

Critique of Covenant Theology

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Introduction

This document will serve as a critique of Covenant Theology as espoused by Reformed Theologians.

Covenant Theology is a robust system that has centuries of development and a robust history, so I won't be able to speak to everything in the amount of detail that I would want to, but it is my hope to bring forward some of the issues that I have seen in debates with Covenant Theologians and in reading their source material.

We will begin with a brief introduction of Covenant Theology and then immediately enter into addressing issues that I have with Covenant Theology. I have attempted below to argue against an accurate depiction of Covenant Theology, not a strawman, and have relied heavily on Covenant Theologian sources to show how they themselves hold these positions, rather than simply citing a plethora of Dispensationalists that already agree that Covenant Theology is in error. It is far more helpful, and I believe more powerful to see Covenant Theologians internally critique their own position.

The issues that I address below are:

1. An Overemphasis on Redemptive Historical Categories
2. An Overemphasis on Deduction and not Induction
3. New Testament Priority Presupposition
4. Christocentric Hermeneutic
 - a. Excursus 1: What About Luke 24?
5. The Theological Covenant of Works, Grace, and Redemption
 - a. Excursus 2: What About Federal Headship?
 - b. Excursus 3: What About Hosea 6:6-7?
6. Supersessionism
7. The Failure to Distinguish Between Israel and the Church
8. Bound To Traditions – Has Covenant Theology Been Left-Behind?

Defining Covenant Theology

Covenant Theology, as defined by the Ligonier website is,

“...a hermeneutical framework that seeks to understand the Bible according to its covenantal structure.”¹

Others like J.I. Packer have defined Covenant Theology as,

“...what is nowadays called a hermeneutic — that is, a way of reading the whole Bible that is itself part of the overall interpretation of the Bible that it undergirds.”²

Ligon Duncan builds on J.I. Packer’s comments when he states,

“Covenant theology is an approach to biblical interpretation that appreciates the importance of the covenants for understanding the divine-human relationship and the unfolding of redemptive history in Scripture. Blending insights from systematic and biblical theology, covenant theology explains the economic Trinity, communion with God, the person and work of Christ, the sacraments, justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, the role of obedience in the Christian life, the believer’s assurance of salvation, the unity and progress of redemptive history, and more, in light of the Bible’s teaching on the divine covenants.”³

As we can see above, Covenant Theology is a hermeneutic that attempts to see the unity and progress of redemptive history by means of the teaching of covenants. When and how did Covenant Theology arrive in church history? Duncan again provides insight for us when he says,

“The formulation of covenant theology is the work of the 16th and 17th century Calvinistic Reformation. By the middle of the 1500s Zwingli, Bullinger, Calvin and others had articulated fundamental aspects of covenant theology in response both to medieval Roman Catholic and contemporary Anabaptist interpretative errors, especially pertaining to the relation of the Old and New Testaments, deliberately citing the church fathers as informing their views and confirming the importance of the covenants in their exposition of redemptive history.”⁴

As of right now, we can begin to see how Covenant Theology was formed and what it was meant to accomplish. It was the work of the 16th-17th century Calvinistic Reformation. It was the product of a response to medieval Roman Catholicism and contemporary Anabaptist interpretative errors, specifically linked with the relationship between the Old and New Testaments (continuity vs. discontinuity). It functioned as a biblical hermeneutic which attempted to unify the scriptures through the divine covenants in order to explain the unfolding of redemptive history.

Now, did Covenant Theologians simply stick to the biblical covenants when attempting to formulate their position, or did they bring something else to the discussion? Because anyone in their right mind would agree that the bible certainly structures itself around covenants, but is that

¹ Ligonier, *Covenant Theology*, Aug 12, 2021, <https://www.ligonier.org/guides/covenant-theology>

² J.I. Packer, *Introduction to Covenant Theology*. Taken from: <https://www.apuritansmind.com/covenant-theology/introduction-to-covenant-theology-by-ji-packer/>

³ Ligon Duncan, *Covenant Theology*, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/covenant-theology/>

⁴ Ibid.

all that Covenant Theologians are advocating for? Certainly not. Covenant Theology is built around 3 *theological* covenants, as Duncan notes,

“Covenant theology posits theological covenants (the Covenants of Redemption, Works, and Grace) and appreciates how the scriptural teaching about covenants entails and relates to a number of vitally important biblical themes and issues, including the purpose of God in history, the nature of the people of God, the federal headships of Adam and Christ, the person and work of Christ, the continuities and discontinuities in the progress of redemptive history, the relation of the Old and New Testaments, law and gospel, the assurance of salvation, the nature and significance of the sacraments (or ordinances), and what it means to walk with God in this life.”⁵

Later we will address these three theological covenants and their defects, but for now we can simply acknowledge the fact that Covenant Theologians affirm *three* theological covenants (works, grace, redemption).⁶

Setting the grounds of what Covenant Theology is and how it arrived in church history, I want to jump right into my issues with the system. These arguments below are not solely based upon my interactions with Covenant Theologians but from the material I have read as well.⁷

Issue #1 – An Overemphasis on Redemptive Historical Categories

I believe that this is a pertinent place to start, since I believe that this presupposition is the grounds by which the whole system has been constructed.⁸ As we saw above, Covenant Theology was created as a response to errors that came from Anabaptists and Roman Catholics. Let it be noted that it was *not* a response to Dispensationalism, as some may suspect, but rather, it was an attempt to show continuity of salvation from Genesis to Revelation and a unified plan of redemption across all of scripture. As a Dispensationalist, this is a noble cause, and we applaud the Covenant Theologian for emphasizing the continuity of salvation from the Old and New Testament, however, where we disagree with the Covenantalist is *how* and *where* they get

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Granted, not all affirm the covenant of redemption (cf. O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*) and not all affirm the language that pertains to the covenant of works (cf. the works of John Murray, and A.T.B. McGowan). However, it does appear that there is consistency in affirming the covenant of grace (due to the nature of its impact on redemptive history).

⁷ Includes works and articles from: Greg Nichols, A.T.B McGowan, John Murray, Pascal Denault, Peter Golding, Ligon Duncan, R.C. Sproul, Guy Prentiss, Michael Horton, Herman Bavinck, Louis Berkhof, Cornelius Venema, Herman Hoeksema, Herman Hanko, Ralph Smith, Tom Hicks, etc.

⁸ Look at the emphasis place on redemptive history by the Covenant Theologians. John R. Muether, J. Nicholas Reid, Guy Prentiss Waters state “This biblical and theological reflection on redemptive history is the model covenant theology seeks to exemplify...As demonstrated above, covenant theology teaches us about God and how he has worked throughout redemptive history...That reality helps us to appreciate how special the church—God’s one people across redemptive history—is to God.” <https://www.crossway.org/articles/10-things-you-should-know-about-covenant-theology/>. Ligon Duncan also states, “To say it another way, covenant theology explains the relationship between God and humanity in terms of divinely initiated covenants that also structure the history of redemption revealed in Scripture because divine covenants in the Bible provide an exegetical, thematic, and theological framework for seeing the overarching unity as well as progress in God’s plan of salvation.”

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/covenant-theology/>. Monergism’s website notes, “Covenant Theology is a framework for understanding the overarching storyline of the bible, which emphasizes that God’s redemptive plan and his dealings with mankind are without exception worked out in accordance with the covenants that he has sovereignly established.” <https://www.monergism.com/threshold/articles/onsite/qna/covenant.html>

this continuity from. They build this continuity of salvation from the *three* theological covenants and a Christocentric hermeneutic, and not directly from the biblical covenants or a proper hermeneutical framework.⁹ The biblical covenants are brought into the *three* theological covenants and are seen *essentially* as one. The covenants in the bible are merely the outworking's of these *theological* covenants. This is where we depart with the Covenant Theologian because we believe that continuity of salvation can be achieved without the necessity of these theological covenants.

As Paul Williamson notes in his book *Sealed with an Oath*,

“Admittedly, this concept of a single, overarching 'covenant of grace' helpfully serves to keep the continuity and theological relationship between the various divine-human covenants clearly in focus. Unfortunately, however, some of the terminology that has thus been introduced into the discussion has proved problematic and potentially misleading. Moreover, superimposing a covenantal framework on the entire canon is not without its difficulties, not least of which is the somewhat hypothetical nature of the major theological construct (i.e, the covenant of grace). Therefore, while fully acknowledging that all the divine-human covenants ultimately serve the same overarching divine purpose (see below), it seems preferable in a biblical-theological investigation to articulate that purpose as simply and unambiguously as possible. Thus, rather than speaking in terms of a single, overarching 'covenant of grace', the unity and continuity of the various divine-human covenants will be explored in terms of God's universal purpose - a purpose that is given clear expression in the Genesis creation narratives, and that finds its ultimate fulfilment in the new creation inaugurated through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.”¹⁰

What Williamson has done in his work is show that we don't need a grid superimposed into scripture in order to see the continuity of salvation throughout redemptive history, it is achievable without these three covenants, it simply ends up causing more issues than it solves, and this is what the Covenantalist needs to understand. If we can provide a better understanding of the covenantal structure that is rooted more in *induction* than *deduction*, more in *exegesis* and not *eisegesis* we should opt for the former and not the latter.

John Feinberg also sees the issue with the emphasis on redemptive historical categories:

“Ask a covenant theologian to sketch the essence of his system and invariably he will begin with a discussion of the covenant of works, the covenant of grace, and the covenant of redemption. But, of course, all these relate to soteriology; and when they are made the basic categories for understanding Scripture, it becomes obvious why covenantal systems usually emphasize soteriology to the exclusion of other issues.”¹¹

⁹ A proper hermeneutical foundation starts with the literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutic, not a theological gird placed over the scripture. For a more detailed analysis see Jon Anderson's dissertation located here: <https://sakeofthetruth.wordpress.com/2021/05/19/the-presuppositional-hermeneutic-an-argument-for-interpreting-and-preaching-the-bible-with-authority/>

¹⁰ Paul R. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath: A Biblical Theology of Covenant* (Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity Press, 2007), 30-31.

¹¹ John S. Feinberg, “Systems of Discontinuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*, ed. John S. Feinberg, (Westchester, IL, Crossway, 1998), 344, n.108.

What we have then is essentially a collapse of *all* of scripture into **soteriological categories** that only emphasize either God saving his elect or God saving some aspect of creation, as was later emphasized in Anthony A. Hoekema's work "*The Bible and the Future*." Is this sufficient though? The simple answer is no.

Paul Henebry in his important work *The Words of the Covenant* traces the entire Old Testament covenantal structure and demonstrates that there is absolutely no need for the Covenant Theologians structure to understand God's redemptive plan, he also states the problem with this narrow perspective when he says,

"In Covenant Theology the quite artificial theological covenants do carve out a clear purpose in redemption, but at the price of making the Hebrew Bible more for the Church than for the Hebrews to whom it was originally given."¹²

The numerous problems with overemphasizing redemptive historical categories must be brought to the attention of the Covenantalist. Problems include:

- Ignoring other pertinent areas of biblical theology and systematic theology that don't include redemptive categories (such as, how the covenants relate to *ethnic* Israel to whom the promises and covenants were actually given (Rom 9:3-4), the land promise, the temple and the new covenant, the restoration of sacrificial worship in Ezekiel's temple, the biblical feasts, the restoration of Israel which includes far more than soteriological redemption, etc.).
- Collapsing all covenant details under the heading of redemption when this is far too broad to bring together all aspects of the covenant promises. Yes, covenants have a redemptive element, but this is far from the only thing that a covenant has intrinsically (i.e., The land given in the Abrahamic Covenant has nothing to do with the redemption of the elect)
- Ignoring the *uniqueness* of each covenant and not simply blurring them all together to see the progress of redemptive history, (i.e., the New Covenant is actually a New Covenant (as Reformed Baptists agree-contrary to Presbyterians) in contrast with the Old Covenant).
- The Old Testament is placed under or is subservient to the New Testament (canon-within-a-canonical) because redemptive categories are far more prominent in the New Testament.
- Neglecting for the 4 seeds of Abraham which in-fact include unbelievers (i.e., *ethnic* Israel, God's chosen people which is a mixed multitude made up of believers and unbelievers)
- Seeing one people of God (i.e., the church – due to a redemptive historical presupposition), rather than seeing God working progressively through Israel (his people in the Old Testament and New) and seeing the Church as a new entity created on Pentecost. This is no way undercuts the continuity of salvation, there is one soteriological people saved by one means, but this doesn't exclude Israel being God's people.

Covenant Theology needs to harmonize Kingdom, Covenant, and Dispensations to better understand how God's program operates. Stephen Wellum and Peter Gentry in their book *Kingdom Through Covenant* have made a much more important contribution to the conversation over the last 20 years than Covenant Theology has with repeating its traditions tied to confessionalism. The issue I have with their work is that it also overemphasizes redemptive historical categories, thankfully to a lesser degree than Covenant Theology, but they have

¹² Paul M. Henebry, *The Words of the Covenant: A Biblical Theology* (Volume 1- Old Testament Expectation), (Xulon Press Elite, Maitland, FL, 2021), 2.

stressed a far greater degree of typology. This leads to dismissing important aspects of covenantal promises, like the land promised to Israel through the Abrahamic Covenant. That being said, they are moving in a much more acceptable direction than Covenant Theology. They have stripped out unnecessary baggage of Covenant Theology, yet they have still kept some aspects of Covenant Theology that they would do well to be remove.¹³

In understanding God's Kingdom program¹⁴ Covenant Theologians would do well to see how God is operating through the people of Israel in the Old and New Testaments in a more cohesive way, and would better understand the relationship of national/ethnic Israel to the covenants.

We must avoid placing too much weight on redemptive historical categories (systematically the doctrine of soteriology) and move towards a robust understanding of all areas of systematics and how they blend together. Covenant Theology has overemphasized one aspect to the exclusion of others.

Issue #2 – An Overemphasis on Deduction and not Induction

The second issue with Covenant Theology is its overemphasis on *deduction* and lack of emphasis placed on *induction*. Henebry summarizes this issue well,

“A person will not understand CT unless they grasp two basic things. Firstly, CT reads the OT through the lens of the NT. Actually, that is not quite right. I should say that CT reads the OT through its *own understanding of the NT*. Which brings me to the second matter. To understand CT, one must comprehend the reasoning. CT is *heavily deductive in its approach to Scripture and Theology*.”¹⁵

I completely agree with this assessment. This has been my observation as well, Henebry further states that,

“Covenant theologians tell “stories.” The stories are persuasive because they are God-centered, Christological, NT oriented, and coherent (at least apparently). But they are stories, nonetheless. Often bits of the story get interpolated into the exegesis and explanations, so that at one moment you are reading something from Genesis, and the next a theology of Calvary via Paul is freighted in. [sic] it is difficult to [sic] many to see but there is a theological agenda always running in the background. Occasionally the veil slips a little and the background assumption can be seen. When this happens, one must pay special attention. Certain things are being taken for granted. One of the best places to see this is when CT's are dealing with the actual covenants of God mentioned in the Bible; the Abrahamic, the Davidic, and the New particularly. Covenant theologians major on “theological interpretation.”¹⁶

¹³ For a review of Stephen Wellum and Peter Gentry's work please see: Craig Blaising's criticisms in the Master's Seminary Journal: <https://tms.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/tmsj26h.pdf>. Also, Andrew Kim's recent work titled “*The Multinational Kingdom in Isaiah*,” and Paul Henebry's articles:

<https://drreluctant.wordpress.com/2013/06/28/kingdom-through-covenant-a-review-pt-1/>

¹⁴ For excellent works on the Kingdom see, Michael Vlach, “*He Will Reign*” and Alva McClain, “*The Greatness of the Kingdom*.”

¹⁵ Paul M. Henebry, *Deciphering Covenant Theology (Pt.1)*, Feb 17, 2022,

<https://drreluctant.wordpress.com/2022/02/17/deciphering-covenant-theology-pt-1/> (emphasis in the original)

¹⁶ Ibid.

The obvious concern here is that other things (exp. Christology, the New Testament, Theological conclusions) are brought into texts (*eisegesis*) and assumed as the truth of the passage, when there isn't any evidence of them being found in the text when biblical exegesis is completed. I will speak further on what we call a New Testament priority presupposition under argument #3.

