

Progressive Covenantalism as an Integrating Motif of Scripture

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Abstract¹

Progressive covenantalism is a new working model for comprehending the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. The goal is to articulate a consistent understanding of how to put together seemingly heterogeneous portions of Scripture. This integrating motif asserts that God's progressive revelation of His covenants is an extension of the kingdom blessings He first introduced in creation. Affiliated claims are that the various covenants revealed in Scripture are interrelated and build on one another, that the people of God throughout the history of salvation are united, and that they equally share in His eschatological promises.

1. Introduction

The present interest in the subject began after watching the webcast, "What Is Progressive Covenantalism", hosted by Michael Patton and Rhyme Dyck of *The Theology Program*.² In fact, this was the first time I heard the concept introduced and explained. Admittedly, the notion of "progressive dispensationalism" has been around for a number of years, as reflected in the publication *Continuity and Discontinuity*;³ but the idea of "progressive covenantalism" was different, especially as presented by individuals who did their graduate studies at Dallas Theological Seminary, an academic institution long known for its dispensational leanings.

The intent of Patton and Dyck was to come up with a consistent understanding of how to put together seemingly heterogeneous portions of Scripture. Concededly, they do not give an elaborate explanation of what they mean by progressive covenantalism. Nonetheless, the comments they make in their lecture provide a useful starting point for proposing a new working model of how to understand the relationship between the Old and New Testaments.⁴ This endeavor mirrors the ongoing task of theology. As König explains, "theology is

¹The idea for the title of the present article came from the essay by Shelton 2004. This is a preliminary draft of an essay that will eventually be published in a peer-reviewed theological journal. All rights reserved.

²Patton and Dyck 2005.

³Feinberg 1988a; cf. Blaising and Bock 1993; Willis and Master 1994.

⁴As a disclaimer, my elaboration of what Patton and Dyck have proposed concerning progressive covenantalism reflects my own views, not necessarily theirs.

not merely *repeating* what is written in the Bible but rather *rethinking* the biblical material” so as to foster greater understanding.⁵

What is the reason for introducing another approach to explain the intertextuality between the testaments?⁶ It is centered in the shortcomings associated with the concept of “dispensations”. Patton and Dyck note that over the past century, dispensationalism has focused on the discontinuity in the master plan of God.⁷ Indeed, the spotlight is on the separate ways in which the Lord has worked among His people in different periods of time.⁸ The lecturers observe that this emphasis is misplaced. Rather than accent distinctions within different portions of Scripture, it is more helpful to talk about the unity of the divine plan for the faith community throughout history. In this case, God’s covenant with His people is the basis for seeing more continuity than discontinuity between the testaments.⁹

An investigation into this topic surfaced one instance in which progressive covenantalism was associated with theonomy or Christian reconstructionism.¹⁰ In another instance, Moore, a professor at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, used the phrase “progressive covenantalism” in reference to the views of Hoekema (a longtime professor at Calvin Theological Seminary) concerning the way in which the kingdom promises of the Old Testament will be fulfilled.¹¹ These references, however, seem to be more incidental and not representative of a broader, well-established view concerning progressive covenantalism.

In light of the preceding observations, there is merit in developing further the theological construct put forward by Patton and Dyck. As a disclaimer, the goal of this essay is not to present a wide-ranging summary of contemporary thought regarding the covenant.¹² This essay reflects the conviction that while there is

⁵1994:182; italics are his.

⁶For differing views on various aspects of the intertextuality between the testaments, cf. Balentine 1981:41-57; Black 1971:1-14; Bock 1985a:209-220; Bock 1985b:306-316; Evans 1986:25-32; Fensham 1971:82-94; Holbrook 1974:127-141; Nakarai 1978:81-89; Roehrs 1984:204-216; Simian-Yofre 1998:267-298; G. Wehemeier 1971:30-42; Weir 1982:65-76.

⁷Cf. Blaising 1992:23-39; Saucy 1993:26-27; for an examination of dispensational positions of discontinuity, cf. Feinberg 1988b:63-86.

