross work of Christ. Hence, for baptism to *replace* circumcision, it must be shown that both circumcision and baptism signify the same realities. But, to anticipate our argument in chapter 17, no one disputes the fact that baptism signifies *spiritual* realities won by Christ and applied to us as his people. However, the point of contention is whether circumcision, *in its Old Testament covenantal context*, conveys *the exact same realities* as baptism does in the New Testament. Does not circumcision also convey more—e.g., national, typological, and spiritual realities—which minimally demands that circumcision and baptism are similar in meaning but *not* exactly parallel? The only way to resolve this issue is to think through the relationships between the biblical covenants. In so doing, one must be careful of reading new covenant realities into the old without first understanding the Old Testament rite in its own covenantal context and then carefully thinking through the issues of continuity and discontinuity between the covenantal signs.

In covenant theology literature the *spiritual* meaning of Old Testament circumcision is usually understood in at least three ways—ways that

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[113] Examples of this abound. For example, Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 632–633, admits that the covenant made with Abraham has a national aspect to it, but then he turns around and contends that the Abrahamic covenant must be viewed primarily as a *spiritual* covenant, parallel to the new covenant, including the rite of circumcision. Or, as Randy Booth, *Children of Promise*, 99–100, contends, "The argument that circumcision had a purely natural or physical reference cannot stand the test of biblical teaching. Circumcision carried primarily a spiritual significance (i.e., justification by faith), and therefore may not be regarded as simply a physical sign of descent. It represented cleanliness (cf. Deut. 30:6; Isa. 52:1). Circumcision was an outward sign of the fact that God required a 'circumcised' or cleansed heart." Cf. Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 46–47.

ultimately link it to baptism under the new covenant, so that what may be said about circumcision may also be said about baptism.[114]

1. At the heart of the Abrahamic covenant is the covenantal formula— "I will be your God, and you shall be my people"—which speaks to the blessing of union and communion with the Lord. As a sign of the covenant, circumcision signifies and seals this blessing. Objectively, it makes one a member of the covenant community. The same may be said of baptism, which signifies that the recipient has objectively entered into faith union with Christ in his redemptive work.[115] This is not to deny that the recipient must still exercise faith before covenant blessings may be appropriated. Failure to respond in faith to one's baptism brings covenant curses instead of blessings. But note: like circumcision, baptism is viewed as a sign that promises and anticipates gospel realities; it does *not* affirm or testify that these same gospel realities have already taken place in the recipient.

2. Circumcision, as a physical act, signified the removal of the defilement of sin, the cleansing from sin, and it pointed to the need for a spiritual circumcision of the heart (see Ex. 6:12, 30; Lev. 19:23; 26:41; Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4; 6:10; 9:25). Likewise, baptism is an outward sign of the inward, spiritual need for the grace of God in the heart of the covenant member—"it points to the necessity of spiritual regeneration";[116] it does *not* testify that regeneration has already taken place.

3. Circumcision was the seal of the righteousness Abraham had by faith while he was as yet uncircumcised (Rom. 4:11). As such, in circumcision, "God signified and sealed the fact that he justifies believers by faith and considers us as righteous through faith."[117] Circumcision is not a guarantee that Abraham has faith, nor even that Abraham (or anyone else, for that matter) has righteousness. Instead, "what circumcision guarantees is the word of God's promise: that *righteousness will be given on the basis of faith*."[118] The same may be said of baptism. This is why both circumcision and baptism testify to God's promise to justify the ungodly by faith. This is also why one can circumcise or baptize an infant before faith is present. The covenant sign is simply a promise that righteousness will be given when a person believes the promises of God.

Thus, when thinking of the significance of circumcision and baptism,

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[114] For a discussion of these points see Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 45–68; Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 96–119; Mark E. Ross, "Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals," in *Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, 85–111.
[115] See Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 107.
[116] See ibid.
[117] Ibid., 102.
[118] Mark Ross, "Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals," 94 (emphasis his).

covenant theology argues that essentially they signify the same gospel reali-
ties, namely, regeneration (Col. 2:11–12; Rom. 2:29), union with Christ
(Rom. 6:4; Gal. 3:27–29), and all of the blessings related to that union
(Acts 2:38). Because the signs are parallel in meaning and application, if it
is legitimate in the Old Testament to apply the sign to "believers and their
children," then the same is true in the new covenant era. This, however,
raises an obvious question: If the covenantal signs are so similar in meaning
then why did circumcision disappear as a covenant sign, especially for the
Jewish Christian? Most covenant theologians argue that the change was due
to the greater blessings that the new covenant has ushered in, especially in
terms of extending more blessings to more people than before (e.g., Jew and
Gentile). As we have noted above, as we move from old to new covenant,
we also move from promise to fulfilment. Now that Christ has come, some
of the rites of the Old Testament have been changed to reflect the completed
work of Christ. Baptism has replaced the bloody rite of circumcision, just as
the Lord's Supper has replaced the bloody Passover lamb.[119]

Here in a nutshell is the basic viewpoint of covenant theology, especially
in relation to how it conceives the nature and relationship of the biblical cov-
enants, and the implications of this for its view of the nature of the church
and its covenant signs. As with dispensationalism and its varieties, covenant
theology is a biblical-theological viewpoint which seeks to "put together"
the entire canon of Scripture and thus grasp something of the incredible plan
of God. Even though both views agree with each other at a number of key
points, at the heart of their differences is their understanding of the nature of
the biblical covenants and the relationship of these covenants to each other.
In the next chapter, after a brief hermeneutical discussion where we lay out
how we go about the task of reading and applying Scripture, we will return
to these two theological systems by highlighting some of the key issues that
need adjudication and why it is that we are convinced that our *via media*—
"kingdom through covenant"—provides a better alternative than the present
two biblical-theological systems. In the remaining chapters we will seek to
demonstrate this thesis.

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[119] Within the larger Reformed community there is a growing debate regarding paedocommunion. Some covenant
theologians argue that covenant children should be included in communion given the fact that they are full cov-
enant members of the new covenant. In favour of paedocommunion, see the writings of Douglas Wilson, Peter
Leithart, and Gregg Strawbridge in Gregg Strawbridge, ed., *The Case for Covenant Communion* (Monroe, LA:
Athanasius, 2006). For the case against paedocommunion, see Cornelius P. Venema, *Children at the Lord's Table?*
(Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2009). For a survey of positions and critique from a "progressive
covenantal" or "new covenant theology" perspective, see Brent Parker, "Paedocommunion, Paedobaptism, and
Covenant Theology: A Baptist Critique and Assessment" (unpublished paper).

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