What is wrong with deduction or the deductive method, at its core? Firstly, deduction can lead to bringing things such as *assumptions* to the text that are not there or are not derived from biblical exegesis. Secondly, a deductive method causes the interpreter to be the arbiter for what the meaning of the text is, this can lead to serious problems such as foreign understandings from cultural influences being read into the text. Induction or the inductive method is generally regarded as a much more biblically centered approach because the evidence evaluated from the text itself and the meaning is pulled from the text (not read into the text) through the means of biblical exegesis. As this website states,

“When it comes to the Word of God, inductive Bible study is the best way to study. We want to interpret and understand the Scripture based on the evidence presented to us, instead of our preconceived notions of what we want or assume the text says.”¹⁷

In attempting to be faithful to the author's original intent, the context, the singular meaning, and to biblical exegesis under the proper hermeneutical framework, we should never read into the text anything that cannot be found there or has been built from a theological or philosophical framework. We must derive our conclusions about the bible from the bible itself.

The issue with Covenant Theology is that it is bringing three covenants that are not derived from biblical exegesis into the Scriptures and imposing a theological grid over the rest of scripture that creates more problems than it solves.

Issue #3 –New Testament Priority Presupposition

I have heard it argued numerous times by Covenant Theologians that they do not have a *New Testament priority presupposition*, but the evidence is that they do, and this has been articulated in numerous books and articles. Herbert W. Bateman IV defines testament priority as a,

“... presuppositional preference of one testament over the other that determines a person's literal historical-grammatical hermeneutical starting point.”¹⁸

No matter how much it is denied by the Covenantalist, it is central to how they interpret the Old Testament. Let's look at what some Covenant Theologians say about this topic.

Tom Hicks in his article called “*Hermeneutics: New Testament Priority*” states,

“One important aspect of biblical hermeneutics (the theory of biblical interpretation) is the principle of ‘New Testament priority...’ The interpretive principle of New Testament priority is

¹⁷ Taken from: <https://biblestudy.tips/inductive-bible-study/>. See also Richard Alan Fuhr Jr. & Andreas J. Köstenberger's book, *Inductive Bible Study*.

¹⁸ Herbert W. Bateman IV, *Dispensationalism Yesterday and Today, in Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 38.

derived from an examination of the Scriptures themselves. As we read the Bible, we notice that earlier texts never explicitly interpret later texts.”¹⁹

Dewey Dovel in his article titled “*Dismantling Dispensationalism*” says,

“For this article, it is sufficient to point out that no Christian can reject a New Testament interpretive priority altogether. There are too many clear instances in which Biblical doctrine can only be known definitively in light of having the New Testament to build off of what was revealed in the Old Testament.”²⁰

In Sam Waldron’s criticisms of Matthew Waymeyer’s work “*Amillennialism and the Age to Come*” he notes the following criticism in the title of his blog post,

“Hermeneutical Priority Must Be Given to the New Testament over the Old Testament and the More Literal New Testament Passages over the More Figurative.”²¹

So, as we can see, this is not an isolated assumption made on the part of Dispensationalists. This is a rampant pre-commitment brought to the Scriptures. Waldron, further presses this idea when he states,

“In my book, *End Times Made Simple*, I assumed with little argument that when it comes to interpreting the Bible as a whole (and, therefore, its eschatology in particular) that there were certain “self-evident” principles which must be followed. They were that clear passages must be given priority over difficult passages, literal passages over figurative passages, and general truths about eschatology before the details of prophecy.”²²

This is a massive assumption and pre-commitment that needs to be accounted for, and an assertion that cannot be passed over by the statement “self-evident,” as Waldron does.

Richard B. Gaffin does the same thing in his critique of Theonomy,

“Is the New Testament to be allowed to interpret the Old as the best, most reliable interpretive tradition in the history of the church (and certainly the Reformed tradition) has always insisted? Does the New Testament as a whole—as the God-breathed record of the end point of the history of special revelation—provide the controlling vantage point for properly understanding the entire

¹⁹ Tom Hicks, *Hermeneutics: New Testament Priority*, <https://founders.org/articles/hermeneutics-new-testament-priority/>

²⁰ Dewey Dovel, *Dismantling Dispensationalism: It is Inconsistent on Sensus Plenior and New Testament Interpretative Priority*, Feb 1, 2021, <https://covenantconfessions.com/dismantling-dispensationalism-it-is-inconsistent-on-sensus-plenior-and-new-testament-interpretative-priority/>

²¹ Sam Waldron, *Amillennialism and the Age to Come—A Critical Review # 6*, May 17, 2017, <https://cbtseminary.org/amillennialism-and-the-age-to-come-a-critical-review-6/>.

²² Ibid, emphasis in the original. Waldron makes the same argument in his critique on Theonomy: “It is true that earlier revelation is vital for understanding the context of later revelation. In that sense, earlier revelation is logically prior to later revelation. But sound hermeneutical principles recognize that later revelation has interpretive priority over earlier revelation. Therefore, when later Old Testament texts explain earlier parts of the Old Testament, we should pay close attention to what the later texts say and allow them to explain and draw out implications of earlier Old Testament texts, making explicit what was only previously implicit. Similarly, when the New Testament explains Old Testament passages of Scripture, the New Testament has priority of interpretation over the Old Testament.” Sam Waldron, *Why is Theonomy Unbiblical*, April 12, 2021, <https://cbtseminary.org/why-is-theonomy-unbiblical/>

Old Testament, including its prophecies? Or alternatively, will the Old Testament . . . become the hermeneutical fulcrum?”²³

John Feinberg notes that this is a sticking point for both our systems when he states,

“Nondispensationalists begin with the NT teaching as having priority and then go back to the OT. Dispensationalists often begin with the OT, but wherever they begin they demand that the OT be taken on its own terms rather than reinterpreted in the light of the NT.”²⁴

If this “watershed” as George Ladd defined it²⁵, cannot simply be overlooked, how are we to proceed? Are we stuck here? I don’t think so. I believe that the New Testament priority presupposition must be rejected as a tool that is used when evaluating the Old Testament. We cannot come to an Old Testament text and simply assume that the New Testament is going to be the interpreter of that specific text.²⁶ There needs to be good textual indicators that allow us to connect the Old and New together when interpreting the Old. Hermeneutically, we cannot just simply assume that the New Testament is a sort of exhaustive commentary on the Old. What we can do is look at how the New Testament authors use the Old Testament texts, as we have seen in some recent publications over the last 20 years. The Old Testament existed well before the New Testament and we must allow the progressive of revelation to inform us, but the Old Testament must be allowed to stand on its own or we bring into question its validity.

G.K. Beale (who is completely inconsistent in practice) states that we should not allow the New Testament text to *influence* our understanding of the Old Testament. He writes,

“Analyze the OT context both broadly and immediately, especially thoroughly interpreting the paragraph in which the quotation or allusion occurs. This is crucial! It may provide significant insights into the OT citation or allusion that may not have been seen before. One should go into the exegetical depths of the Hebrew text (or English text, if the researcher does not know Hebrew). Here one should interpret the OT on its own grounds and within its own redemptive-historical context, without allowing the NT text to influence the interpretation, since it represents a later stage of redemptive history.”²⁷

²³ Richard B. Gaffin, *Theonomy and Eschatology, in Theonomy: A Reformed Critique*, ed. William S. Barker and W. Robert Godfrey (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 216–217.

²⁴ John Feinberg, *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 75.

²⁵ “Here is the basic watershed between a dispensational and nondispensational theology. Dispensationalism forms its eschatology by a literal interpretation of the Old Testament and then fits the NT into it. A nondispensational eschatology forms its theology from the explicit teaching of the New Testament.” George E. Ladd, *Historic Premillennialism, The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, ed. Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove, IL; IVP, 1977), 28.

²⁶ Cory Marsh correctly notes, “Like a house that is built upon a foundation before its walls are erected, the OT should be understood as providing the foundation for the NT. And, just like the walls, windows, or roof of a house do not repurpose or change its foundation, neither does the NT repurpose or change the meaning of the OT. Whatever the original intended meaning was in the OT, it was fully sufficient for its purposes and is never altered or canceled by the NT. Though the NT may supply additional information or draw fresh implications and analogies from an OT text (e.g., Matt 2:15; 1 Pet 1:10-11), the passing of time does not violate clearly stated referents, promises, and established meaning of the earlier revelation.” Cory Marsh, *A Primer on Biblical Literacy*, (SCS Press, El Cajon, CA), 66-67.

²⁷ G K. Beale, *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament: Exegesis and Interpretation*, (Grand Rapids, Mi, Baker Academic, 2012), 44.

It is absolutely bizarre to me that Beale states in such clear ways that the New Testament should not influence our interpretation when one is studying the Old Testament, yet in the same way, he comes to the Old Testament in numerous of his works reading this exact presupposition into passages that don't comport with his pre-commitments.²⁸ What good is it to say one thing and then do another?

James Orr in *The Progress of Dogma* highlights the clear issue here,

“. . . it [Covenant Theology] failed to seize the true idea of development, and by an artificial system of typology and allegorizing interpretation, sought to read back practically the whole of the New Testament into the Old. But its most obvious defect was that, in using the idea of the covenant as an exhaustive category, and attempting to force into it the whole material of theology, it created an artificial scheme which could only repel minds of simple and natural notions. It is impossible, e.g., to justify by Scriptural proof the detailed elaboration of the idea of a covenant of works in Eden, with its parties, conditions, promises threatening, sacraments, etc. Thus also the Reformed theology—the more it had assumed this stiff and artificial shape—failed to satisfy the advancing intellect of the age. . .”²⁹

James Orr is spot-on! He gets it, the New Testament priority causes Covenant Theologians “*to read back practically the whole of the New Testament into the Old.*” So, what happens is that when a theological challenge is faced for the Covenant Theologian, they first go to the New Testament to see how something might allude to, or relate to an Old Testament text and then reads that backwards into the Old Testament.

One of the most obvious examples that I have seen of this error is from Kenneth Gentry’s writings on Ezekiel 47.

Gentry states,

“In Ezekiel 47:1–9 redemption flows forth from God’s temple as an ever-deepening stream. The waters of life trickle from under the altar, first “to the ankles” (Eze 47:3), then they flow gradually deeper to the knees (Eze 47:4a), then deeper still to the loins (Eze 47:4b), until the stream finally becomes “a river that I could not ford” (Eze 47:5). This is the river of life (Eze 47:9). In fact, in John 7:38 Christ presents himself as fulfilling this prophecy. This water-from-the-altar is quite consistent with Christ’s presenting himself as the true temple (John 2:19–21). In John 7:38 we read: “He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.” At Pentecost the torrential flow of the living water begins in earnest (Acts 2:33).”³⁰

In order to defend the principle of “gradualism” Kenneth Gentry quotes an Old Testament text (Ez. 47), strips it of its content and context (literal temple – cf. Ez. 40-48), reads *redemptive* themes into the text (Ez. 47:1-9) when there is absolutely no indication of any such themes,

²⁸ An example of this, is his interpretation of Ezekiel’s temple, which he mainly draws from 1 Cor 3 and Rev 21-22. See first: <http://mydigitalessinary.com/whats-going-on-with-ezekiels-temple/>

²⁹ James Orr, *The Progress of Dogma*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.), 303-304. Brackets added by me.

³⁰ Kenneth Gentry, “*The Gradualism Principle*,” April 20, 2021, <https://postmillennialworldview.com/2021/04/20/the-gradualism-principle/>

spiritualizes the entire text to say something it doesn't say, and then connects this text with John 7:38, John 2:19-21, and Acts 2:33 (which nowhere quote Ezekiel 47 or any part of the text). Jesus then becomes the one who fulfills this prophecy, Christ becomes the temple in Ezekiel 47 because of John 2, and Pentecost becomes the "torrential flow of the living water." This is the sort of damage that a New Testament priority does. It renders the entire text absolutely incoherent and meaningless. Notice the logical deductions? Notice the redemptive themes? All of these are compounded problems for the Covenantalist. Rather than approaching Ezekiel broadly, then narrowing in on specific text and doing proper biblical exegesis, we are reading things from foreign contexts backwards into Ezekiel rendering the authorial intent void. This is not the least bit helpful because it doesn't actually explain anything even in the text of Ezekiel. The less exegesis the Covenantalist does in the Old Testament, the more worried you should be.

Daniel Block raises his concerns on this whole matter in his book called "*Covenant*" when he sees the Old Testament treated in such a poor way. He aptly states the following,

"Within North American evangelicalism, we hear voices explicitly calling for Christians to detach the First Testament from Christian faith because the Old Testament poses too many problems for those who try to present the good news (gospel) of salvation in Jesus Christ. Christians since the heretic Marcion who argued that the God of ancient Israel and the God of the New Testament were distinct and very different deities-have hesitated to be this explicit. Yet for many evangelicals, the First Testament is at worst the problem that the New Testament supposedly fixes and at best a dead book that we would do well to bury ceremoniously in a genizah. Our creedal statements affirm the authority of the entire Bible, First and New Testaments, for Christian faith and life, but the former is largely missing in evangelical worship. My summary of the problem below is embarrassingly autobiographical, but in our time symptoms of the trivialization and demise of the only Bible that Jesus and the apostles had are everywhere: (1) avoidance of the First Testament; (2) walk-through-the-Bible approaches to the First Testament; (3) using the First Testament primarily as a source of illustrations for New Testament sermons; (4) using the First Testament primarily for prooftexts in apologetic debates; (5) restricting our use to a few favorite selected texts; (6) preaching biographical sermons that focus on the human characters and idealize them even when biblical authors intentionally characterize them negatively; (7) reading the First Testament with a "a homiletical hermeneutic," which means that the message we preach depends upon what we want the people to get out of the text, rather than what the text intends to say; (8) Alexandrian spiritualizing of historical and cultural elements in the text because the "spiritual meaning" of the text supposedly edifies; (9) reading the First Testament through New Testament lenses, which means that the rhetorical use of texts or concepts in the later contexts drowns out the message of the authors as established by normal grammatical-historical interpretation; (10) Christologizing the First Testament. That Jesus Christ is the heart and goal (telos) of all revelation (cf. Luke 24:25-35) is an important underlying assumption of Christian exegesis, but it is not the starting point of interpretation for any given text. These are the symptoms of a deeply rooted and pervasive problem."³¹

Daniel Block has correctly noted the *root* of the problem, it comes from a complete diminishing of the Old Testament. The Old Testament becomes a sort of "lesser" testament, a secondary

³¹ Daniel I. Block, *Covenant: The Framework of God's Grand Plan of Redemption*, (Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI, 2021), 9-10.

testament, a fleshly and earthly testament. This sort of thinking has been built into the Covenantalist framework for centuries. It goes all the way back to the neo-platonic ideas of the Alexandrian church. It permeated the thoughts of Origen, Ambrose, and Augustine.

Henebry has also noted this problem,

“CT’s insistence that the NT (well, especially the Pauline Writings) are necessary for understanding “how the Old Testament is fulfilled” creates a canon within the canon. And this in turn logically places the OT, which is three quarters of the Bible, at a lower level of authority than the NT... It ought to dawn upon people that if the OT cannot be properly understood on its own terms that it must therefore be unclear in some important sense. Full clarity can be given to the OT only by the NT, it is not something that the OT itself possesses as an inherent property. Thus, the greater portion of the Holy Scriptures, especially the covenants and prophecies, do not possess the virtue of perspicuity. Not only that, but some large sections of the NT seemingly don’t possess it either! This is not to say that the NT does not clarify certain things written in the OT with further revelation. It is to say that any further revelation given by the NT will not force the OT to be reinterpreted so that the original words are given meanings that they just do not bear.”³²

Henebry has brought up an important point. If the Old Testament cannot be known apart from the New Testament, we have a problem. The problem should be very obvious, what happens to those who didn’t have the New Testament? How were they able to understand what God was telling them? How were they able to obey? How were they able to understand the prophecies or the covenants without the New Testament? This thinking is a direct attack toward the perspicuity of scripture. God is not an author of confusion! His words are clear and succinct. The revelation that he supplied was sufficient for their needs. They could fully understand what God was saying and this is seen in their responses to him.