⁸For a summary of classic dispensational teachings regarding Israel and church, cf. Yip 2001:2-19.

⁹Regarding the fundamental homogeneity and continuity between the testaments, cf. Liroy 2005:15-16.

¹⁰Cf. the following website: www.gospelpedlar.com/cov_dis.html.

¹¹ Moore 2000:23; cf. Hoekema 1979:274.

¹²For an overview of the development of the doctrine of the covenant in post-Reformation theology, as well as twentieth-century trends of the interpretations of the doctrine of the

“great variety in the Bible”, the Word of God is also characterized by “meaningful coherence” in which thematic trajectories can be discerned.¹³ Concerning the integrating motif proposed in this treatise, the major premise is that God’s progressive revelation of His covenants is an extension of the kingdom blessings He first introduces in creation. Affiliated claims are that the various covenants revealed in Scripture are interrelated and build on one another, that the people of God throughout the history of salvation are united, and that they equally share in His eschatological promises.

2. God’s Progressive Revelation of His Covenants

2.1. Theological Covenants

This essay affirms the view that the covenant concept is used as an organizing and controlling principle of Scripture. Through the Messiah, the covenant also links God’s various affirmations of His creative and salvific purposes toward humanity.¹⁴ Matthews regards the covenant as one of four overarching themes that “comprise the literary and theological glue of the ancient Israelite writers”.¹⁵ The other three themes identified by the author are remnant, universalism, and wisdom.¹⁶ Indeed, Matthews considers the covenant concept as “the single most overriding theme in the Old Testament”.¹⁷ As well, Williamson observes that the “divine-human covenants” are not only pivotal within the Hebrew sacred writings, but also are “foundational for the revelation that unfolds

covenant, cf. Kil Ho Lee 1993:4-21.

¹³König 1994:182.

¹⁴Akins 1995:249-250; Beckwith 1987:98-99; Jocz 1968:68, 225; König 1994:183; Shelton 2004:21, 34. For a summary of recent biblical scholarship on the definition and taxonomy of covenant, cf. Hahn 2005:263-292. For a detailed study of how the covenant concept is defined and deployed in the Old Testament, cf. Jocz 1968:17-82; Lane 2000. For an examination of the relationship between covenant and promise in the Old Testament, especially in connection with the history of redemption, cf. McComiskey 1985:59-93. For an in-depth look at the meaning of covenant in both testaments, cf. McKenzie 2000. For an examination of the covenantal structure of the Bible, cf. Harless 2004:49-65. For an overview of the divine program of redemption within a covenant paradigm, cf. Most 1967:1-19. For an analysis of various proposals concerning the theological center of the Old Testament, cf. Hasel 1991:139-171.

¹⁵Matthews 2000:vii.

¹⁶Cf. Jacob 1958:136.

¹⁷Matthews 2000:7; cf. Freedman 1964:419; Nicholson 1986:209-210, 216; Payne 1962:73-74; Van Groningen 1990:59.

in the rest of the Bible”.¹⁸ McKenzie adds that covenant is the foremost biblical image “to express the relationship between God and humans”.¹⁹

By acknowledgment, no consensus exists “over the precise number of divine covenants in Scripture”. Some affirm “only those divine-human relationships to which covenantal terminology is expressly applied”. In contrast, this essay identifies “several additional covenants”.²⁰ Even when the word “covenant” does not appear, the motif remains present throughout Scripture, whether explicitly or implicitly.²¹ To be specific, the history of salvation is understood within the framework of three central or dominant theological covenants: the covenant of redemption, the covenant of works, and the covenant of grace.²² These three are called “theological covenants” because, while not explicit, they are implicit in the Bible.²³

The *covenant of redemption* is understood as being made in eternity past among the members of the Godhead.²⁴ An examination of the broad sweep of Scripture as well as the history of salvation indicates that it was the intent of the Father to appoint the Son to live a morally perfect life (Heb 4:15; 7:26-27). In turn, He became an acceptable substitutionary sacrifice by dying an undeserved death at Calvary (Rom 3:25-26). He did this on behalf of those who would trust in Him for salvation. In essence, the Messiah became the covenantal representative for the elect (1 Pet 1:17-21).²⁵

The outworking of the covenant of redemption is seen in the covenant of works and the covenant of grace.²⁶ In the garden of Eden, the *covenant of works*²⁷ was made between God and Adam as the head of humanity (Gen 1:28-30; 2:15-17).²⁸ Admittedly, this portion of Scripture does not specifically mention the

¹⁸Williamson 2003:139; cf. Kent 1985:289; Walton 1994:24-46.

