

Progressive Covenantalism and New Covenant Theology

AN ESSAY BY

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DEFINITION

Progressive covenantalism and new covenant theology are evangelical biblical-theological systems that seek to understand how God's entire plan of redemption unfolds from creation to Christ. Specifically, they seek to understand how God's one, eternal plan is progressively unveiled and revealed through the biblical covenants, and how all of God's promises are fulfilled in Christ, applied to the church as God's new covenant people, thus allowing us to draw right theological conclusions from Scripture for God's glory and our good.

SUMMARY

This article will describe the distinctives of progressive covenantalism. It will do so by setting it against the backdrop of dispensational and covenant theology, thus highlighting where it differs in such areas as the progression of the covenants, the relationship between Israel and the church, and the overall metanarrative flow of Scripture centered in Christ Jesus.

All Christians agree that “covenants” are central to the Bible’s story and that God’s redemptive plan unfolds over time reaching its fulfillment in Christ. All Christians also accept some form of redemptive epochs or dispensations across history demarcated by the biblical covenants, and that the fulfillment of God’s saving purposes in Christ has brought some kind of change from past eras. However, Christians disagree on the exact relationships between the covenants. This is not a new debate. In the early church, the apostles wrestled with the implications of Christ’s new covenant work (see [Acts 10-11, 15](#); [Gal. 3-4](#); [Eph. 2:11-22](#)).

Today, Christians still disagree on the precise relationships between the covenants, which has implications for other theological disputes such as: debates on the *newness* of what Christ has achieved; what moral demands apply to Christians today, as reflected in disagreements regarding the Decalogue and the Sabbath/Lord’s Day observance; and how previous Old Testament promises are now fulfilled in Christ and the church, tied to the larger discussion of the Israel-Church relationship and the role of national Israel in God’s plan. In fact, within evangelical theology, people tend to think about these issues within the views of either dispensational or covenant theology, while progressive covenantalism and new covenant theology serve as mediating views. To grasp better the latter views, let’s first briefly describe the basic points of the former views.

Dispensational and Covenant Theology

As a movement, Dispensationalism began in the early 19th century among the Brethren in England and quickly spread to other countries. Dispensational theology has undergone various revisions now described as classic, traditional/revised, and progressive dispensationalism.

Dispensationalism divides up redemptive-history into various dispensations which reflects God's ordering of his redemptive plan. Classic dispensationalism divided history into seven dispensations, while later dispensationalists modified and simplified the dispensations. However, what is unique to all forms of dispensationalism is the Israel-church distinction, which is largely tied to its understanding of the biblical covenants and their relationships. For *all* varieties of dispensationalism, *Israel* refers to an ethnic, national people, and the church is *never* the transformed, restored, eschatological Israel in God's plan. The salvation of Gentiles is *not* part of the fulfillment of the promises made to Israel *as a nation* now realized in the church. Instead, God has promised national Israel, first in the Abrahamic covenant and reaffirmed by the prophets, the possession of the Promised Land under Christ's rule, which still requires a future fulfillment in the premillennial return of Christ and the consummation.

The church, then, is distinctively *new* in God's purposes and ontologically different from Israel. Although in our present dispensation the church is comprised of believing Jews and Gentiles, the church is only receiving the *spiritual* blessings of the Spirit that were promised to Israel. But in the future, Christ will rule over redeemed *nations*, not the church as another "people group." The "church" as a present-day *covenant* people and forever *theological* reality will *not* receive *all* God's promises *equally* and *fully* in Christ or continue in its present form. Instead, believing Jews and Gentiles, who now compose the church, will join the redeemed of national Israel *and* the Gentile nations to live under Christ's rule according to their respective national identities and specific promises. In this way, a clear distinction is maintained between Israel as a nation and the church as a people, who at present, in an inaugurated form, illustrate what is still to come. Yet, presently the church is constituted as a regenerate community, which entails that the sign of baptism is only to be applied to those who profess faith in Christ. Baptism does not signify what circumcision did for Israel under the old covenant. With the odd exception, dispensational theology affirms credo- over paedobaptism.

Covenant theology, on the other hand, has its roots in the Reformation and post-Reformation era. It's best systematized by the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1643-1649), along with other Reformed Confessions. Covenant theology organizes God's plan in history by God's covenantal dealings with humans. As in dispensationalism, covenant theology is not monolithic, yet broadly, covenant theology speaks of three covenants: the "covenant of redemption" or God's eternal plan; the "covenant of works" made with Adam on behalf of the entire human race, which sadly, by Adam's disobedience has resulted in sin and death; "the covenant of grace" made in Christ for the salvation of God's people which is unfolded over time by different covenant administrations.

While covenant theology admits there are biblical *covenants*, it tends to subsume the plurality of the covenants from Adam to Christ under the overarching category of *the* covenant of grace. By doing so, unlike dispensationalism, it stresses the *continuity* between Israel and the church, so that *by nature* the two are essentially the same, yet administrated differently. For this reason, covenant theology argues that there is continuity between Israel and the church in at least two ways: both communities are comprised of believers *and* unbelievers (i.e., a mixed people *within* the covenant community); and their respective covenant signs (i.e., circumcision and baptism) signify the same spiritual reality, thus the rationale for applying baptism to infants in the church.