So, does this then mean that we use the Old Testament as the priority? No. The New Testament doesn’t interpret/reinterpret the Old Testament and the Old Testament is not the lens by which we read the New Testament. Both testaments are able to stand on their own and be exegeted on their own, when bringing together biblical theology and themes across testaments we must understand the doctrine of *progressive revelation*. We always ought to consult the New Testament use of the Old Testament when the text is quoted, or there are *clear* allusions to an Old Testament texts.³³ In Gentry’s example above, there were no quotations of Ezekiel 47 found in any of the texts and there were no allusions, so his erroneous conclusions ought to be rejected because the principle is found wanting. Covenant Theology must stop attempting to read the Old Testament through the lens of the New Testament. It creates massive theological mistakes which could be avoided by doing biblical exegesis in the appropriate context of the original audience. We are seeking to understand the author’s intended meaning, not the meaning we can force into

³² Paul Martin Henebry, *Deciphering Covenant Theology* (20), Posted on 21 September 2022, <https://drreluctant.wordpress.com/2022/09/21/deciphering-covenant-theology-20/>. In addition to Henebry’s comments he has also written this excellent article called “*Forty Reasons for not Reinterpreting the OT by the NT*”: <https://drreluctant.wordpress.com/2017/04/25/archive-forty-reasons-for-not-reinterpreting-the-ot-by-the-nt-the-first-twenty/>

³³ For two excellent resources on this subject see: Abner Chou, *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers*, and Michael Vlach, *The Old in the New*.

the text. We accuse false teachers of doing this egregious act all the time, why do covenant theologians get a free pass when they are clearly doing eisegesis?

Issue #4 – Christocentric Hermeneutic

Covenant Theology and Progressive Covenantalism have highly depended upon a “Christocentric” hermeneutic. It is my contention that the Christocentric hermeneutic is invalid and leads to erroneous conclusions and often diminishes the Old Testament to nothing more than a game of guessing where Christ is. Here is a quote from a Covenantalist,

“The Bible is a book about God’s plan to glorify himself by saving sinners through the work of his Son, Jesus Christ. At every point, Scripture’s covenant theology leads us to Jesus. When Adam (representing us) broke God’s covenant in the garden of Eden, God introduced a gracious covenant, through which God redeems sinners in every age (Gen. 3:15). He administers that one gracious covenant in several administrations—his covenants with Noah, Abraham, Israel, and David, for example. That covenant comes to its intended fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Every time, then, we study the covenants of Scripture, we are looking at Jesus Christ. Covenants prior to Christ point ahead to him. The New Covenant shows us his finished work and prepares us eagerly to await his glorious return. Covenant theology helps us never to stray from the Bible’s main message—Christ and him crucified.”³⁴

Not only is redemption the focal point, at *every point* the Scripture’s covenants (more importantly the *theological* covenants) lead us to Jesus. Doesn’t that sound great? Why not just say that everything points to or finds its telos in Christ, and leave it at that. The issue is much deeper than this. The issue is not finding Christ where he belongs, or having a *Christotelic*³⁵ view of scripture, the issue is that Christ is *inserted* where he doesn’t belong in the biblical text. Several Covenant Theologians have attempted to apply this hermeneutical principle in *all* of scripture. Bryan Chapell states,

“In recognizing that all Scripture predicts, prepares for, reflects, or results from the ministry of Christ preachers unfold the road map that keeps them traveling to the heart of the Bible no matter where they journey in its pages...By identifying the redemptive content, character, or context of the passage one can now heed Spurgeon’s instruction so as to discern not merely the savor of Christ in every text but also his pervading presence.”³⁶

³⁴ John R. Muether, J. Nicholas Reid, Guy Prentiss Waters, *10 Things You Should Know about Covenant Theology*, October 28, 2020, <https://www.crossway.org/articles/10-things-you-should-know-about-covenant-theology/>

³⁵ “A hermeneutic is a principle of interpretation, and the theological debate between a Christocentric and a Christotelic interpretation has taken on increased discussion in recent years. A Christocentric reading of Scripture views the Old Testament from a Christian viewpoint, seeing the Christ or Messiah on “every page” or at least regularly throughout the Old Testament writings. A Christotelic view makes the distinction that, even though God (“Yahweh”) is noted throughout the Old Testament, and even though Jesus is God, many of the Old Testament passages often referred to as Messianic do not directly point to Jesus. Reformed theologians often reject the Christotelic view, claiming it adds support to dispensationalism. Those against a Christotelic view would claim the Old Testament is Christotelic because it is Christocentric, ultimately blending the views into one without making such a distinction.” <https://www.gotquestions.org/Christocentric-Christotelic.html>

³⁶ Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 280.

Chapell elsewhere states,

“Exposition fair to this grand purpose excavated the Old Testament texts to expose implicit spiritual, physiological, or theological preparations that enable us to embrace redemptive truths where no explicit statement about the Redeemer may exist.”³⁷

Albert Mohler agrees,

“Every single text of Scripture points to Christ. He is the Lord of all, and therefore He is the Lord of the Scriptures too. From Moses to the prophets, He is the focus of every single word of the Bible. Every verse of Scripture finds its fulfillment in Him, and every story in the Bible ends with Him.”³⁸

Edmund Clowney likewise states,

“Preaching Christ from the Old Testament means that we preach, not synagogue sermons, but sermons that take account of the full drama of redemption, and its realization in Christ. To see the text in relation to Christ is to see it in its larger context, the context of God's purpose in revelation... If you are tempted to think that most Old Testament texts do not present Christ, reflect on both the unity of Scripture and the fullness of Jesus Christ.”³⁹

As we can see, there is a strong emphasis on Christ being found in *every text* of scripture. This is clearly what Covenant Theologians see as a hermeneutic grid, which is read especially throughout the Old Testament. Some may see the redemptive historical hermeneutic as mentioned in issue #1 as the Christocentric hermeneutic, but I believe a distinction must be made between these two approaches due the broad nature of “redemption.” One seems like more of a presupposition, the other seems more like a hermeneutical approach.

In seeing Christ in *all* of scripture, some have pushed back and argued against doing hermeneutics this way.

Eric Davis states,

“I do not think it is permissible to ask of the Old Testament, “How is Christ in every passage?” It's a hermeneutical presupposition which moves interpreters to approach every Old Testament text assuming, “Christ is somewhere in this verse. It's up to me to find him.” In that sense, readers approach each text as a christological Easter egg hunt: “just as that precious, evasive Easter egg is present, but hidden, so is Christ in each passage. If I am clever enough; persistent enough, I can find him.” Thus, the statement can, if inadvertently, teach interpreters that the highest goal of a text is to find Christ in it. This should not be the end of interpretation. Although the “Christ-in-every-passage” (christocentric hermeneutic) approach to the Old Testament has a few positives, it has more negatives, and therefore, should be jettisoned.”⁴⁰

³⁷ Ibid., 276.

³⁸ Albert Mohler, *He Is Not Silent, Preaching in a Postmodern World*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008), 96.

³⁹ Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture*, (Crossway Books, Wheaton, ILL, 2003), 11.

⁴⁰ Eric Davis, *Jesus in Every Old Testament Passage*, Part 1, 2017.

<https://thecripplegate.com/jesus-in-every-old-testament-passage-part-1/>

Eric Davis is absolutely right! It becomes pure subjectivity when attempting to read Christ into every passage and has more problems than solutions (again). Eric Davis rightly cautions this approach for the following reasons,

“...1.) The christocentric hermeneutic approach to the Old Testament risks violating the authorial intent of the text. ...2.) The “Christ-in-every-passage” approach risks devaluing the Old Testament ...3.) The christocentric hermeneutic approach to the Old Testament threatens the perspicuity of Scripture. ...4.) A “Christ-in-every-passage” approach to the Old Testament misunderstands the process of biblical change in the soul5.) The “Christ-in-every-passage” approach to the Old Testament violates the meaning of Luke 24:27. ...6.) A christocentric hermeneutic is problematic because New Testament writers did not interpret the Old Testament in such a way.7.) The christocentric hermeneutic risks imposing the climax event of the redemptive story onto every event leading up to the climax of the story.8.) A christocentric hermeneutic is unnecessary because Christ is the source of the Old Testament Scriptures. ...9.) A christocentric hermeneutic risks isolating one’s understanding of Scripture to the second Person of the Trinity.”⁴¹

I fully appreciate the comments from Eric Davis. There are numerous clear problems and risks associated with interpreting the scriptures in such a manner. We should avoid the desire to interpret the scriptures this way, though it might sound convincing and God glorifying. A Christotelic approach does much more justice, as it understands that Jesus is the ends and the ultimate goal (*teleology*) of the Scripture, not that Christ is everywhere in the Old Testament.

Excursus 1: What about Luke 24?

Briefly, it must be noted that Luke 24:44⁴² is a common proof text used to defend the Christocentric hermeneutic. I will address several problems with this below.

1) There are no records of which texts Jesus is referring to in Luke 24, which then leads the Covenantalist to *assume* that this means *all* texts must be about Jesus. Also, this somehow leads Covenantalists to believe that the literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutic is somehow rejected by Jesus, and that this hermeneutic is not consistent in of itself. Jesus repeatedly uses the literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutic notes Abner Chou,

“One can see that Jesus engages in a “literal” hermeneutic and not a Christocentric approach in the way He handles Scripture. He uses Scripture to speak of the resurrection (Exod 3:6; cf. Matt 22:32), eschatology (Dan 11:31; cf. Matt 24:15), loving God (Deut 6:5; cf. Luke 10:27), love for others (Lev 19:18; cf. Mark 12:31), marriage (Gen 2:24; cf. Matt 19:5–6), divorce (Deut 24:1–4; Matt 19:7–8), Israel’s judgment (Gen 19:1–24; cf. Matt 10:15), and honoring father and mother (Exod 20:12; cf. Matt 15:4). He never made any of these passages speak of Him but rather talked about what they talked about. Thus, the Christocentric hermeneutic’s goal and method is not

⁴¹ Eric Davis, *Jesus in Every Old Testament Passage*, Part 1, 2017.

<https://thecripplegate.com/jesus-in-every-old-testament-passage-part-1/> & Eric Davis, *Jesus in Every Old Testament Passage*, Part 2, 2017. <https://thecripplegate.com/jesus-in-every-old-testament-passage-part-2/>

⁴² Luke 24:44 LSB - Now He said to them, “These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.”

Jesus' goal or method. Our Lord's goal is to affirm what the OT says. He has a literal approach to Scripture.”⁴³

2) The second fallacy of using Luke 24 as a reference is that Covenantalists *assume* "all the scriptures" (v.27) refers to *every single passage in the Old Testament*. It is more likely that Jesus is referencing "the Law of Moses, Prophets, and the Psalms". It is one thing to argue that prophecies contained in these three things are focused upon Jesus, it is another thing to argue that Jesus is found in each Old Testament. Chou states,

"The same can be said of Jesus' statements recorded in Luke. The language does not state that Jesus spoke Scripture as all about Himself but rather that which was about Himself (τὰ περὶ ἑαυτοῦ) in Moses and the prophets (Luke 24:27). Jesus is not making every scriptural passage speak of Him but rather highlighting throughout the OT the pertinent passages concerning Himself. In fact, Jesus condemns His disciples for not recognizing what the prophets have spoken. This shows that the hermeneutic the disciples had was adequate to identifying what the prophets spoke. Even more, it shows that Jesus affirms the human authorial intent of the authors.”⁴⁴

3) The "things concerning himself" should not be understood to mean that everything in the Old Testament is about him. It simply means that all the things that were written or prophesied about him will indeed come to pass.

Issue #5 – The Theological Covenant of Works, Grace, and Redemption

As I said above, it would be impossible to discuss Covenant Theology without addressing their theological covenants. We will break down each of these covenants to demonstrate the numerous issues that are associated with each. As it has been previously stated, these are theological covenants brought out by deduction, not induction, as we will see.

The Covenant of Works

The covenant of works is defined in the Westminster Confession of Faith [WCF] as:

"The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam, and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.”⁴⁵

The immediate question that needs to be asked is, does the scripture speak to or speak of such a covenant made with Adam?⁴⁶ In Genesis 2, there is absolutely nothing about a "covenant" mentioned, all that is stated is,

Genesis 2:16-17 LSB - And Yahweh God commanded the man, saying, "From any tree of the garden you may surely eat; 17 but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat from it; for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die."

⁴³ Abner Chou, *A Hermeneutical Evaluation of the Christocentric Hermeneutic*, December 2016, 17.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 9.

⁴⁵ Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter VII, 2. <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/westminster-confession-faith>

⁴⁶ Note: I would not simply reject the covenant of works on the grounds that the word "covenant" or *berit* are not used. This is overly simplistic and naïve.

All that we have in Genesis 2 is a prohibition against eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The WCF assumes *life* was promised to Adam and in him to his posterity if Adam had perfect and personal obedience. This simply cannot be ascertained from Genesis 2. There is no indication that *eternal life* was set before Adam as a potential blessing if he was to succeed. Not only that, but Covenant Theologians also believe that the “tree of life” was to be given to Adam upon completion of his probation. Tom Hicks states,

“The Genesis account not only reveals the threat of death in the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but it also reveals the promise of eternal life in the tree of life.”⁴⁷

Where does one go to attempt to make this argument? None other than Genesis 3:22-24 which states,

Genesis 3:22-24 LSB - “Then Yahweh God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of Us to know good and evil; and now, lest he send forth his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat and live forever”— 23 therefore Yahweh God sent him out from the garden of Eden, to cultivate the ground from which he was taken. 24 So He drove the man out; and at the east of the garden of Eden He stationed the cherubim and the flaming sword which turned every direction to guard the way to the tree of life.”

Notice the concern stated by Yahweh? The concern is that because man has become like “one of Us” able to discern between good and evil, he must immediately be cast out of the garden of Eden. Why? Because man could potentially take from the tree of life and be permanently stuck in his fallen state with no hope of redemption from violating God’s command in Genesis 2. Nothing here indicates that Adam would have received the “tree of life” if he obeyed. This is deductive logic again, and not biblical exegesis.

Remember, Genesis 2 is where the covenant of works is supposedly found, not chapter 3. Genesis 3 fixates on the covenant of grace (3:15) not the covenant of works. So, the conditions (*blessings and curses*) cannot be stipulated after the covenant is broken, which according to the covenant theologian must be the case. They only have the *prohibition* to not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and in their minds, the blessings must be arrived at *deductively*.⁴⁸ There is nothing in the text of Genesis 2 or 3 that there is a covenant made with Adam, there is nothing in the text that indicates blessings for Adam’s obedience, there is nothing in the text that indicates that Adam is in probationary period. All of these things are read into the text, and as we identified above, this is exactly why Covenant Theology is found wanting. It is built off of logical deductions and not biblical exegesis.

Several Covenant Theologians have opposed the theological covenant of works. Those skeptical of the Covenant of works are John Murray, Karl Barth, A.T.B. McGowan, W. Wilson Benton,

⁴⁷ Tom Hicks, *Is the Covenant of Works Biblical?* <https://pastortomhicks.com/2021/06/24/is-the-covenant-of-works-biblical/>

⁴⁸ Herman Hoeksema notes, “Nowhere do we find any proof in the Scriptures for the contention that God gave Adam the promise of eternal life if he should obey that particular command of God.” Herman Hoeksema, *The Triple Knowledge: An Exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1970), 108. Cited by Williamson, *Sealed*, 54.

James B. Torrance, S. G. De Graaf, G. C. Berkouwer, Herman Hoeksema, Cornelius Van der Waal and Clarence Stam, and Holmes Rolston III.

Cornelis P. Venema points out John Murray's complaints as a fellow Covenantalist when he says,

"Murray's original objection to the idea of a covenant of works stems from his reformulation of the doctrine of the covenant. According to Murray, "covenant" in the biblical writings always expresses a gracious disposition of God toward the partner with whom he covenants; the notion of a "covenant of works," accordingly, is contrary to the ordinary meaning of covenant in the Scriptures, at least when they speak of God's covenanting with man. In an encyclopedia article in which he traced briefly the history of covenant theology, Murray initially voiced this reservation about the older federal theology's doctrine of a covenant of works. However, he provided a more complete statement of his revision of the doctrine of the covenant works in his important article, "The Adamic Administration." As the title of this article suggests, Murray objected to the language of a covenant of works, not only in that it militated against the gracious character of God's covenanting with man, but also in that it speaks of a pre-fall "covenant," whereas the Scriptures reserve the language of covenant to God's post-fall dealings with the sinful creature."⁴⁹

Not only does Murray not agree with the term "covenant" to describe the bond between Adam and God, he also doesn't agree with the word "works" since this does not accurately describe the relationship with Adam and God.