¹⁹McKenzie 2000:8; cf. Dyrness 1977:113; Eichrodt 1961:1:36, 502-511; Fensham 1971: 94; Freedman 1964:419; Jacob 1958:211; Jocz 1968:9, 227; Mendenhall and Herion 1992:1:1179, 1201; Shelton 2004:24, 34-35; Shelton 2005:36, 43; Thompson 1979:1:791.

²⁰Williamson 2000:420; cf. the discussion presented by Walton 1994:47-62.

²¹Bratcher 1987:24; Shelton 2004:24.

²²Cf. Osterhaven 2001:301-303; Vos 2000:23.

²³For an examination of the covenant concept in reformed theology, cf. Murray 1953:3-32; VanGemeren 1988:37-62.

²⁴Grudem 1994:518-519.

²⁵Cf. the extensive discussion offered by McComiskey 1985:179-192.

²⁶Robertson 1980:55.

²⁷Sometimes referred to as the covenant of creation; cf. Hos 6:7.

²⁸Cf. the detailed analysis put forward by McComiskey 1985:213-221.

Hebrew word for “covenant”;²⁹ yet as Matthews notes, it contains “elements of covenantal or treaty language”.³⁰ Also, as Rendtorff argues, God’s covenant with His creation forms the macro-structure around which the primeval narrative of Genesis 1—11 is organized.³¹ Likewise, Brown notes that creation itself “provides a defining framework” and the “cosmic bedrock that supports the covenant”.³² Additionally, McKenzie observes that chapters 1:1—2:3 “prepare the reader for the series of covenants to come”.³³ This is done in two ways. First, the Genesis narrative verbalizes the divine blessing for humans to be fruitful and multiply, a notion that subsequent covenants reaffirm. Second, the passage explains “the origin of Sabbath, which will serve as the sign of the [Mosaic] covenant”.³⁴

The Lord created Adam in His image and gave Adam the covenantal responsibility of expanding the vice-regency of the human race from Eden to the entire earth.³⁵ This was to occur by the increase in numbers of the human race and their dominion over the planet.³⁶ In this special arrangement, Adam was required to pass the test of the forbidden fruit. If he succeeded, the human race would have completed its earthly history without sin and death. Because Adam failed the test, he brought the judgment of death to the entire human race (Rom. 5:18).

In light of the fact that Adam disobeyed God and broke the covenant of works God established the *covenant of grace*³⁷ between Himself and humankind (Gen 3:15; Isa 42:6).³⁸ The Messiah, as the head of redeemed humanity, is pivotal to

²⁹Cf. Dumbrell 1984:43-46.

³⁰Matthews 2000:7-8; cf. Grudem, 1994:516-517; Shelton, 2005:45.

³¹Rendtorff 1989:386, 388, 393.

³²Brown 1996:289; cf. Robertson 1980:27, 44-45, 62; VanGemeren, 1990:86, 280.

³³McKenzie 2000:47.

³⁴Cf. Lioy 2004:40-46, 65-70; Lioy 2005:53-55; Ross 1988:95. For a discussion of how the Genesis account of the garden of Eden is pivotal to making sense of what Scripture teaches regarding the people of Israel, cf. Och 1988:143-156. For an explanation of how Genesis 1—2 can be understood covenantally, cf. Dumbrell 1984:33-39; Harless 2004:69-81; Nwachukwu 2002:43-69; Robertson 1980:67-92. For an argument against the notion of an all-embracing covenant between God and His creation in the period before the biblical Flood, cf. Williamson 2000:420-421; Williamson 2003:141-143.

³⁵Van Groningen 1996:125.