Progressive Covenantalism and its Distinctives

Not everyone in evangelical theology fits in the dispensational or covenantal camp. In recent years, some have sought to offer a mediating position between the two dominant views, as reflected by the view of progressive covenantalism and new covenant theology.

Although these views are often identified, there are enough differences between them that they need to be distinguished. For example, within new covenant theology, some deny a creation covenant, others deny Christ's active obedience, and others are not nuanced in their grasp of God's moral law in relation to the Decalogue. Progressive covenantalism, on the other hand, strongly affirms a creation covenant, God's demand of Adam (and all humanity) for perfect obedience thus necessitating Christ's active obedience for our justification before God, and that the Decalogue is a reflection of God's moral law for Christians now applied to us in Christ. Yet what both views have in common is seeing how *all* of God's plan and covenant promises are brought to fulfillment in Christ and the new covenant. But what follows is more a description of progressive covenantalism in three summary points.

(1) God's one plan is revealed through a plurality of covenants culminating in Christ.

Similar to covenant theology, progressive covenantalism views the biblical covenants as the central way God has unfolded his redemptive plan throughout history. Yet, it contends that the Bible presents a *plurality* of covenants that *progressively* reveal God's *one* redemptive plan for his *one* people which reaches its fulfillment, *telos*, and terminus in Christ and the new covenant. Each biblical covenant contributes to God's unified plan, and to know the entire plan, we must understand *each* covenant in its own context by locating that covenant in relation to what precedes *and* follows it before we draw its application to us today. *Through the progression of the covenants*, we come to know God's plan, how *all* of God's promises are fulfilled in Christ *and* applied to the church as God's new covenant people (Heb. 1:1-3; cf. Eph. 1:9-10), and how we are to live as God's people today.

(2) The covenants are more than a unifying theme of Scripture but the backbone to the Bible's redemptive storyline, starting in creation and reaching fulfillment in Christ.

Progressive covenantalism argues that the *covenants* are more than a unifying theme of Scripture; instead, they are revelatory of God's plan, prophetic in their anticipation of Christ, and *theologically* significant as they function as the backbone to Scripture's storyline. However, unlike most advocates of covenant theology, progressive covenantalism does not divide the biblical covenants into simply two categories: "the covenant of works" (law) and "the covenant of grace" (gospel), although the truth of "law" and "gospel" as theological concepts is vital to maintain. Nor does it categorize the covenants as either unconditional/unilateral (royal grant) or conditional/bilateral (suzerain-vassal), as both covenant and dispensational theology tend to do.

Why? For this reason: each covenant contains both elements, but with a clear distinction between the covenant in creation *before* and *after* the fall, and that redemption is grounded in Christ alone. In fact, it's due to this blend of both elements that a deliberate *tension* is created in the Bible's unfolding covenantal storyline—a tension that heightens as God's plan unfolds—and is only resolved in Christ's perfect obedient life and death for us.

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

Thus, it's through the *plurality* of interrelated covenants, starting with Adam and creation and culminating in Christ and the new covenant, that God's one, eternal plan is revealed in time. In fact, starting with a creation covenant is crucial for two reasons.

First, the creation covenant is *foundational* for all future covenants since *all* subsequent covenants unpack Adam's role in the world. Adam, and all humanity, is created as God's image-son, a priest-king to rule over creation (Gen. 1:26-28; cf. Psa. 8). Adam is created in relation with God as he mediates God's rule to the world. Yet, God demands perfect obedience from his covenant partner, which, sadly, he fails to do (Gen. 2:16-17; cf. Gen. 3). But God graciously promises that a "seed of the woman" will come (Gen. 3:15), a greater Adam, who will reverse the effects of sin and death. In truth, *all* subsequent covenant heads will function as subsets of Adam, who, in God's plan, will not be the greater Adam, but who will point forward to Christ. Adam's role as the representative head of creation defines what comes after him, and the entire work of Christ (Heb. 2:5-18).

Second, the creation covenant is foundational for establishing various typological patterns that eventually reach their *telos* in Christ and the new covenant (e.g., the *rest* of the seventh day [Gen. 2:1-3; Exod. 20:8-11] and salvation rest in Christ [Heb. 3:7-4:13]; Eden as a temple sanctuary which is fulfilled in Christ as the new temple; and marriage which points to a greater reality, viz., Christ's relationship to his people [Gen. 2:24-25; Eph. 5:32]). *All* of these patterns will eschatologically terminate in Christ *and* God's new covenant people, the church.

In this way, the creation covenant lays the foundation that continues in *all* the covenants and it, along with all the covenants, is fulfilled in Christ. As God's eternal plan is enacted on the stage of human history, it moves from creation in Adam to consummation in Christ.