Herman Hanko summarizes some of the key contentions arrived at by Herman Hoeksema,

"After a close scrutiny of the covenant of works, Herman Hoeksema came to the conclusion that it was an erroneous view. I here summarise Hoeksema's carefully developed analysis and arguments (Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 1, pp. 308-312): 1) It finds no support in the Word of God, but is an unwarranted deduction from God's command to Adam not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. 2) The covenant of works postulates a period of probation for Adam, at the end of which he would have received eternal and heavenly life, but this is impossible for man except through Christ (I Cor. 15:47). Also the concept of Adam's entering eternal life in heaven has imbedded in it the idea of merit, a notion abhorrent to Reformed theology (Luke 17:10; Rom. 11:35). 3) This view raises other problems: How long was the probationary period? Would Adam have entered heaven with all his posterity? What would then happen to the earthly creation in which Adam was prophet, priest and king? 4) The covenant of works makes the covenant between God and Adam something incidental to Adam's creation, for it was added to Adam after his creation. What was Adam's relationship to God prior to this covenant? 5) If one looks at the whole concept from the viewpoint of God's sovereignty and wisdom, His original intention in establishing a covenant of works with Adam ended in failure and God found it necessary to resort to another plan to accomplish salvation."⁵⁰

Hoeksema's criticisms are valid. Let's pull them out and summarize them so that they are clearer.

⁴⁹ Cornelis P. Venema, *Recent Criticisms of the Covenant of Works in the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Vol. 9/3, Fall 1993, pp. 165-198, Mid-America Journal of Theology).

⁵⁰ Herman Hanko, *The Covenant of Works*, Mar 8th, <http://www.prca.org/resources/publications/cr-news/item/1498-the-covenant-of-works>

- 1.) It finds no support in the Word of God.⁵¹
- 2.) It postulates a period of probation for Adam at the end he would receive eternal life⁵², but this is impossible since eternal life is only tied through Jesus Christ. It also imbeds the idea of merit which is completely against Reformed Theology.⁵³

⁵¹ “As for the biblical merits of the Covenant of Works it has to be said that they are slim. The arguments that are constructed for it out of Scripture and reason are all propounded on the basis of eisegesis. That is to say, the texts of Scripture are not being expounded to see what they say in the places where they say it, but are being located and dug-out of their contexts (which are often clearly pointing to biblical covenants like the Mosaic and the Davidic) and are being seconded to function in a way that is foreign to their original contexts.” Paul M. Henebury, *Deciphering Covenant Theology (Pt.5)*, Posted on 21 March 2022,

<https://drreluctant.wordpress.com/2022/03/21/deciphering-covenant-theology-pt-5/>. “With regard to the theme of covenant, it is best not to envisage a “covenant of works” in 2:16-17, for a prohibition and a threat (“you shall not eat... you shall surely die”) do not in themselves imply the presence of a covenant. The non-use of the word “covenant” does not rule out there being a covenant in Genesis 2 (cf. the nonappearance of the word in 2 Samuel 7) but the element of formalization elsewhere present when covenants are made (e.g., a sign, a ceremony, an oath, a shared meal, or a name change) is absent. The failure to find a covenant in Genesis 2 does not impair the doctrine that Adam and Christ are the two corresponding heads of the human race.” Hosea 6:7 may favor the finding of the first covenant here (“But like Adam they transgressed the covenant”); however, the adverb “there” in the second line of that verse (“there they dealt faithlessly with me”) suggests that Adam is a place name (“at Adam”; cf. Josh. 3:16), which is supported by the use of place names in subsequent verses: Gilead (Hos. 6:8) and Shechem (6:9).” Andreas J. Köstenberger & Gregory Goswell, *Biblical Theology: A Canonical, Thematic, and Ethical Approach*, (Crossway, Wheaton, ILL, 2023), 110.

⁵² “Never in the text of Genesis is Adam told that he will gain life by his obedience. He is only told that he could lose life by his disobedience. Adam was already in God’s favor by creation. He did not need to earn that favor. But God did grant Adam a choice, so that he could walk away from God’s grace, bringing death upon himself and his descendants. There is an implicit assumption in Reformed arguments that because Adam could do something to lose life, he could conversely perform some work to gain life. Such an assumption is unwarranted, and is not defensible from the text of Genesis.” Jordan Cooper, *There is no Covenant of Works*, Feb 5, 2015.

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/justandsinner/there-is-no-covenant-of-works/>. “Those who believe in the Covenant of Works understand that within the arrangement between God and Adam there was an “implicit promise of blessing for obedience.” But our question is, “How can you be certain if it is not stated explicitly?” ...It may seem like a logical deduction to connect the Tree of Life to a promise. But before we can make that connection, we must go to Scripture with these questions: Does Scripture tell us that the tree signified this? Does God’s Word say that there was a “time of testing” or “probation period” anywhere in the text of Genesis? Does God ever say that Adam only had to obey the command for a certain period of time? Does God ever say that if Adam did obey the commandment that God would allow him to eat from the tree of life? Does the text say that if Adam and Eve obeyed that they would be “established in righteousness forever and...have their fellowship with God made sure forever”? There might have been a probation period and there might have been a covenant, but if Scripture doesn’t tell us this, then we must not speculate about these things.” Steve Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology: Questions Answered* (n.p.: Steve Lehrer, 2006) 41.

⁵³ “One of the most vigorous advocates of the criticism that the WCF’s doctrine of the covenant of works leads to legalism, is Holmes Rolston III. Rolston believes that the WCF’s doctrine of a covenant of works represents a substantial betrayal of the original Reformation insight that man’s standing before God is always founded upon grace alone. When the WCF describes the covenant of works as a covenant in which “life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience,” it introduces into Reformed theology a concept of merit that militates against the genius of the Reformation rediscovery of the gospel of grace.” Cornelis P. Venema, *Recent Criticisms of the Covenant of Works in the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Vol. 9/3, Fall 1993, pp. 165-198, Mid-America Journal of Theology). “Torrance also regards the federal theology of the seventeenth century, especially as this is set forth in the WCF, to be a “rationalistic” departure from the early Scottish tradition of Knox, the Scots Confession, the pre-Westminster confessions, and the theology of John Calvin. It is evident that Torrance believes the source for a growing legalism in Scottish theology and practice, confirmed in the so-called “Marrow Controversy,” lay in an increasing emphasis upon the federal scheme and the conditional character of the covenant between God and his people. The idea of “conditional grace” was introduced into Scottish theology, according to Torrance, by means of the route of federal theology. Whereas the original, biblical idea of covenant

- 3.) The probationary period is completely speculative.⁵⁴
- 4.) The covenant of works is incidental to Adam's creation, because it was added to Adam after his creation.
- 5.) It attacks God's sovereignty.

I would add several other points such as:

- 6.) It is indefensible since it is not derived from biblical exegesis.⁵⁵
- 7.) There is no record of covenant making in Genesis 2 that fits the typical covenant making protocol.⁵⁶
- 8.) Scholars don't generally recognize a covenant in Genesis 2-3.⁵⁷
- 9.) This leads to confusing the Mosaic Covenant as a republication of the Covenant of Works.⁵⁸

I agree with Paul Williamson when he states,

"It seems best to conclude, therefore, that while Adam and Eve were certainly involved in a divine-human relationship both before and after the fall, neither the pre-lapsarian relationship nor post-lapsarian relationship was understood in terms of a 'covenant'. This explains not only the

expresses an unconditional binding of two parties in covenant loyalty and faithfulness, the federal theology shifted the emphasis from this notion of covenant to that of a legal contract. Whereas a covenant is rooted in mutual promises and commitments, freely given and received, the federal theology, by distinguishing between a covenant of works and a covenant of grace, reconfigured the covenant as a contractual relationship. This theology "is built upon a deep-seated confusion between a covenant and a contract, a failure to recognise that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is a Covenant-God and not a contract-God... For these and other reasons, Torrance insists that the federal theology of the WCF is the primary culprit in stimulating, even reintroducing, a doctrine of meritorious good works into the room of Reformed theology. The grand themes of the Reformation, sola gratia, solo Christo, sola fide, find in this theology their denouement." Ibid.

⁵⁴ "Although these verses refer to a prohibition, they in no case speak of a promise for obedience, or any Divine commitment to grant anything to the man and woman. There is no trace of covenantal language in this section. And any and every attempt to read a covenant into Genesis 2 (or 3) requires the interpreter to bring along far more speculative material than textual material to fill out the content of such a venture." Paul M. Henebry, *The Words of the Covenant*, 95.

⁵⁵ "Efforts to find direct exegetical support for designating this relationship a covenant have generally yielded questionable results." Thomas E McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* (Leicester: IVP, 1985), 214. "We agree that the Bible is structured around two covenants. However, the two covenants that you keep talking about, namely, a covenant of works with Adam in the garden of Eden and a covenant of grace made with Adam immediately after the fall, have no textual basis in the Word of God. They are both theological covenants and not biblical covenants. They are the children of one's theological system. Their mother is Covenant Theology and their father is logic applied to that system. Neither of these two covenants had their origin in Scripture texts and biblical exegesis. Both of them were invented by theology as the necessary consequences of a theological system." John Reisinger, *Abraham's Four Seeds*, (Frederick, Md.; New Covenant Media, 1998) 129.

⁵⁶ "... if covenants involve formal procedures to create a relationship that does not exist naturally or to reestablish relationships that have been ruptured, then we cannot define Adam and Eve's relationship with God in Genesis 2-3 as covenantal." Daniel I. Block, *Covenant: The Framework of God's Grand Plan of Redemption*, (Baker Academic, Grand Rapids MI, 2021), 46.

⁵⁷ "[T]he vast majority of contemporary OT scholars totally dismiss any idea of an Adamic covenant." Paul Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath*, 54-55.

⁵⁸ Cf. <https://knowingscripture.com/articles/was-the-mosaic-covenant-a-republication-of-the-covenant-of-works>

lack of scriptural warrant for any such Adamic covenant, but also the insurmountable fact that the biblical narrator clearly chose not to employ the word 'covenant' prior to Genesis 6:18.”⁵⁹

Excursus 2: What about Federal Headship?

In the excellent work of A.T.B. McGowan called *Adam, Christ, and Covenant: Exploring Headship Theology*, he demonstrates the ability to ascertain headship theology from Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15 and being able to connect Adam and Christ together as federal heads without the need of any Covenant of Works. He argues,

“In the last chapter we argued that the Adam-Christ parallel does not require a covenantal underpinning. In other words, although the representative headship of Adam and the representative headship of Christ are vital for our understanding of sin and salvation, we do not need to create a 'covenant of works' and a 'covenant of grace' to make sense of this headship. Clearly, all who are united to Adam will die and all who are united to Christ will be made alive. Without this representative headship we cannot understand why we are born as sinners, nor how we can become the righteousness of God. Having said that, the relevant biblical passages on which we construct our 'headship theology' (Gen. 2; 1 Cor. 15; Rom. 5) do not use the word 'covenant' nor is a covenantal structure implied by those texts. Also, the terms 'covenant of works', 'covenant of redemption' and 'covenant of grace' are not found in Scripture. Having adopted a 'headship theology' liberated from a covenantal structure, we are now able to read and understand the covenants that do appear in Scripture and to try to understand their relationship to one another. That is to say, we can understand the biblical covenants on their own terms, rather than forcing them into a structure which does not arise naturally from the text of Scripture.”⁶⁰

He also states that essentially everything that Covenant Theology attempts to achieve with the Covenant of Works can be ascertained with Headship Theology. He notes,

“In short, then, everything which is achieved by covenant theology can be achieved by 'headship theology'. The word 'covenant' can then be liberated from the strictures of non-biblical terminology to be interpreted in its context, when dealing with the various covenants mentioned in Scripture. In other words, 'covenant' remains a vital word and concept in Reformed theology as a useful descriptor of God's relationship with his people but it need not be invested with a significance which is not claimed by the Scripture itself, or made to bear a weight it was never intended to bear. The union between Adam and all who are in him and the union between Christ and all who are in him stands by itself, on the basis of Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15, and does not require the use of covenant terminology to make it effective for purpose. This allows us to read the covenants in Scripture as the means by which God relates to his people, Israel and the church. In the next chapter we shall spell out what that looks like.”⁶¹

If it is the case that we can remove the Covenant of Works and keep the Headship Theology, I believe we should. It makes far more sense to see the connection between Christ and Adam made in the New Testament by Paul than it is to make up a covenant system that is simply non-existent in Genesis 2 and read back later revelation into earlier texts. This is far too forced.

⁵⁹ Paul Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath*, 58.

⁶⁰ A.T.B. McGowan, *Adam, Christ and Covenant: Exploring Headship Theology*, (Apollos, London, EN, 2016), 129.

⁶¹ Ibid., 128.

Excursus 3: What About Hosea 6:6-7?

It is common for Covenant Theologians to appeal to Hosea 6:6-7 as an attempt to argue that there is some sort of covenant in Genesis 2. This argument is not only incredibly weak, but also arrived at only out of desperation in trying to find some indication of this non-existent covenant. It is nothing more than eisegesis.

I have thoroughly refuted this argument in my article.⁶²

The Covenant of Grace

The Covenant of Grace in my opinion what the entire foundation of Covenant Theology is built upon. God's desire to redeem the elect from the foundation of the world as seen through the protoevangelium of Genesis 3:15. The WCF speaks of the Covenant of Grace,

“Man by his fall having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace: wherein He freely offered unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in Him, that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto life, His Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe.”⁶³

Let it be noted that it is beyond the discussion to interact with the various arguments for the “administrations” of the covenant of grace, as this is an in-house debate between Reformed Baptists and Presbyterians.

Because of man's inability to uphold the first covenant (*the Covenant of Works*), God introduces a second covenant, *the Covenant of Grace*, which is freely offered to sinners through Jesus Christ.

Again, just like the Covenant of Works mentioned in Genesis 2, we now need to likewise evaluate the validity of a covenant in Genesis 3.

Paul Henebry remarks,

“What then is the exegetical basis for the Covenant of Grace? Well, don't hold your breath! Even dyed-in-the-wool CT's like O. Palmer Robertson admit that there is slender exegetical apparatus from which to derive it (he thinks the “covenant of works” fairs better, expending much effort on making Hosea 6:7 refer to a pre-Fall covenant). In reality, I would say there is no exegetical justification at all! This impression is only confirmed the more expositions of the Covenant of Grace one examines. What you will find is that passages patently referring to the Noahic, Abrahamic covenants, etc., are used as proof-texts.”⁶⁴

Paul Lee Tan concurs when he states,

⁶² Ian A. Hicks, *Covenant of Works? – An Exegetical Analysis of Hosea 6:7*, Jan 16, 2021, <https://sakeofthetruth.wordpress.com/2021/01/16/covenant-of-works-an-exegetical-analysis-of-hosea-67/>

⁶³ The Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter VII, 3. <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/westminster-confession-faith>

⁶⁴ Paul Martin Henebry, *Deciphering Covenant Theology (Pt.6)*, Posted on 28 March 2022, <https://drreluctant.wordpress.com/2022/03/28/deciphering-covenant-theology-pt-6/>

“Strangely enough, despite the overwhelming importance given to it, the covenant of grace is nowhere found in the Scripture. An agreement between God and man regarding salvation in the Garden of Eden could conceivable have been made, but its existence as a covenant proper is based on inference. Such an agreement is conceivable but it is not clearly revealed.”⁶⁵

New Covenant Theologians [NCT’s] Tom Wells and Fred G. Zaspel state,

“Nevertheless, it now seems clear that a mistake has been made in speaking of this purpose as “the Covenant of Grace.” We may agree in asserting the unity of God’s purpose through the ages, but the selection of the word “covenant” to describe this unity has lent itself to important misunderstanding.”⁶⁶

In Genesis 3:15 do we see any indication of a covenant made? The answer is no. Daniel R. Hyde seems to think that Romans 9:5 and Ephesians 2:12 speak of a covenant of grace? Note the New Testament priority presupposition and the reading backwards of later revelation into earlier texts.