³⁶With respect to the immediate context of Genesis 1:26-28 as it pertains to the mandate of human beings to serve as God’s vice-regents over the earth, cf. Lioy 2005:51-52.

³⁷Also known as the Edenic covenant.

³⁸Cf. Grudem 1994:519; Payne 1962:96; Payne 1973:157-158. For discussion of how Genesis 3:15 can be understood covenantally, cf. Harless 2004:83-91; Nwachukwu 2002:69-73;

this special arrangement (Rom 5:15-21). The Son received from the Father the promise of an elect people, whom Christ redeemed from the curse of the Fall through His atoning sacrifice at Calvary. Moreover, the second Adam fulfilled the obligations of human loyalty that the first Adam failed to heed. The Messiah alone is able to give eternal life to all who put their faith in Him.

The basis for the covenant of grace is the promise of God to humankind in the garden of Eden, as recorded in Genesis 3:15.³⁹ Traditionally, this verse has been called the “protoevangelium”, “first gospel”, or “first account of the gospel of redemption”.⁴⁰ The Lord declared that He would put continuous enmity between the serpent and the woman. There would also be ongoing hostility between the offspring of the serpent and the offspring of the woman. Moreover, the offspring of Eve would crush the head of the serpent, while the serpent would strike her offspring’s heel.

This summary reflects an historical-exegetical reading of the text. Because later biblical writers also interpreted the text in a theological-canonical manner, they came to see the serpent in the garden as an incarnate archetype of Satan (cf. v. 1), the supreme adversary of God (cf. Rev 12:9; 20:2). Likewise, the devil’s offspring are those among humankind who follow him and his ways (cf. John 8:44; 1 John 3:8). In contrast, the woman’s offspring are those who are born of God and remain faithful to Him (John 1:12-13; Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6; 1 John 3:1-2). As the example of Cain and Abel shows (Gen 4), there is constant strife between these two divisions of humanity (John 15:18-25). Scripture reveals that Satan is the “god of this age” (2 Cor 4:4, TNIV) and that he has spiritually blinded those who choose to be his followers. Indeed, the entire world lies under the power of the evil one (1 John 5:19) and follow his debased ways (Eph 2:2). They are at odds with the redeemed and persecute them for their identity with the Messiah (2 Cor 1:5-7; Col 1:24; 2 Tim 3:12). This is part of the divine plan for overcoming the evil one.

As Genesis 3:15 promises, the victory of the redeemed is assured by the Savior. Jesus’ followers triumph over the devil “by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony” (Rev 12:11). Scripture reveals that Christ’s atoning sacrifice on the cross overcame the forces of darkness (Isa 53:12; Luke 24:26, 46; 1 Pet 1:10-11). Moreover, at Calvary, the Son disarmed Satan by taking away his power to accuse believers (cf. Rom 8:1-4, 31-39; Col 2:15; Heb 2:14-15). Furthermore, Paul noted that the “God of peace” will “soon crush Satan” under the feet of the saints (Rom 16:20). Indeed, Jesus is the divine warrior who will triumph on behalf of His people at His return (2 Thes 1:5-10; Rev 19:11-21). From a human standpoint, the delay seems long; but from the divine standpoint it

Robertson 1980:93-107. For an examination of the centrality of the covenant of grace to Calvin’s teaching, cf. Hoekema 1967:133-161.

³⁹Cf. Dyrness 1977:116; Kaiser 1978:35-37, 78-79.

⁴⁰Van Groningen 1990:110; cf. Kidner 1967:70-72; Hamilton 1990:199-200; Kaiser 1995:37-38; Klooster 1988:140-144; Leupold 1942:163-170; Peacock 1995:35-36.

is imminent, being one of the next series of events on the eschatological calendar (cf. 2 Pet 3:8).