However, it's in the new covenant that all the previous covenants are fulfilled. Since *all* of the covenants are part of God's one plan, no covenant is unrelated to what preceded it, and no covenant makes sense apart from its fulfillment in Christ. No doubt, new covenant fulfillment involves an "already-not yet" aspect to it. Yet, what the previous covenants revealed, anticipated, and predicted is "already" here. That is why Jesus is the last Adam and head of the new creation (Rom. 5:12-21; 1Cor. 15:21-22; Heb. 2:5-18), the true seed and offspring of Abraham who brings blessings to the nations (Gal. 3:16), the true Israel fulfilling all that she failed to be (Matt. 2:15; John 15:1-6), and David's greater son who rules the nations and the entire creation as Lord (Acts 2:32-36; Rom. 1:3-4; cf. Psa. 2, 45, 110).

In *fulfilling* the previous covenants, this does not entail that the earlier covenants have no value for us today. The previous covenants are forever Scripture, which is for our instruction and growth (2Tim. 3:16-17). Yet, now that Christ has come, Christians are no longer under the previous covenants *as covenants* (other than the Noahic until the consummation). As the church, we obey *all* of Scripture, including the Decalogue, but now in light of its fulfillment in Christ and the new covenant (1Cor. 9:19-21).

(3) The Israel-Christ-Church relationship across redemptive-history.

Concerning the Israel-church relationship, progressive covenantalism stresses two points. First, God has *one* people, yet there is an Israel-church distinction due to their respective covenants. The church is *new* in a redemptive-historical sense since she is the *new* covenant community. Second, we must think of the Israel-church relationship *Christologically*. The church is not *directly* the "new Israel" or her replacement. Rather, in Christ Jesus, the church is God's new creation, comprised of believing Jews and Gentiles, because *Jesus* is the last Adam and true Israel, the faithful seed of Abraham who inherits the promises by his work (Gal. 3:16; Eph. 2:11-22). Thus, in union with Christ, the church is God's *new* covenant people in continuity with the elect in all ages, but *different* from Israel in its nature and structure. Now, in Christ, both believing ethnic Jews and Gentiles stand equally together and inherit all of God's promises in him (Gal. 3:26-4:7). And, furthermore, the relationship between Christ and his people is inseparable. For this reason, the church receives *all* of God's promises *in Christ*.

This way of viewing Israel-Christ-Church differs from dispensational and covenant theology in at least two areas. First, against dispensationalism, Jesus is the antitypical fulfillment of Israel and Adam, and in him *all* of God's promises are fulfilled for his people, the church, consisting of believing, regenerate Jews and Gentiles. In addition, in Christ, the land promise is also fulfilled and consummated, as the one who wins the new creation by his work and who, when he returns, will usher in the new creation (Rom. 4:13; Eph. 6:3; Heb. 11:10, 16; cf. Matt. 5:5; Rev. 21-22). In Christ, as the last Adam and true Israel, he is the first man of the new creation and by his work he wins the new creation by putting everything under his feet in victory and triumph at his cross and in his glorious resurrection (Heb. 2:5-18). The land, then, is viewed as a type/pattern which not only looks back to Eden/creation, but also forward to Christ and the new creation.

Second, against covenant theology, Jesus' *new* covenant people are different from Israel under the old covenant. Under the old covenant, Israel, in its nature and structure, was a *mixed* community of believers and unbelievers (Rom. 9:6). But the church is constituted by people who are united to Christ by faith and partakers of the new covenant, which minimally includes the forgiveness of sin, the gift of the Spirit, and heart circumcision. Thus, in contrast to Israel, the church is constituted as a believing, regenerate people, although we await the fullness of what Christ inaugurated at his glorious return. For this reason, baptism, the sign of the new covenant, is only applied to those who profess faith and give credible evidence that they are no longer in Adam but in Christ, and circumcision and baptism do *not* signify the same realities, due to their respective covenantal differences. In fact, to think that circumcision and baptism signify the same reality is a covenantal-category mistake.

Here is progressive covenantalism in summary form. On gospel issues, although there is more agreement than not with dispensational and covenant theology, progressive covenantalism contends that at the center of all of God's plans and purposes is Christ Jesus. In him, all of God's promises are "yes and Amen" (2Cor. 1:20), and by grace, we, as the church are the beneficiaries of his glorious, triumphant work, now and forevermore.

FURTHER READING

- D. A. Carson, “New Covenant Theology and Biblical Theology,” in *God’s Glory Revealed in Christ: Essays on Biblical Theology in Honor of Thomas R. Schreiner*, eds. Denny Burk, James M. Hamilton, Jr, and Brian Vickers (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2019), 17-31.
- Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018).
- Gary D. Long, *New Covenant Theology* (n.p.: CreateSpace, 2013).
- John G. Reisinger, *Abraham’s Four Seeds* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 1998).
- Brian S. Rosner, *Paul and the Law: Keeping the Commandments of God*, NSBT 31 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2013).
- Thomas R. Schreiner, *Covenant and God’s Purpose for the World* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017).
- Tom Wells and Fred Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology: Description, Definition, Defense* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2002).
- Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E. Parker, eds., *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course between Dispensational and Covenant Theologies* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016). See an Author Interview [here](#) and [here](#).
- Stephen J. Wellum, “[Progressive Covenantalism](#).”
- Stephen J. Wellum, “[The Backbone to the Bible’s Storyline](#).”

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