“Reformed Christians speak of Scripture as the unfolding drama of God’s covenant of grace. We do this because the apostle Paul speaks of the Israelites, saying, “To them belong … the covenants” (Rom. 9:5). The Bible is a covenantal story, and one that Paul, again, describes as “the covenants of promise” (Eph. 2:12).”⁶⁷

Basically in the mind of the Covenantalist this Covenant of Grace is simply assumed to be the “covenants” given to Israel in Romans 9 and Ephesians 2, that Gentiles were at one point separated from. This is not exegesis. The Covenant of Grace cannot be deduced outside of its covenantal context in Genesis 3. It must be shown in Genesis 3:15 that there is something of a covenant present here, since this is the beginning picture of the Covenant of Grace. If you appeal outside to other covenants, you are begging the question, and simply assuming that your grid is correct. Again, Covenant Theologians as we will see go all over the place to attempt to back this up:

“God’s purpose, then, in devising the covenant of grace, was not for the purpose of saving all of mankind but rather a portion of mankind. In eternity God chose from among fallen mankind those whom he purposed to save. As the Scriptures declare: “According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world … in love having predestinated us unto the adoption of children” (Eph. 1:4–5). Christ prayed, “I pray not for the world but for them which thou hast given me” (John 17:9). Christ declared to his disciples: “Ye have not chosen me but I have chosen you and ordained you that ye should go and bring forth fruit” (John 15:16). Paul affirmed: “Whom he did predestinate, them he also called, and whom he called, them he also justified” (Rom. 8:30).”⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy*, (Rockville, Md., Assurance, 1984), 239.

⁶⁶ Tom Wells and Fred G. Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology: Description, Definition, Defense* (Frederick, Md.: New Covenant Media, 2002), 45.

⁶⁷ Daniel R. Hyde, *What Is the Covenant of Grace?* Sep 26, 2014.

<https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/what-covenant-grace>

⁶⁸ Calvin Knox Cummings, *The Covenant of Grace: A Key to an Understanding of the Bible for Young Christians*, <https://www.opc.org/cce/covenant.html>

What on earth does Ephesians 1:4-5, John 17:9, 15:16, and Romans 8:30 have to do with a “Covenant of Grace?” See the *deductions* here? Reisinger nails the point on the head,

“No one can deny that the verse [Genesis 3:15] predicts the coming of Christ to destroy the work of Satan. However, the verse nowhere suggests that God is making a covenant of grace with Adam. Using Genesis 3:15 as a proof text for a covenant of grace with Adam demonstrates the obvious fact that men are talking about a theological invention rather than a truth established by biblical exegesis. God's revealing a specific purpose in a threat to Satan cannot be turned into making a formal covenant with a man. Gods speaking to Satan and informing him of his certain doom is a far cry from God's entering into a covenant of grace with Adam. If anyone insists on using Genesis 3:15 to prove the establishment of a covenant, then we must insist that the covenant, according to the text, was made with Satan.”⁶⁹

Every Christian understands that from eternity past (e.g., Eph 1:4-5) Paul is referring to the eternal plan of redemption tied directly to the decree. We all agree that the Father gives a people (his elect) to His Son. We all agree that Jesus will save His own people. The issue here is whether *covenant* is the appropriate way to express this? The answer is no!

The other inherent flaw with the Covenant Theologians perspective here is that all the other covenants are now flattened into this *theological* covenant, so the focus purely becomes “redemption.” Everything else is essentially ignored in God’s Dispensational or Kingdom program. When moving through the scriptures, Covenant Theologians just assume all other categories of covenant are in fact the covenant of grace. Again, I echo the previous statements of Williamson here,

“Admittedly, this concept of a single, overarching 'covenant of grace' helpfully serves to keep the continuity and theological relationship between the various divine-human covenants clearly in focus. Unfortunately, however, some of the terminology that has thus been introduced into the discussion has proved problematic and potentially misleading. Moreover, superimposing a covenantal framework on the entire canon is not without its difficulties, not least of which is the somewhat hypothetical nature of the major theological construct (i.e, the covenant of grace). Therefore, while fully acknowledging that all the divine-human covenants ultimately serve the same overarching divine purpose (see below), it seems preferable in a biblical-theological investigation to articulate that purpose as simply and unambiguously as possible. Thus, rather than speaking in terms of a single, overarching 'covenant of grace', the unity and continuity of the various divine-human covenants will be explored in terms of God's universal purpose - a purpose that is given clear expression in the Genesis creation narratives, and that finds its ultimate fulfilment in the new creation inaugurated through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.”⁷⁰

It may seem permissible to just call everything a covenant, but we have absolutely overused the category of covenant in making the definition of covenant so broad so that it essentially means nothing.⁷¹ There is nothing in Genesis 3:15 about a covenant, there is nothing that indicates any

⁶⁹ John Reisinger, *Abraham’s Four Seeds*, 37-38. Brackets added by me.

⁷⁰ Paul R. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath*, 30-31.

⁷¹ Richard Phillips notes the same issue when he states, “There is a fine line between the use and the overuse of a word. The same is true with public figures. When someone is getting exposure, we are excited for them.

sort of covenantal relationship between the elect and Jesus Christ, there is nothing implicit in the text that would allow us to even remotely arrive at this conclusion.

As a Dispensationalist, it is completely permissible to attempt to unify the testaments through a covenantal paradigm, so long as those covenants are grounded in biblical exegesis and arrived at from the text. We agree with the redemptive plan of salvation from eternity past, but we reject that covenant terminology is necessary to describe what we see happening.

The Covenant of Redemption

I thought I would leave the most controversial of the covenants until the end. As much as the Covenant of Works has numerous problems and the Covenant of Grace is completely unfounded in scripture, the Covenant of Redemption has been a thorny problem for Covenant Theologians.⁷² Covenant Theologian, O. Palmer Robertson notes,

“This particular "covenant" (Covenant of Redemption) finds no specific development in the classic creeds of the Reformers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But it has been recognized broadly among Covenant theologians since that time. The intention of God from eternity to redeem a people to himself certainly must be affirmed. Before the foundation of the world God set his covenantal love on his people. But affirming the role of redemption in the internal counsels of God is not the same as proposing the existence of a pre-creation covenant between Father and Son. A sense of artificiality flavors the effort to structure in covenantal terms the mysteries of God's eternal counsels. Scripture simply does not say much on the pre-creation shape of the decrees of God. To speak concretely of an intertrinitarian "covenant" with terms and conditions between Father and Son mutually endorsed before the foundation of the world is to extend the bounds of scriptural evidence beyond propriety. It should be noted further that most of the discussion in this area built on the assumption that a covenant was to be defined as a mutual contract, not as a sovereignly administered bond. In view of more recent light on the character of the biblical covenants, the feasibility of a "covenant" among members of the Trinity appears even less likely.”⁷³

So, not only is this covenantal not developed in the classic creeds of the Reformers⁷⁴, but the *Covenant of Grace* has also been pushed back into eternity past into what is known as a

But when they are over-exposed we are embarrassed for them. In my view, the word *covenant* has crossed that line in Christian circles. As such, one often hears it applied in dubious ways. We have gone from covenant people and covenant children to covenant schools and covenant businesses. I recently was given a bag of covenant coffee beans, which, by the way, I received as an effectual means of grace. Today, if you want to express a zeal to be distinctively Christian, and especially if you are Reformed-leaning, you are very likely to apply the word *covenant* to your activity or group or product. In the process, the word has begun to lose definition and take on little more than a vague nimbus.” Richard Phillips, *Covenant Confusion*, <https://www.alliancenet.org/covenant-confusion>

⁷² Michael Horton notes, “Despite this past consensus, Reformed theologians in our day are not unanimously persuaded that the eternal decree can be formalized as a covenant on the basis of exegesis.” Michael S. Horton, *Introducing Covenant Theology*, (Grand Rapids, Mich., Baker Books, 2009), 80.

⁷³ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 54. Brackets added by me.

⁷⁴ Robert Letham notes that the “...idea of a pretemporal covenant between the Father and the Son emerged more clearly in the 1630’s.” Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship*, (Phillipsburg, NJ, P&R Publishing, 2019), 314.

*Covenant of Redemption.*⁷⁵ The covenant of grace is simply the outworking of the Covenant of Redemption in time.

As Robertson notes, the scripture does not say a lot about the pre-creation shape of the decrees. There is a lot assumed here on the part of the Covenant Theologian. How does the pre-creation covenant differ from the decree of God, is it a subset of the decree? Is it different than the decree?⁷⁶ Is the covenant in eternity past made only between the Father and Son, what about the Spirit?⁷⁷ Is the Trinity reducible to a “common bond” that is seen in terms of covenant?⁷⁸ Is there ontological subordination in the Godhead since *covenant* demands this?⁷⁹ Where does the scripture speak of this covenant?⁸⁰

Robert Letham correctly notes problems that arise from this covenantal structure when he states,

“Furthermore, inevitable problems arise in applying covenant concepts to God. There are two kinds of covenants in the Bible. The first kind is a one-sided imposition. Applied to the relations of the Father and the Son (leaving the Holy Spirit aside!), this would mean subordination. The other covenant type is a quid pro quo, a voluntary contract between two or more persons. This requires the parties to be autonomous agents. Applied to the Trinity, it implies that the Trinitarian persons each have their own will, entailing something approaching tritheism. Both of these elements are present in the *pactum salutis*. Constructions such as these veer toward either subordinationism or tritheism.”⁸¹

⁷⁵ “Covenant theology pushed the covenant concept back into the deliberations of the Father, Son, and Spirit. This is usually called the “covenant of grace” is based. It seems to me that covenant theology ended up with a bi-lateral covenant, and some unhealthy statements about the reason why the Word was made flesh.” Jon Zens, *An Examination of The Presuppositions Of Covenant and Dispensational Theology*.

http://resources.grantedministries.org/article/examination_of_the_presupp_of_disp_and_cov_j_z.pdf

⁷⁶ “To distinguish between an electing decree and a Trinitarian covenant seems highly questionable.” Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 318.

⁷⁷ Letham notes, “While some of the more acute theologians recognized that the Spirit must of necessity be included, many constructions of the covenant have confined themselves to the Father and the Son without reference to the Spirit.” Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 315. Jon Zens notes the same problem, “While covenant theology obviously wishes to be Trinitarian, their “covenant of redemption” issues in confusion at this point. Why is the Holy Spirit, practically speaking, usually omitted in discussions pertaining to the “eternal purpose”?” Jon Zens, *An Examination of The Presuppositions Of Covenant and Dispensational Theology*.

http://resources.grantedministries.org/article/examination_of_the_presupp_of_disp_and_cov_j_z.pdf

⁷⁸ Cf. Richard Phillips, *Covenant Confusion*, <https://www.alliancenet.org/covenant-confusion>

⁷⁹ Jon Zens notes, “I believe that in discussing the pre-temporal relationship of Father and Son, covenant theologians kept talking when they should have put their hands over their mouths and remained silent. Through asserting the equality of the Father and Son, there is a marked tendency for the system to result in a pre-temporal subordination of the Son.” Jon Zens, *An Examination of The Presuppositions Of Covenant and Dispensational Theology*. http://resources.grantedministries.org/article/examination_of_the_presupp_of_disp_and_cov_j_z.pdf

⁸⁰ The Covenantalists have often argued for this theological covenant from several texts as Letham notes, “...while Zechariah 6:13 is often seen as a primary texts for the *pactum*, it was not used in support in the seventeenth century. Each author supported his claims by a different set of passages. Many were drawn from the OT (c.f., Pss. 2:7; 40:5-6; 89:27; 110:1’ Isa. 42:1f.; 49:4-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12). From the NT, there was Luke 22:29.” However, as Letham notes, “What was not noted, however, is that these texts refer to the incarnate Christ, not to an eternal intra-Trinitarian pact.” Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 316. Italics in the original.

⁸¹ Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 319.

It is absolutely true that both *subordinationism* and *tritheism* can be possible outworking's that are introduced because of the Covenant of Redemption. Again, without this theological covenant none of these problems arise. I like the way Jon Zens puts it,

“But, further, why must the “covenant” concept be called into service to describe the “eternal purpose” of God in Christ? Why not be satisfied with the Biblical delineation? As far as I can tell, the Bible nowhere calls the pre-creation commitments in the Godhead—among themselves or to elect sinners—a “covenant.”⁸²

There is no need to adopt a pre-temporal covenant of redemption. It absolutely creates more confusion and more problems than it solves. As Letham notes,

“The nagging suspicion remains, however, that the application of covenant concepts to the eternal life of the Trinity loses more than it gains, even if one recognizes that analogical predication is involved and an exact equivalence is ruled out. Clearly, all of God’s works are Trinitarian. Salvation rests ultimately on the eternal counsel of god, all three persons inseparably involved. Talk of *the eternal Trinitarian counsel* avoids these problems, maintaining the indivisibility of the Trinity as well as the hypostatic distinctions, while achieving all that was intended by the *pactum salutis*.⁸³

Not only are there Trinitarian problems, but there are also exegetical problems because there are no texts that speak of an intra-trinitarian covenant made between the Father and Son. As Letham said, we don’t need a covenant, the eternal counsel of the Trinity fully explains the plan of redemption without causing confusion with covenantal categories.

Conclusion

We’ve had a look at the three *theological* covenants introduced by Covenant Theologians and we can conclude the following:

The Covenant of Works

- The covenant formulation is nowhere present in Genesis 2 or 3 (We need to ask why Moses chose to exclude it, and emphasize it in Genesis 6 for the first time)
- The covenant creates more speculation than it actually attempts to address. In assuming a covenant exists, one must search the text for a probationary period with no limits, whether or not salvation is achievable by works (merit) or by grace, or whether one can achieve eternal life without Christ, etc.
- The covenant introduces questions around the length of probationary period that must be inferred and not exegeted from the text.
- The covenant introduces exegetical challenges since scripture doesn’t teach it clearly it must be inferred.
- The covenant lacks all typical content that we see in covenants later in scripture.

⁸² Jon Zens, *Is There a Covenant of Grace?* (BRR, Vol. 7. #3, 1977), 48.

⁸³ Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 324.

- The covenant creates further challenges such as what was Adam's relationship with God before this covenant was established, is this covenant of works repurposed later in the Mosaic Covenant, is this a gracious or law-based covenant, etc.

Non-scriptural, non-exegetical, entirely built from speculation, inferences, and eisegesis.

Recommendation for Covenant Theologians as it Pertains to the Covenant of Works:

I recommend that Covenant Theologians keep the doctrine of Federal Headship and get rid of the covenantal language altogether. I recommend scrapping the idea of a probationary period, the idea that the tree of life is the gift for fulfilling the period of probation, that the idea of eternal life can be gained through obedience apart from Christ, the idea that the Mosaic Covenant is a republication of the Covenant of Works. This period can be re-labelled the Adamic Administration as John Murray recommended.

The Covenant of Grace

- The covenant formulation is nowhere present in Genesis 3 (We need to ask why Moses chose to exclude it, and emphasize it in Genesis 6 for the first time)
- The covenant introduces challenges such as how the covenant is made in Genesis 3, where it is mentioned, where the stipulations for blessings are made with the elect.
- The covenant confuses *promise* with *covenant*.
- The covenant ends up flattening all covenants down into this covenant, rather than allowing each covenant to be evaluated fairly without a grid superimposed over it that necessitates a view of redemption.
- The covenant is not sustained through exegesis.

Non-scriptural, non-exegetical, entirely built from speculation, inferences, and eisegesis.

Recommendation for Covenant Theologians as it Pertains to the Covenant of Grace:

Keep the continuity of salvation and the plan of salvation for both testaments. Remove the covenant language, keep the *promise* element of the protoevangelium, remove the overarching grid superimposed over the biblical covenants, remove the “redemptive historical” element that causes contents of the biblical covenants to be ignored.

The Covenant of Redemption

- The covenant is completely nonexistent in scripture. There is no covenant mentioned between Father and Son in scripture.
- The covenant confuses the decree of God with a covenantal relationship.
- The covenant can create issues in the ontological Trinity (subordination or tritheism)
- The covenant muddies the word covenant, and can lead to covenant simply being a bond of love or relationship between the ontological Trinity.