The research done by Peacock indicates that the Eden narrative of Genesis 2:4b—3:24 depicts “three realms of relationship” that were “broken as a direct consequence of sin”: 1) between God and humanity; 2) between individuals; and 3) between humanity and the creation. God works through the covenant to “restore the broken relationships”. In this paradigm, all the covenants recorded in the Old Testament are intertwined with the Eden narrative. Moreover, each covenant discloses how God used it to partially restore the “realms of relational existence broken by sin”. This ongoing redemptive process is consummated in the new covenant inaugurated by the Messiah. Specifically, He establishes fellowship between God and His covenant people, enables the Church to experience community in all its fullness, and ensures that at the end of the age all creation will join the redeemed in glorious freedom from death and decay.⁴¹

Patton and Dyck liken God’s covenantal promise to Adam and Eve as a first installment on a long-term plan to fix what was broken when sin entered the human race (Rom 5:12). Thereafter, each covenant in Scripture builds on the one made in the garden of Eden. Similarly, each covenant increases the recipients of the divine plan of redemption. Together, these covenants are analogous to an ascending staircase that shows the direction in which God is leading His people. The inherent unity of the covenants is reinforced by the observation made by Smith that in the Hebrew sacred writings, “covenant . . . never occurs in the plural”. The idea is that “there is only one ‘covenant’ with many manifestations”.⁴²

2.2. Biblical covenants

The *Edenic covenant* is the basis for all the subsequent covenants in the Bible. Because these special arrangements are explicitly described in Scripture, they are called “biblical covenants”. Though they are distinct from one another, they are tightly interrelated. Indeed, all these covenants operate under the premise that the redeemed are to submit to God’s rule and live in accordance with His moral law.⁴³ Such a faith-stance is in response to God’s grace. It is never regarded as a way to earn God’s acceptance or merit His favor.

As was previously mentioned, the Lord established the Edenic covenant with Adam and Eve, the progenitors of the entire human race (Gen 3:15). This is followed by the *Noahic covenant*, which pertains to Noah and his descendants (6:18-22; 9:8-17). In 8:21, the Lord declared that He would never again send a flood to destroy all life. Then in 9:8-17, He solemnly confirmed that decision with

⁴¹Peacock 1995:2-3, 6-7, 12, 51-64, 236-239; cf. Shelton 2004:7-8, 21.

⁴²Smith 1993:149.

⁴³For example, as expressed in the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount; for a detailed analysis of the interrelationship between these two portions of Scripture, cf. Liroy 2004.

a covenant, the sign of which was the rainbow. In Bible times, covenants often had a sign or seal to commemorate them.

Some scholars think that until this period in history, there had never been a rainbow. Others maintain that rainbows had always been appearing near rain clouds, but that after the Flood, God invested this beautiful arch of color in the sky with a new and special meaning. According to the Genesis account, the rainbow would function as a reminder to God that He should limit the damage any rainstorm could do. He would not allow the water to continue to rise on the earth until all living things had perished. Because of the Lord's grace, Noah and his descendants were released from the ark to repopulate a stable creation. As they increased in number, they had the God-given opportunity to extend the vice-regency of humankind throughout the globe and exercise dominion over the planet. They also were required to heed God's ethical requirements. Those who transgressed His moral law faced the judgment of death.

Next in line is the *Abrahamic covenant*, which the Lord made with the patriarchs and their offspring (Gen 12:1-3; 13:14-17; 15:1-20; 17:1-14; 22:15-18; 24:6-8; 26:23-24; 28:13-15; 35:11-12). The Lord established this special agreement with Abraham, as the head of Israel. Through the patriarch and his descendants, the vice-regency of the human race would be extended further. Initially, this would take place through the Israelites in the land of Canaan. From there the blessing of redemption through the Messiah would be extended throughout the entire earth (Matt 28:18-20; Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8).

According to Genesis 17, when Abraham was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to him to reaffirm the covenant and confirm it with name changes and the sign of circumcision. As on previous occasions, the patriarch learned that he would have many descendants, who would possess Canaan. He was also told that he and all the males in his household were to be circumcised. Moreover, this practice was to be repeated on all Abraham's male descendants as well as others in the covenant community. Circumcision represented an oath affirming the covenant. It was similar to saying, "If I am untrue to the covenant, may I be cut off like my foreskin". This reflected the literal meaning of the phrase for "to make a covenant," which is "to cut a covenant". The idea is that Abraham and his descendants were to live righteously. Those who violated God's moral requirements would experience His judgment. Later in biblical history, some Jewish rabbis put too much emphasis on circumcision, and some early Jewish Christians disrupted the church because of the practice (Acts 15:1-2; Rom 2:25-29; Gal 5:2-6; Phil 3:1-3).