Recommendation for Covenant of Redemption

Keep the continuity of salvation and the plan of salvation for both testaments. Remove covenantal language and jargon. Remove the relationship of covenant within the ontological Trinity and keep the decree as the foundation for the plan of redemption.

It has been seen that the theological covenants have been problematic, and aspects of them should be completely tossed. Under each of the covenants, it has been noted that the “term” covenant should be removed, but aspects of the theology kept. Numerous scholars have shown how biblical theology can be achieved around the covenants without appealing to this superstructure and this should show us that there is nothing incredibly unique that Covenant Theology brings together.

Issue #6 – Supersessionism

Covenant Theologians hate the charge that they are “Replacement Theologians” or “Supersessionists.” Why do they hate this idea? Because they don’t believe it quite accurately depicts their position and they don’t want to be seen as antisemitic. The Monergism website states,

“...this term [Replacement Theology] is an inaccurate and unfair representation of Covenant Theology since no Covenant Theologian we have ever run into would recognize himself to teach such a thing: while it is true that Covenant Theology emphasizes the unity of God’s people throughout redemptive history, and denies that the Church is a distinct people of God that exists alongside his other people, ethnic Israel (as does the bible, see questions 19-22 above); yet it most certainly does not teach that the Church “replaces” Israel. Quite to the contrary, it teaches that the Church has been in existence ever since God first established his Covenant of Grace with Adam, and that, while the Church was composed of the believing remnant of national Israel during the Old Testament era, God’s design was always to expand it and bring all the nations into its fold, just as he promised Abraham (Gen. 12:3; Gal. 3:7-9). Today he has done that, and so now, his Church is composed both of the believing remnant of the Jewish nation, as it always has been, and also of a believing remnant of the Gentiles, who have been grafted in and made a part of the same body. So Israel has not been replaced, it has just been expanded to include Abraham’s children by faith from every nation on earth (Ephesians 2; Galatians 2 & 3).”⁸⁴

Others have likewise felt the charges are unfair in the Reformed camp,

“Well, that’s not an accurate depiction of covenant theology. Covenant theology isn’t replacement theology, it’s fulfillment theology. There’s promise and fulfillment. The promises of God to Israel are fulfilled in both the Jews and the Gentiles being part of the one people of God in the purposes of God’s redemption.”⁸⁵

Duncan states that we should swap the word “replacement” with “fulfillment.” Now, I certainly understand the desire to be accurately represented, but in my opinion, it is more helpful to

⁸⁴ Taken from: <https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/qna/replacement.html>. Brackets added by me.

⁸⁵ Ligon Duncan, *What are some Misconceptions about Covenant Theology?* Oct 13, 2020, <https://rts.edu/resources/what-are-some-misconceptions-about-covenant-theology/>

understand how to define Replacement Theology or Supersessionism as scholars have defined it and then to see if Covenant Theologians have adopted this language in their writings.

Replacement Theology and/or Supersessionism is defined by Michael Vlach as,

“...the view that the NT church is the new and/or true Israel that has forever superseded the nation Israel as the people of God.”⁸⁶

Let's look at a couple more definitions. Ronald E. Diprose states,

“...the Church completely and permanently replaced ethnic Israel in the working out of God's plan and as recipient of Old Testament promises to Israel.”⁸⁷

R. Kendall Soulen states,

“According to this teaching, God chose the Jewish people after the fall of Adam in order to prepare the world for the coming of Jesus Christ, the Savior. After Christ came, however, the special role of the Jewish people came to an end and its place was taken by the church, the new Israel.”⁸⁸

Walter Kaiser states,

“Replacement theology. . .declared that the Church, Abraham's spiritual seed, had replaced national Israel in that it had transcended and fulfilled the terms of the covenant given to Israel, which covenant Israel had lost because of disobedience.”⁸⁹

To summarize the definitions above, we can say that Replacement Theology is the assertion that:

The New Testament Church is the new people of God and they have superseded or replaced the Nation of Israel permanently as God's people.

Now, there are four classes of Replacement Theology as defined by Michael Vlach and other scholars. The four classes are: *Punitive*, *Economic*, *Structural*, and *Moderate*. Let's define each.

Punitive Supersessionism – Is the belief that God has rejected the Jews because of their disobedience.⁹⁰

Economic Supersessionism – Is the belief that God planned to end the role of ethnic Israel at the first coming of Christ.⁹¹

⁸⁶ Michael Vlach, *Various Forms of Replacement Theology*, TMSJ 20/1 (Spring 2009), 57.

⁸⁷ Ronald E. Diprose, *Israel in the Development of Christian Thought* (Rome: Istituto Biblico Evangelico Italiano, 2000), 31, n.2.

⁸⁸ R. Kendall Soulen *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, (Fortress Press, 1996), 1-2.

⁸⁹ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *An Assessment of 'Replacement Theology': The Relationship Between the Israel of the Abrahamic-Davidic Covenant and the Christian Church*, Mishkan 21 (1994): 9.

⁹⁰ “And we say with confidence that they [the Jews] will never be restored to their former condition. For they committed a crime of the most unhalowed kind.” Origen, *Against Celsus* 4.22, ANF 7:109.

⁹¹ “The people [Israel] was precious before the church arose, and the law was marvelous before the gospel was elucidated. But when the church arose and the gospel took precedence the model was made void, conceding its power to the reality. . . . The people was made void when the church arose.” Melito of Sardis, *On Pascha*, trans. S. G. Hall (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979) 21.

Structural Supersessionism – Is the belief that The Hebrew Scriptures are unhelpful for shaping how God works during this present economy.

Moderate Supersessionism – Is the belief that Israel has been chosen and reject, but that they still have a salvific future.⁹²

Covenant Theologians from my experience are often a blurring and/or blending of three of these positions (*punitive, economic, and moderate*). At some level they affirm that God rejected the Israelites because of their rejection of Christ, others see that God was transferring everything (in terms of blessings and promises) to the church when Jesus comes, others believe there is a future for ethnic Israel but only as it pertains to redemption.

No Covenant Theologian, that I have encountered or have read affirms that there will be a national *restoration* that will be accomplished for Ethnic Israel. The best a Covenant Theologian can do is move to a *moderate* form of replacement. This is most often seen in the writings of the Puritans.

To show that Covenant Theology does affirm Replacement Theology, I will now quote Covenant Theologians directly who **clearly** affirm that God is finished with Ethnic Israel as a people and that the promises and blessings have been transferred to the church.

Bruce K Waltke,

“...hard fact that national Israel and its law have been permanently replaced by the church and the New Covenant.” And “The Jewish nation no longer has a place as the special people of God; that place has been taken by the Christian community which fulfills God’s purpose for Israel.”⁹³

Sam Storms,

“There are numerous other New Testament texts that affirm the same truth (see below). My point here is simply to clarify why I see the Church as the “one new man,” the true Israel of God in and for whom all the promises will be fulfilled. The promises will not be fulfilled exclusively in and for a separate “nation” of ethnic Israelites but in and for all believing ethnic Israelites together with all believing ethnic Gentiles, that is to say, in the Church.”⁹⁴

Herman Bavinck,

⁹² “Paul quotes this passage, (Rom. xi. 26,) in order to shew that there is still some remaining hope among the Jews; although from their unconquerable obstinacy it might be inferred that they were altogether cast off and doomed to eternal death. But because God is continually mindful of his covenant, and “his gifts and calling are without repentance” (Rom. xi. 29), Paul justly concludes that it is impossible that there shall not at length be some remnant that come to Christ, and obtain that salvation which he has procured. Thus the Jews must at length be collected along with the Gentiles that out of both “there may be one fold” under Christ. (John x. 16) . . . Hence we have said that Paul infers that he [Christ] could not be the redeemer of the world, without belonging to some Jews, whose fathers he had chosen, and to whom this promise was directly addressed.” John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, in Calvin’s Commentaries, 8:269.

⁹³ Bruce K. Waltke, *Kingdom Promises as Spiritual*, in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 274-275.

⁹⁴ Sam Storms, *Kingdom Come, The Amillennial Alternative* (Mentor Imprint of Christian Focus Publications, Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire, IV20 1TW, Scotland, U.K., 2013), 191.

“Chiliasm [millennialism] includes the expectation that shortly before the return of Christ a national conversion will occur in Israel, that the Jews will then return to Palestine and from there, under Christ, rule over the nations. . . . Those of the Jews who reject Christ are not really true Jews (Rom. 2:28-29). They are not the “circumcision” but the “mutilation” (Phil. 3:2). They are the irregulars, idle talkers, deceivers, who must be silenced (Tit. 1:10-11). They have killed the Lord Jesus and their own prophets as well. They persecute believers, do not please God, and oppose everyone. . . . Real Jews, the true children of Abraham, are those who believe in Christ (Rom. 9:8; Gal. 3:29, etc.). The community of believers has in all respects replaced carnal, national Israel. The Old Testament is fulfilled in the New.”⁹⁵

Gary North,

“Similarly, Jesus told us that as members of His eternal Church, we are the heirs of the Old Covenant kingdom that God had given by grace to the Jews. The Church receives the kingdom inheritance of Israel....Obviously, this transfer of ownership from Old Covenant Israel could not skip to some future Jewish society at least 1,960 years after Jesus announced it. He told them that their kingdom would be removed from them and given to someone else, not held in a kind of deep freeze for two millennia. It would be given to a rival nation that would bring forth the fruits of the kingdom. So, we must abandon the fruits of unrighteousness.”⁹⁶

Gary DeMar,

“Unbelieving Israel has been cast out and has been replaced by the international church, those whom Jesus purchased with His own blood "from every tribe and tongue and people and nation" (Revelation 5:9).”⁹⁷

Nathan Pitchfork,

“Included in this expected casting off of shadows is the casting off of national Israel as God’s people. When God removed his Shekinah glory from the temple in Jerusalem, he was essentially signifying the taking up of his presence from Israel, so that they were no longer his special people. They were now the same as the Gentiles around them (see Ezekiel 11:23). If the reality of this casting off is not indisputably clear in Ezekiel’s vision, it nevertheless becomes manifestly apparent in Hosea 1. There God very clearly and explicitly declares that Israel will become “lo-ammi” — “not my people”. In this declaration, Israel becomes essentially the same as the Gentiles around them; therefore, immediately afterwards, when God declares that in the future Israel will number as the sand of the sea, he must mean an Israel that is drawn without distinction from a world that is, without distinction, “lo-ammi” with God. So, the expected casting off of Old Testament shadows is complete enough to include the casting off of ethnic Israel as God’s people.” And “Although God cast off physical Israel, he prophesied of a restoration of Israel. What would be the distinction between this eschatological Israel and the archetypical Israel? Israel would no longer be Israel because of birth or external laws on tablets. Instead, they would be Israel because God had written his law on their hearts, and put a new heart of flesh within their midst. (See Jer. 31:31-36; Ezekiel 36:24-28). This new Israel God would call from all the nations, choosing some who had been Gentiles to be Levites and Priests (See Isaiah 66:18-21). In fact,

⁹⁵ Herman Bavinck, *The Last Things*, (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 1996), 99, 102.

⁹⁶ Gary North, *Rapture Fever: Why Dispensationalism is Paralyzed*, (Institute for Christian Economics, Tyler Texas, (1993)), XII, XV.

⁹⁷ Gary DeMar, *The Debate Over Christian Reconstruction*, (Dominion Press, 1988), 21.

Paul himself clearly explains that the prophesied restoration of Israel spoken of by Hosea was accomplished when God called to himself a people from both ethnic Jews and ethnic Gentiles (Romans 9:24-26). Hence, even in the Old Testament we start to see the necessity of a change from types to spiritual realities in order to do justice to the prophecies involving future Israel.”⁹⁸

Pascal Denault,

“Since Abraham’s physical posterity existed by virtue of the covenant of circumcision (the old covenant), when the goal of the covenant was accomplished (leading to Christ through the preservation of Abraham’s physical posterity), the covenant made with Abraham’s natural descendants came to an end.”⁹⁹

Lorraine Boettner,

“It may seem harsh to say that ‘God is done with the Jews.’ But the fact of the matter is that He is through with them as a unified national group having anything more to do with the evangelization of the world. That mission has been taken from them and given to the Christian Church (Matt. 21:43).”¹⁰⁰

Greg Nichols,

“When he made the new covenant he transformed his people and transferred the privilege of theocratic society from Hebrew Israel to Christian Israel.” And “When Jesus says that God will take his kingdom, the theocracy away from Hebrew Israel, he means that they will no longer be his people. He also says that God will give his theocracy to another nation that will appreciate it. When God takes the theocracy from Hebrew Israel, he gives it to Christian Israel, the nation composed of Abraham’s spiritual children circumcised in heart.” And “His people under the old covenant were Abraham’s patriarchal posterity. Under the new they are his Messianic posterity.” And “His disciples are Israel because Christ had removed unbelieving Hebrews from God’s people (Acts 3:22, 23).” And “Jesus reforms and transforms Hebrew Israel into Christian Israel.”¹⁰¹

As you can see, it isn’t just a couple of people. Covenant Theologians are notorious for asserting that God is done with ethnic Israel and the new people that God is working with is the Church or Spiritual/True Israel. This is what they believe and articulate. I would ask that you compare the definition again and read carefully through what Covenant Theologians are arguing for.

The error comes from a poor understanding of Israelology.¹⁰²

Dispensationalism

⁹⁸ Nathan Pitchfork, *Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology*, Vol.4 (Psalm 45 Publications, 2010, Lulu Press), 14-16

⁹⁹ Pascal Denault, *The Distinctiveness of Baptists Covenant Theology*, (Solid Ground Christian Books, Birmingham, AL, 2017), (2nd Ed.), 131.

¹⁰⁰ Lorraine Boettner, *The Millennium* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1957), 89-90.

¹⁰¹ Greg Nichols, *Covenant Theology: A Reformed Baptistic Perspective on God’s Covenants*, (Solid Ground Christian Books, Birmingham, AL, 2014), 177-178, 184, 185, 260, 292.

¹⁰² For an excellent treatment of the subject of Israelology check out Arnold Fruchtenbaum’s, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology*.

Dispensationalism is a corrective to the errors of Supersessionism as we believe below. Dispensationalists don't have an overarching covenantal structure which blurs together the covenants. Dispensationalists believe that the Abrahamic Covenant pertains clearly to multiple seeds (4) one of which is essentially ignored by the Covenant Theologian (*the physical offspring of Abraham*). Let's address this first however,

Is Israel (national/ethnic/geopolitical) God's people according to the scripture?

If we set aside the redemptive historical program, since we have seen the issues with it, is it clear within the Old Testament that God is working through Ethnic Israel, which is made up of *believers* and *unbelievers* [i.e., a mixed multitude]?

As a Dispensationalist I absolutely believe that Israel is God's people, the scriptures in my eyes are absolutely clear on this.

Israel is the Great Nation that would come from Abraham's offspring:

Genesis 12:2 LSB - And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing;

Israel is Abraham's *physical seed* who were predicted to be enslaved:

Genesis 15:13 LSB - Then God said to Abram, "Know for certain that your seed will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years.

The Abrahamic Covenant will be visible through the physical seed, Abraham -> Isaac -> Jacob and so forth:

Genesis 17:7 LSB - And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your seed after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your seed after you.

This mixed multitude grows in Egypt:

Exodus 1:7 LSB - But the sons of Israel were fruitful and increased and multiplied and became exceedingly mighty, so that the land was filled with them.

In multiplying so greatly, Pharaoh compelled the Egyptians to use the Israelites in slave labor:

Exodus 1:13-14 LSB - So the Egyptians brutally compelled the sons of Israel to slave labor; 14 and they made their lives bitter with hard slave labor in mortar and bricks and in all kinds of slave labor in the field, all their slave labor which they brutally compelled them to do.

God remembers his promise to rescue those tied to Abraham's lineage:

Exodus 2:23 LSB - Now it happened in the course of those many days that the king of Egypt died. And the sons of Israel sighed because of the slavery, and they cried out; and their cry for help because of their slavery rose up to God. 24 So God heard their groaning; and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. 25 And God saw the sons of Israel, and God knew them.