Paul argued in Romans 4 that Abraham is the father of all who believe, whether circumcised or uncircumcised. The apostle also maintained that a "person is a Jew who is one inwardly" (3:29). These observations are not meant to deny the existence of ethnic, national Israel. Such is affirmed, including God's eschatological program for the converted, physical descendants of Abraham (Zech 10:8-12; Rom 11:25-27);⁴⁴ nonetheless, it is important to stress that natural

⁴⁴Compton 1986:161-180; Cranfield 1983:2:576-577; Edgar 1997:15-17; Harrison 1976:10:123-123; Holwerda 1995:168-170; Morris 1988:420-421; Murray 1968:2:96-100;

descent from Abraham did not automatically guarantee inheritance of the divine promises. Embracing the covenant with saving faith was imperative.⁴⁵

Galatians 6:16 makes reference to “the Israel of God”. Some understand the preceding connective (“and,” which renders the Greek word *kai*) as pointing to two distinct groups, that is, “all who follow this rule” as well as “the Israel of God”.⁴⁶ The alternate view is that in this verse, the connective is more properly rendered “even”. This means that “all who follow this rule” are also “the Israel of God”. Expressed differently, the latter are the newly constituted covenant community of believing Jews and Gentiles (cf. Pss 125:5; 128:6).⁴⁷

The seal of the Holy Spirit, rather than circumcision, is now the faith community’s identifying mark (Eph 1:13-14). On the one hand, there is individuality and uniqueness among the members of Christ’s body (1 Cor 12:4-6). On the other hand, there is also a mystical unity. Indeed, “all its many parts form one body” (v. 12) through faith in the Messiah. The believers’ union with Him is made possible through the baptizing work of the Spirit (v. 13). Together, saved Jews and Gentiles form one body, partake of the same Spirit, and share one hope (Eph. 4:4). There is “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (vv. 5-6; cf. Rom 6:3-4; Col 2:12).

After the Abrahamic covenant comes the *Mosaic covenant* (also known as the Sinaitic or old covenant). This special agreement was established through the mediation of Moses and has ethnic Israel as its immediate focus (Exod 19–24). The nation’s redemption from slavery in Egypt forms the historical context for the issuance of God’s law, which Paul said was “holy” (Rom 7:12), and the divine commandments, which the apostle noted were “holy, righteous, and good”. The people of the covenant were required to observe its stipulations. Obedience would lead to blessing, while disobedience would result in defeat and exile from the promised land (Lev 26; Deut 28). The Israelites—particularly those who had the faith of Abraham (4:16)—served as God’s agents to extend the vice-regency of redeemed humanity.⁴⁸ Initially, this occurred through their increase in numbers and conquest of the land of Canaan. Ultimately, through the advent of the Messiah and the evangelistic efforts of His followers, the light of the gospel

Nwachukwu 2002:241-243, 248; Payne 1973:541; Pierce 1994:35-36; Poythress 1994:134-135; Schreiner 1998:614-623; for a discussion of the distinctive future of ethnic Israel in God’s eschatological plan, cf. Blaising 2001:435-450; Burns 1992:188-229; Feinberg 1988b:81-83; Kaiser 1988:301-303; Master 1994:103; Saucy 1993:297-323; Ware 1992:92-96.

⁴⁵Barker 1982:5.

⁴⁶Cf. Saucy 1993:198-202.

⁴⁷Boice 1976:507; Bruce 1982:274-275; Guthrie 1981:152; Hays 2000:11:345-346; Hendriksen 1995:246-247; Holwerda 1995:169; Lightfoot 1982:224-225; Ridderbos 1984:227; Silva 1996:184.