God in hearing the pain of the Israelites, sends Moses to call them out of slavery. Note: They are **HIS** people.

Exodus 3:7-8 LSB - And Yahweh said, “I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt, and I have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sufferings. 8 So I have come down to deliver them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up from that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Amorite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite.

Moses is sent to Pharaoh to call out God’s people so that they will worship him:

Exodus 3:10-11 LSB - So now, come and I will send you to Pharaoh, and so you shall bring My people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt.” 11 But Moses said to God, “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?”

This point cannot be missed. God is already calling the Israelites (mixed multitude) His people. This theme of Israel being God’s people is everywhere in the Old Testament. It is stated strongly in Deuteronomy 7:6-7.

Deuteronomy 7:6-8 LSB - For you are a holy people to Yahweh your God; Yahweh your God has chosen you to be a people for His own treasured possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. 7 “Yahweh did not set His affection on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, 8 but because Yahweh loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your fathers, Yahweh brought you out with a strong hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

At this point in time, it must be clearly seen that God’s people is the nation of Israel and that Israel is made up of both believers and unbelievers, a point that will be seen later in Romans 9:6.

God is not solely focused upon the believing elect (the supposed “church”). This is to read later theology backwards into the Old Testament through the lens of redemptive categories. God is working and operating through his people tied to the Abrahamic Covenant. The Abrahamic Covenant is an eternal covenant, not to be conflated or confused with the Mosaic (Old) Covenant which passed away with Christ.

Israel was in captivity, they were brought out, they partook in the marriage covenant ceremony with God on Mt. Sinai, they entered into relationship with God and were called to uphold his commands.

Presbyterians understand the concept of the mixed multitude better than the Reformed Baptists. Presbyterians unfortunately brought this concept of mixed multitude over to the New Covenant and made it essentially the same as the Mosaic.

Moving across the Old Testament, we obviously see the persistent evil committed by national Israel. They persist in their adultery and idolatry with other nations around them. They will not repent, and they continue in their evil.

When we get to the New Testament, we see Israel's rejection of their own Messiah and their hardened hearts. Romans 9-11 talks about Israel's past, their present, and their future reality. Romans 9:3-5 makes it absolutely clear that the covenants were given to Israel the national entity (*the kinsmen according to the flesh*). It is wrong to assume that God gave the covenants to the spiritual Jews, or the church. Romans 9 makes it clear that the covenants were given to the kinsmen according to the flesh.

Romans 9:3-5 LSB - For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh, 4 who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, 5 whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.

The obvious frustration of Paul is seeing that his brothers (ethnic Israelites) are not believing in their Messiah. He would rather be accursed and cut-off than to see his brothers in this state of hardness and rejection. They were given everything and yet they still rejected the Messiah. Romans 9:6¹⁰³ is the logical point that follows. Did the Word of God fail, may it never be, because not all that are of Israel are Israel. What does this mean? Paul is contrasting two Israel's here:

Kinsmen According to the Flesh = Israel
Children of Promise = True Israel

Just because one was of Abraham's *physical seed*, it did not make them a *child of promise* elected unto salvation. Abraham's physical seed for the Jews seemed almost like a *free pass* (cf. John 8), in that they thought being related to Abraham was the key. Paul refutes this idea to show that there are those within Israel that are true Israel. The true Israelites are believing Jews, circumcised in the flesh and heart (Rom. 2:28-29). This is Paul's point here. Romans 11 builds on this, to say that Israel has not been rejected. The powerful text that refutes the entire replacement concept is at the end of Romans 11. Romans 11:28-29 which clearly alludes back to Deuteronomy 7:6-8 says,

Romans 11:28-29 LSB - From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God's choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers; 29 for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

Ethnic Israelites from the standpoint of the Gospel are *enemies* for their sake, the sake of the Romans. However, from the standpoint of God's election, *they are beloved for the sake of the fathers* (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob). *These gifts and calling are irrevocable*. Jeremiah 31, says the same thing:

Jeremiah 31:35-36 LSB - 35 Thus says Yahweh, Who gives the sun for light by day And the statutes for the moon and the stars for light by night, Who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar;

¹⁰³ For more on Romans 9 see my analysis: "God's Sovereign Election – An Exegetical Analysis of Romans 9:1-13," Oct 12, 2020. <https://sakeofthetruth.wordpress.com/2020/10/12/exegetical-analysis-romans-9-1-13/>

Yahweh of hosts is His name: 36 “If these statutes are removed From before Me,” declares Yahweh, “Then the seed of Israel also will cease From being a nation before Me forever.”

Jeremiah is clearly saying that nothing could separate the nation of Israel from before him. It is impossible not only are the gifts and callings given to Israel irrevocable, so long as the sun gives light by day and the moon and stars light by night, they cannot cease from being a nation before God. It is certain.

Covenant Theology must deal with Ethnic Israel, they cannot simply by-pass them and ignore their relationship with Yahweh. If God will not rid himself of them as his people because of their relationship to the patriarchs, Covenant Theology begins to face a serious issue.¹⁰⁴

If we follow what the scriptures are saying, then we must start by acknowledging that God’s people is Israel (mixed multitude) made up of believers and unbelievers. If God still has a purpose for Ethnic Israel, then they still have a future, and the restoration principles cannot simply be applied to the church.

C.E.B. Cranfield laments regarding his usage of Replacement Theology in Romans when he says,

“And I confess with shame to having also myself used in print on more than one occasion this language of the replacement of Israel by the Church. It is only where the church persists in refusing to learn this message [of Romans 9-11], where it secretly—perhaps unconsciously—believes that its own existence is based on human achievement, and so fails to understand God’s mercy to itself, that it is unable to believe in God’s mercy for still unbelieving Israel, and so entertains the ugly and unscriptural notion that God has cast off His people Israel and simply replaced it by the Christian Church. These three chapters emphatically forbid us to speak of the Church as having once and for all taken the place of the Jewish people.”¹⁰⁵

Gerald R. McDermott states almost the same thing when he writes,

“I had been convinced that the Church is the New Israel. This mean that after Jesus died and rose again, the covenant that God had made with Israel was transferred to those who believed in Jesus. The vast majority of Jews, who had refused Jesus’ claim to be Messiah, were no longer the apple of God’s eye. They were no different in God’s eyes from any other people who had heard the gospel and had rejected it. The old Israel was no longer the true Israel. The church of believers in Jesus Christ had now becomed the New Israel. Or so I thought. This was the Christian interpretation that I had learned from Reformed theologians such as John Calvin and that was no embraced by many Christian churches...”¹⁰⁶

What caused McDermott to change his mind?

“...I began to come across some startling discoveries. One of the first was that the New Testament never calls the Church the New Israel...Then I looked further into Galatians 3:28. Paul did indeed say that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek. But he also said there is “no male or

¹⁰⁴ See Barry Horner’s books: *Future Israel and Eternal Israel*.

¹⁰⁵ C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 2, 448.

¹⁰⁶ Gerald R. McDermott, *Israel Matters, Why Christians Must think Differently about the People and the Land*, (Brazos Press, Grand Rapids, MI, 2017), xi.

female,” for all are “one in Christ Jesus.” I realized that there are still differences between male and female and that Paul himself referred to different roles for men and women in marriage...If male and female distinctions persist, what about Jewish-gentile differences? Does that distinction also remain in the church where all are one in Christ Jesus?”¹⁰⁷

McDermott strongly remembers the day that he stumbled across that important text that we mentioned above [Romans 11:28-29],

“I will never forget the day that I stumbled upon Paul’s insistence that Jews who rejected Jesus were still beloved by God and that God kept his covenant with them as a people... I had always assumed that Paul was talking only about Jews in the past, before Jesus came. But as I looked more closely, it became clear that Paul was talking about Jews in his own day who had heard his preaching of Jesus and rejected it. These Jesus-rejecting Jews “are beloved” of God, he said. Not “*were* beloved” but “*are* beloved.” Not past but present tense...God still loves them. And not in the way that God loves all people, but with a special kind of love. That is clear from Paul’s long discussion of Jews in Romans 9-11.”¹⁰⁸

As McDermott notes, Romans 11:28-29 is paramount to rejecting the Replacement Theology adopted by Covenant Theologians. There is not only a future for Ethnic Israel, but also a future restoration promised throughout the entire Old and New Testament.¹⁰⁹ Dispensationalists have rightly pointed out that Covenant Theology embraces Replacement Theology. They have rightly demonstrated this from the direct sources, and they have shown that Israel is not replaced by Israel.¹¹⁰ Israel is God’s covenant people, let us not become arrogant toward the natural branches.¹¹¹

Issue #7 – The Failure to Distinguish Between Israel and the Church

This piece is adapted from my article “*Israel is not the Church!*”¹¹²

One thing that you may hear often from Covenant Theologians is “**the True Israel of God is the Church**” and while an assertion may sound initially convincing, an evaluation of the textual evidence leads one to a different conclusion. Because the Covenant Theologian engages in “oversimplification” they end up blurring together two completely separate categories. Let me demonstrate the proper understanding of Israel and the Church below in a diagram.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., xii.

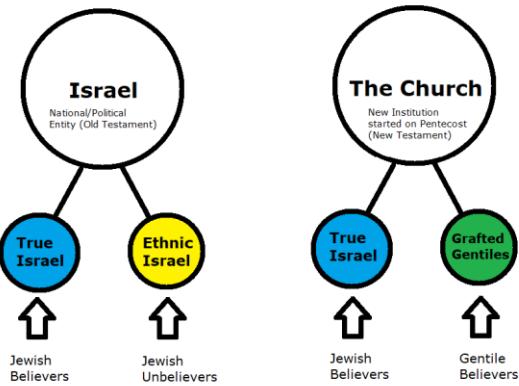
¹⁰⁸ Ibid., xiii.

¹⁰⁹ For more information consult Harry Bultema, *Maranatha, A Study of Unfulfilled Prophecy*.

¹¹⁰ For an excellent resource on this topic, see Michael Vlach, *Has The Church Replaced Israel, A Theological Evaluation*.

¹¹¹ Romans 11:20-21 LSB - Quite right! They were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be haughty, but fear, 21 for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you, either.

¹¹² <https://sakeofthetruth.wordpress.com/2020/08/04/israel-is-not-the-church/>



Let me explain the diagram above as it relates to each component. On the left side we have Israel, a national/political entity which includes both Jewish believers, and Jewish unbelievers. Israel was not simply inclusive of believers. Paul makes it emphatically clear that there are “two” Israel’s (Romans 9:6). Let me quote the passage:

Romans 9:6 LSB - But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel.

We see that Paul makes it emphatically clear that there are those who are not of Israel who are “descended” from Israel. Well, contextually we must understand what Paul is saying. Paul in Romans 9:1-5 is grieved over his “kinsmen according to the flesh”. Paul is grieved because his own Jewish brothers and sisters are rejecting their very own Messiah. The kinsmen according to the flesh prove very important in the grand scheme of Romans 9-11. The kinsmen according to the flesh (in the diagram above) are the “unbelieving Jews”. These are the ones that were rejecting their Messiah. However, just because they were “Israelites” did not mean that they were truly believers, or truly regenerate. These Israelites were born into sin, under the federal headship of Adam, just like all other sinners. Paul is contrasting, in Israel, that there are two clear offspring (physical vs. spiritual; in Christ vs. in Adam; slaves to sin vs. slaves to Christ; in bondage vs. free). Now, we see that there are two clear categorical distinctions in Israel (True Jews – Paul calls them the Israel of God in Galatians 6:16¹¹³, or the children of promise), and (Ethnic Jews – unbelieving Jews, kinsmen according to the flesh).

Now, we have established a clear demarcation in Israel. Let us move to the right side of the image, which is focused upon the Church. The Church is a new institution with new functions that didn’t exist until Pentecost. Jesus said that he would build (οἰκοδομήσω) – not that he had built – the Church (cf. Matthew 16:18). οἰκοδομήσω is in the future indicative, which means that this is something that “would” be built, not something that pre-existed. The Church is a new entity for some of the following reasons:

¹¹³ For further discussion on Galatians 6:16, see my work: “*The Israel of God – An Exegetical Analysis of Galatians 6:15-16*” Sep 12, 2020, <https://sakeofthetruth.wordpress.com/2020/09/12/the-israel-of-god-an-exegetical-analysis-of-galatians-615-16/>

1. New Ecclesiological Structure (Pastors, Elders, Deacons, Apostles)
2. Permanent Indwelling of the Holy Spirit
3. Spiritual Gifts given to each individual of the Body of Christ
4. New Ordinances (Water Baptism, Communion)
5. New Covenant
6. Baptism of the Holy Spirit
7. The “foundation” of the Church was built upon *both* Apostles and Prophets. If the Church had pre-existed it would have been built solely upon the Prophets. Rather the foundation, was built on the Apostles and Prophets, Christ being the cornerstone.

Some have attempted to say that the New Testament Church existed “in the wilderness” based upon Acts 7:38. The proper rendering in the LXX is “*assembly/congregation*” which simply means a group that is “called out” to assemble or to gather together. It is wrong to say that this is the same entity that is built upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets.

The Church consists of “believing Jews” as well as “believing Gentiles”. It encompasses all those of the *invisible* Church. Those that are “in Christ”, mediated for on behalf of Christ, and those who have been regenerated by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Now, what seems to be the problem with calling “True Israel” the Church? Isn’t True Israel a part of the Church? Yes, believing Jews are a part of the Church. So, what is the problem, you may ask? The issue is the conflation of one group, and the negation of the other group. Let me explain.

True Israel → Believing Jews

Grafted Gentiles → Believing Gentiles

In Romans 11¹¹⁴, Paul makes a clear internal distinction between these two groups, despite their salvific unity in Christ (Galatians 3:28). True Israel are “natural branches” in Romans 11 that remain grafted into the cultivated Olive Tree, who partake of the covenantal blessings that stem from the root (Abrahamic Covenant – Patriarchs). Ethnic Israel also partook of the Covenantal Blessings (for a time), until they were completely cut-off. Now, due to the fact that some of the natural branches have been cut-off and partially hardened they are no longer partaking in the covenantal blessings. This means that Gentiles (wild olive branches) are grafted in, and have become partakers in the blessings made to Israel. This means that Gentiles have finally been brought near, since they weren’t before, and now have an opportunity to partake in these blessings because of Christ. Notice that Paul distinguishes between the branches? He never says that the Gentiles become True Jews/Spiritual Jews/Christian Israel. He says simply that Gentiles remain Gentiles, in that they don’t change from natural to unnatural branches. The Gentiles and Jews are now a “new man” in Christ (Eph. 2)¹¹⁵, and become partakers of the blessings in Christ

¹¹⁴ For further discussion on Romans 11, see my work titled, “*Israel’s Future – An Exegetical Analysis of Romans 11:1-36*”, Nov, 9, 2020, <https://sakeofthetruth.wordpress.com/2020/11/09/israels-future-an-exegetical-analysis-of-romans-11-36/>

¹¹⁵ For further discussion on Ephesians 2, see my work titled, “*A New Position Corporately – An Exegetical Analysis of Ephesians 2:11-22*”, Mar 7, 2023, <https://sakeofthetruth.wordpress.com/2023/03/07/a-new-position-corporately-an-exegetical-analysis-of-ephesians-211-22/>

(Eph. 1). They become co-heirs (Eph 3), but they never “*become*” Israel in any sense of the word. This is the first major error. Covenant Theologians call Gentiles Israel – in some spiritual sense – despite the fact that Paul keep Gentiles (wild olive branches) and Israel (natural branches) distinct. This is important.

Secondly, the other fundamental flaw is that Covenant Theologians now completely neglect those who are cut-off. They set aside the “kinsmen according to the flesh” to focus upon the Church (True Israel of God) – what they believe to be the singular people of God – but wait? We just showed above that there are clearly two distinct people groups being worked through. So, wouldn’t that cause a conflation and negation? You bet it would. This is why Dispensational advocates have called out Covenant Theologians on their oversimplification fallacy. Covenant Theologians blur together Jews and Gentiles (conflation), and then forget about the Jewish unbelievers (negation). The Jewish unbelievers are still God’s people though (Romans 11:1-2, 28-29), even though they have been hardened and cut-off. So, what is Paul’s rationale here?