⁴⁸Williamson 2003:154.

began spreading to all regions of the earth (9:18). Guinan pointed out that “for Christians, the promise of the Mosaic covenant has become a reality in Christ”.⁴⁹

In this way of thinking, the Mosaic covenant is another link in God’s unbroken eschatological plan. Such stands in contrast to the view of dispensationalists such as Merrill, who claims that, rather than standing “within the broad stream of covenant tradition”, the Mosaic covenant is “made with Israel alone”.⁵⁰ It is true that this special agreement originally had the physical descendants of Jacob as its focus. Nonetheless, as Merrill concedes, the Lord wanted to use the Israelites to introduce His redemptive message to humanity. Indeed, an undeniable element of unity and continuity with the rest of the covenants is the basis for the Mosaic covenant being the foundation upon which the Israelites were able to “mediate the soteriological purposes of God” to the world. The case for continuity, rather than discontinuity, is also evident in Merrill’s statement that the Mosaic covenant “springs from” the “Genesis narratives” and is “informed by them”.⁵¹ Keumyoung, having evaluated the dispensational view of the Sinaitic covenant and the law, concluded that “it is foreign for the biblical writers to separate pure law from the Decalogue, to see the Sermon on the Mount as primarily applicable to the millennial kingdom, or to assume an antithetical relationship between law and grace”.⁵²

The *Davidic covenant* follows the Mosaic covenant and has both Jews and Gentiles in its purview (2 Sam 7:5-16; Pss 89; 132). Second Samuel 7:11-13 records the establishment of God’s covenant with David, who was the head of Israel’s permanent, royal dynasty. Although the word covenant is not specifically stated in this passage, it is used elsewhere to describe this occasion (cf. 2 Sam 23:5; Ps 89:28, 34). Clearly, the issues of 2 Samuel 7 are of immense theological importance. They concern not only the first coming of the Messiah, but also the Savior’s eternal rule on the throne of David. The Hebrew word rendered “house” (v. 11) lies at the heart of this passage. David saw his own house (or palace) and desired to build a house (or temple) for the Lord; but God declared that He would build a house (or dynasty) for David, and the king’s son would build a house (or temple) for the Lord. In His covenant with David, God promised that the king’s descendants would become a dynasty and always rule over Israel. Individual kings were subject to severe punishment (Ps 89:30-32), but the Lord would never permanently reject the line of David from the throne (vv. 33-37).

The New Testament reveals that God’s promises to David are fulfilled in the Messiah through the *new covenant*, which encompasses the household of faith in both testaments (Isa 54:10; Jer 31:31-34; Ezek 11:19; 18:31; 34:25; 36:26; Heb 8:7-13; 11:39-40).⁵³ Although various passages in the Old Testament mention God’s establishment of an “everlasting covenant” (Isa 24:5; 55:3; 61:8; Jer 32:40;

⁴⁹Guinan 1992:4:908.

⁵⁰Merrill 1987:1-2.

⁵¹Merrill 1987:3.

⁵²Keumyoung 1989:abstract; cf. 373-375.

50:5; Ezek 16:60; 37:26), only Jeremiah 31:31 speaks of a “new covenant” (cf. Heb 8:8). The emphasis here is on the inauguration of a covenant that is both “new in time and renewed in nature”.⁵⁴ Jesus establishes the new covenant through the shedding of His blood (Matt 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25; Heb 10:29; 12:24; 13:20).⁵⁵ Jesus also keeps the conditions of the covenant perfectly (Heb 4:15), serves as the Mediator of the covenant (9:15), and promised to return as the conquering King (Matt 24:29-31). Through the Savior’s atoning sacrifice, He made redemption and forgiveness of sins possible. All are now invited to partake of what He has done. In short, those who put their faith in Christ are forgiven and receive everlasting life (cf. John 3:16).