Paul uses the olive tree metaphor to demonstrate a “distinction” between Jews and Gentiles in relation to the promises given to the patriarchs. Not for the sake of ethnical division, but for the sake of us understanding the purpose God has for his people the kinsmen according to the flesh. The reason that the Jewish unbelievers were cut-off, and the Gentiles were grafted in, were to make the Jewish unbelievers jealous (Romans 11:11). This will provoke them, and cause them to repent, and to come back to the Lord, just as the Old Testament predicted. Mass conversion, mass change of heart, and being re-grafted back into the Olive Tree.

Romans 11:25 LSB - For I do not want you, brothers, to be uninformed of this mystery—so that you will not be wise in your own estimation—that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in;

Once the “fullness of the Gentiles” comes in, which will be when the total sum Gentiles have believed, then the partial hardening will cease for the kinsmen according to the flesh, and they will be saved (Romans 11:25-26) which will result in greater blessings.

Romans 11:12 LSB - Now if their transgression is riches for the world and their failure is riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fullness be!

This, my friends is the proper understanding of the Jew and Gentile distinction. Gentiles are not the “True Israel of God”, this title is for the Jewish believers (True Israel). The Church does not replace, or negate Israel (kinsmen according to the flesh). There is a partial hardening on Israel (unbelieving Jews) who will be re-grafted into the Olive Tree, and Israel will have a nation-wide conversion. Hallelujah.

Let us not be conceited or proud. Let us not become boastful of our inclusion and neglect Israel, but let us be joyful and know that Israel will once again be in a proper relationship with God. We have not replaced or fulfilled Israel’s promises. We have become co-heirs, and partakers in the blessings of these promises.

Issue #8 – Bound To Traditions – Has Covenant Theology Been Left-Behind?

This comes from an article that I wrote called, “*Has Covenant Theology Been Left-Behind?*”¹¹⁶ It has been slightly adapted for this article. It is written directly to the Covenantalist.

The article title is a play on what most Dispensationalists are mocked for (i.e., the Left Behind series). I want to throw this back in your court, if you are a Covenantalist, consider if perhaps you are being *left behind* in the theological discourse.

In this series of questions, I want you to consider whether you believe your position has genuinely honored the counterarguments that have been made against it, or whether there is resistance to change because we have a tradition that we love, which cannot be challenged.

1.) *Have you ever stopped to consider that your position might be outdated, that it fails to keep up with the growing amount of literature that counters it?*

2.) *Have you ever stopped to consider that the creeds and confessions might be putting you at an extreme disadvantage in not being able to see beyond them and being anathematized if you were to consider changing or altering them in any way, based upon external feedback?*

3.) *Have you stopped to consider that you might be using outdated arguments, ones that have been addressed for decades by opponents of your position?*

4.) *Have you stopped to consider that what you believe to be “newer” positions (i.e. Dispensationalism, New Covenant Theology, Progressive Covenantalism, etc.) are not monolithic and take external input seriously and that when you address outdated arguments it shows an unwillingness to read literature, an unwillingness to adapt to change, and an unwillingness to keep up and outpace your opponents?*

5.) *Have you stopped to consider that reformation is ongoing? That we can’t claim that reformation is over when we say it is and that we can’t stop the church from returning to the Scriptures as the ultimate authority! Is it at all possible that Dispensational Theology is a by-product of reformation, an entity that results from moving back towards the Scriptures and away from tradition? Is this possible, or is there a monopoly on the word reformed, that disallows progress within Protestantism? If, so, why? Why is reformation stuck at one period?*

6.) *Have you stopped to consider that appealing to individuals like Tim LaHaye, John Hagee, and Hal Lindsey shows an ignorance for the amount of literature that has been written at an academic level? Do you realize that these men aren’t even quoted as sources in academic literature? Is it possible to set these men aside for even a moment to consider that there are better scholars, better representatives within Dispensational Theology?*

7.) *Have you stopped to consider that saying “I grew up as a Dispensationalist” is not the same as saying “I have thoroughly studied Dispensationalism (all variants) and found it to not align with Scripture?” It is one thing to say you grew up surrounded by teaching, but never actually studied it yourself in depth. It is another to sit down and read through the literature, comb the responses, the rebuttals, the internal dialogues, to make a well-informed conclusion.*

8.) *Have you stopped to consider that there are unnecessary presuppositions that your side brings to the table (i.e., a New Testament Priority)? Have you considered that these presuppositions may not be valid and should be challenged? How about a Covenant of Grace, Works, Redemption, nowhere found in*

¹¹⁶ <https://sakeofthetruth.wordpress.com/2021/11/03/has-covenant-theology-been-left-behind/>

scripture, not derived from exegesis, ought we stick with these, or is there a better way to understand God's eternal decree without confusing covenantal language?

9.) Have you stopped to consider why the majority of your commentators on the Scriptures restrict their study to the New Testament? Have you considered why there are so few volumes of academic exegetical analysis on the Old Testament from your perspective?

10.) Have you stopped to consider that using the same arguments: "Dispensationalism is a recent invention, Dispensationalism is new, Dispensationalism was created by Darby, Dispensationalism was only popular because of Scofield, Dispensationalists believe in multiple means of salvation, Dispensationalists believe in a secret rapture that was invented by Margaret McDonald, etc." only shows that you haven't really done research on the topic?

These questions (as I hope you will see) will hopefully get you to consider where you stand on all these topics. It might be true that you have considered all of these and still found Dispensationalism to be incorrect, but I hope you will at least hear me out until the end.

A friend of mine once told me that he would rather see a basketball game between Shaq and Michael Jordan than between Shaq and a midget. This, I totally agree with. I don't want to see the best take on the worst. I don't want to see a fight between a heavy-weight champ and a rookie. I want to see the best that both sides have to offer at an academic level. Covenant Theologians continue to try and take on the weakest proponents of positions while acting victorious from attacks on Hal Lindsey, Tim LaHaye, and fictional series like 'Left Behind' as if that's the best the other side has to offer. I want to see academic scholars from both sides duke it out, but yet this seems to be completely neglected in the Covenant Theology circles. Covenant Theologians in my eyes want the easy victory, they don't want the work. They know there are variations in Dispensational Theology, but who cares, it's easier to keep bringing up Darby and Scofield over-and-over and the newness of the position than to address the abundance of literature that exists today. Dispensationalism (if I am to be completely honest) is a difficult position to attack. You must have a solid understanding of all its variants, the variations of all its adherents, and the internal ongoing discussions to really make an informed argument. Yet, Covenant Theologians still act like we all just believe the same thing. They haven't progressed in their dialogue to even begin to unpack information that has happened essentially since the 1980s. Go look at a bibliography and you will see quickly what level of argumentation is happening by the sources they have selected.

Here are some examples to make my point:

Samuel E. Waldron in his book "*The End Times Made Simple*" (2003) thinks that an appropriate way to start his book is by attacking the 'Left Behind' series. He uses two mythical people (one is Fascinated Fred) – Basically, a Dispensationalist, to argue against our position. Rather than Waldron attacking leading scholarship at the beginning of the book, delineating between variations in our position, he takes a cheap shot at a fictional series. Is this really pursuing a deeper level of discussion?

Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., in his book "*He Shall Have Dominion*" (Third Edition – 2009) thinks that it is appropriate to continually attack Tim LaHaye and Hal Lindsey. Tim LaHaye is referenced

13 times and Hal Lindsey 32 times in his book. He divides Dispensationalists into two groups (dispensational novelties – Ryrie, Walvoord, and Pentecost, and sensationalistic prognostications – LaHaye, Hagee, and Lindsey). In 2009, is this the best that Gentry can do? Could he not find anything more recent than the 1960/’70s? He has a bibliography of works from at least to the ’90s (i.e., Blaising, Bock, Saucy, Feinberg) but doesn’t really reference them or argue in full against them. How is this a revised edition, if he is not adequately dealing with revisions in the opposing camp? Take a look at his words on page 73, “In that the more recent progressive dispensationalism is not widely held, and is very similar to historic premillennialism, I will focus on the more classical form.” So, he admits that despite there being revisions and tweaks to our position, he won’t bother addressing them, he will argue against an older position. This is not how one attempts to rebut a position. Dispensationalism (as Gentry knows) isn’t monolithic, so it shouldn’t be argued against like it is. Mark Hitchcock put out a dissertation in 2002 refuting Gentry’s dating of Revelation, yet he never mentions it once in 2009. He knows of a separate work by Hitchcock in 2003 because he quotes it in the footnotes of pg. 374. Yet, he never once reacts or deals with a 200 Pg scholarly response to his position. Why?

Gary DeMar, in his book “*Is Jesus coming Soon?*” (2006) starts by attacking Hal Lindsey on the first page. DeMar thinks that after his introduction to eschatology in the 1970’s that Dispensationalism has clearly stood still. Read what he says on page 1, “My first introduction to Bible prophecy was through Hal Lindsey’s Late Great Planet Earth, the publishing event of the 1970’s. Lindsey presented an end-time scenario that was both fascinating and disturbing, especially to someone who knew almost nothing about the Bible. While Lindsey’s prophetic novel introduced me to the Bible I was immediately confused when I actually read God’s Word and found that a number of passages he chose as the center of his system did not seem to fit the Bible’s view of the end times.” After ignoring all the academic work since the 70’s he figures he can now establish his position because it is either crazy Lindsey or the Bible. DeMar does the same thing in his book “*Last Days Madness*” (1999), where he figures he should attack Lindsey repeatedly there as well, with over 21 references. Does DeMar not realize that there are other advocates of our position that have been in print and that are actually academic? Or are we stuck in the 1970’s unwilling to read anything further and respond accordingly?

Jeff Durbin, in his Apologia sermon on Matthew 24 titled “*Who Will Be Left Behind?*” (2019) starts by attacking the ‘Left Behind’ within 5 minutes of this video:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bveSBOi-rSk&list=PLp_q3Yx7CBrI6fjU29Xfz8saCQOxpBRdW&index=19. Again, no academic response (realizing this is a sermon and not an article), yet giving this impression that Dispensationalists are still stuck in the 1970s with a fictional series. Is this the best a pastor can do, take quick jabs at a fictional series?

James White (following in the footsteps of Jeff Durbin) in his sermon titled “*My Journey to Hope for the Future*” (2021) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K1S4vmHgtWA> doesn’t take long to attack Hal Lindsey (3-minute mark) and the Left Behind series (5:50 minute mark). James White, as a biblical exegete and reformed Baptist, must do better. He claims that these books (left behind) are just “newspaper eschatology.” As someone who used to be a

“panmillennialist” suddenly he can teach eschatology. As someone who really hasn’t stayed fresh with academic literature now, he is caught up and ready to defend Postmillennialism. Is this really fair, does it show growth or ignorance? Recently, James White declared that he had embraced Postmillennialism. I was quite surprised. Not because an alleged Amillennialist/Panmillennialist became Postmill, but it was the way he did it. How could such an exegetical giant jump from uncertainty to certainty in what seemed like a month? How could White have studied the vast amount of literature published during this time from Amills addressing Postmills? How could White have combed through an extensive subject that he himself admitted he hadn’t studied to conclude the validity of Postmill so quickly? To me, this has not been answered. Is it sufficient to say that a couple proof texts (i.e., Psalm 110, 1 Cor. 15, etc.) warrant jumping ship? I don’t think so. However, this trend won’t be unknown to Covenant Theologians. How many of them first became Calvinists and then jumped ship if they had believed tenants of Dispensational Theology, thinking they were incompatible? How many just seemed to embrace Amill overnight without studying Dispensational Premillennialism or Historic Premillennialism? I have asked many times over the years what Dispensational Premillennialism or Historic Premillennialism books they had read or studied and about 90% of the time they hadn’t read anything by them. They had read lots from the opposing side, but never stopped to see the implications. How many read Gentry and jumped ship ignoring large amounts of literature responding to him, how many read Riddlebarger or Storms, and jumped ship ignoring large amounts of literature responding to them? Now, don’t get me wrong, we are all growing, and changes of theological positions aren’t a bad thing and are bound to happen, but they can be bad when you don’t fairly study the opposing positions. They are bad when you refuse to keep up with the growing literature and keep attacking outdated arguments. They are bad when you are bound by tradition and won’t be conformed to the Bible. That is where there is trouble.

Craig L. Blomberg and Sung Wook Chung title their Historic Premill book “*A Case for Historic Premillennialism: An Alternative to ‘Left Behind’ Eschatology*.” Is this really again the best that the Covenantal Premillennialists can do? They lump all of us in with LaHaye and Lindsey again like there are no variations. It’s either fictional books or the Bible, you choose. Obviously, when portrayed in this light, the conclusion is simple, the Bible, but what if it isn’t a fictional book series at all, what if it is just the Bible?

As you can see, it is my contention that Covenant Theologians are the ones that are being ‘left behind’ in their unwillingness to move from their misconceptions, strawmen, and ignorance of academic literature. They are being ‘left behind’ by other academic theologians who want to address the best the other sides have to offer.

Take for instance the book by Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum called, “*Kingdom through Covenant*.” Their general index at the end of the book is filled with academic authors, great sources, and plenty of fair references from all sides that make it hard to argue against. They aren’t focusing their efforts attacking a fictional novel series in the 1970s but taking great works from great men and attempting to refine points of discussion and disagreement. As a Dispensationalist, that is one thing I appreciate about the New Covenantist and Progressive

Covenantalists, they get it! They see the issues with Covenant Theology and its failure to progress and reform from within. They see the errors and expose them, but do so to move the dialogue forward. They revise, they adapt, they try to balance good and bad from both spectrums adding to the discussion. Covenant Theologians in general aren't doing this. We are still stuck dealing with Hal Lindsey, Tim LaHaye, and clarifying misconceptions that are repeated ad nauseum for decades even when some Covenant Theologians tell other Covenant Theologians to stop. When will this end? I am afraid unless better proponents of Covenant Theology step up and start reading academic literature, then it won't change. Covenant Theologians will continue to attack the 'Left Behind' series showing an unwillingness to move forward as the dialogue progresses. NCT's/DT's/PC's will continue to press forward refining areas of their theology leaving Covenant Theology behind with its creeds and confessions.

To summarize a few things here. There are a few reasons I think Covenant Theology has been Left Behind:

- 1.) It fails to consider the best the opponents of their position have to offer.
- 2.) It fails to adapt and make alterations to feedback provided (out of concern for preserving confessions and creeds).
- 3.) It fails to exegetically rebut arguments and literature that has been written by scholars.
- 4.) It fails to properly represent the other side and all its variants.
- 5.) It fails to keep up with the literature in print.
- 6.) It fails to incorporate and honestly hear what others are saying.

Now, I want to be gracious here. I am not speaking of all Covenant Theologians, as there are certainly some who do in fact work through things at an academic level and respond accordingly, and to them, I am grateful and have no contention. I am mostly speaking to those who bandwagon with others, who jump to Covenant Theology merely because they want to escape Dispensationalism or Pentecostalism. To those who haven't studied Dispensational Theology to its maximum and make consistent misrepresentations of the system. To those who continue to act like the best, we have to offer is a fictional book series. These men (and women) are being left behind.

A few words of recommendation for Covenant Theologians.

I love you brothers and sisters and I am grateful for your love for the Lord. I am grateful for your desire to stand against error, to stand with the Word, to stand in opposition to others for the truth. I genuinely admire this for all of you. I pray that you will hear me with open ears and take a moment to reflect. If what I am saying is true, then something has to change. It must start from your side as much as I must be consistent in my call for change. To further the dialogue, we must hear what others are saying, we must take the best the other side has to say and read it with an openness to learn. We must set aside these petty and cheap shot attacks and work through the Scriptures together. We must stop with the strawmen. We must deal with each other against the Word of God. It is in exegesis of totascriptura that the different positions will come to light. If we continue down this path, we will rip each other apart until we are so divided that we can't have any form of unity with each other. My plea to you is to begin to familiarize yourself with our material, good works from our perspective. Get acquainted with the academic side of things,

learn where the dialogue has been heading, learn what responses we have to your position. Learn to take that and refine your own understanding with input from your brothers and sisters. If you need to adapt do so because of the Bible. If we have more of you doing this, more will see the implications and we can begin to move forward and progress together. My hope is that we can stay connected in love and pursue the truth together, united in Christ.