Concerning Jeremiah 31:31-34, this arguably would have been the high point of Jeremiah’s prophetic ministry. By saying that a day will come, Jeremiah also indicated that the new covenant will be part of the future messianic age (v. 31).⁵⁶ More than a century before (722 B.C.), the Assyrians had defeated and removed the residents of Israel (cf. 2 Kings 17:5-6); however, even though the northern kingdom no longer existed, Israel would be included along with Judah in the new covenant (Jer 31:31). This indicates that it was to be for all God’s people. Indeed, “Israel” (v. 33) refers to the entire nation, which was divided into the house of Israel and Judah; also, the phrase “after that time” refers to the Jews’ return from exile and their repopulation of the promised land.

As Thompson points out, the covenant the Lord inaugurated between Himself and the Israelites at Mount Sinai forms the backdrop to Jeremiah’s announcement (Exod 19:1—24:11).⁵⁷ The limitations associated with the old covenant underscored the reason for the new covenant. In the former, which God originally made with the ancestors of the Jews, He took them by the hand (in a manner of speaking) and led them out of the land of Egypt (v. 32). Even though the Lord was like a faithful and devoted husband to Israel, the people continually broke the Mosaic covenant. The new covenant would have to address the problem inherent in the old one. In particular, it would have to compensate for the inability of the people to perform up to God’s standards.

It was never God’s intent that the Mosaic law be used as a means to obtain salvation; instead, forgiveness of sins has always been the Lord’s gracious gift to those who have humbled themselves before Him in faith (Gen 15:6; Rom 4:3). The law was God’s way of pointing out the pathway that believers should walk

⁵³For an extensive discussion of the messianic meaning of the Davidic covenant, cf. Akins 1995:157-228.

⁵⁴Kaiser 1972:17; cf. the extensive discussion on the new covenant made by Kaiser 1978:231-235.

⁵⁵Malone 1989:230; McKenzie 2000:6,

⁵⁶Feinberg 1976:6:574-575.

⁵⁷Thompson 1980:580; cf. Keown, Scalise, and Smothers 1995:133.

(Rom 7:7; Gal 3:19, 24).⁵⁸ Thus, the problem with the covenant at Mount Sinai was not in God's provision, but in Israel's response. Only the Lord could change the hearts and minds of His people; thus, a new covenant was needed.

In Jeremiah 31:33, the Lord pledged to do three things in the new covenant. First, He would put His law within His people; it would become a part of their innermost being. Second, God would write the law on their hearts; expressed differently, His will and Word would affect their thoughts, emotions, and decisions. Third, the Lord would be the God of the Jews, and they would be His chosen people. Jeremiah was echoing several Old Testament promises (cf. Gen 17:7; Exod 6:7; Lev 26:12). Nonetheless, the life, death, and resurrection of the Messiah opened a new avenue for human beings to relate to their heavenly Father. Because of the salvation provided by the Redeemer, all believers can enter into God's presence. Here is seen the essential difference between the old and new covenants. The new one would be primarily internal, while the old one was principally external. The new covenant represented a relationship, while the old covenant was more of a legal document. The old was written on tablets of stone, while the new would be written on human hearts (cf. 2 Cor 3:3). Once the law of God could be implanted within people's hearts, their relationship with the Lord could be permanent.⁵⁹

Such distinctions, however, should not be overstated,⁶⁰ for there remains a fundamental unity between the old and new covenants. Indeed, embedded within the concept of covenant is "continuity in the divine purpose in history".⁶¹ This observation implies that the new covenant is "not new in essence, but new in fulfillment".⁶² In Romans 11:11-24, Paul revealed that the Lord has grafted Gentiles into the people of God (that is, the stem of Abraham), like wild olive shoots into the main trunk of an olive plant. Similarly, the new covenant is "part of the same tree" as the old covenant, not "an altogether new stock".⁶³

McKenzie explained that both the old and new covenants involve the same parties, namely, the Lord and His people. In the time of Jeremiah, the latter would have been "the descendants of the exodus generation, who were the recipients of the original covenant".⁶⁴ Furthermore, both covenants have God's moral code as their ethical foundation, with the Mosaic law being the chief historical expression of it. As Barker noted, the Old and New Testaments alike "speak with a united voice on the importance—indeed, the necessity—of

⁵⁸For a detailed discussion of the biblical concept of the law, cf. Lioy 2004:13-34.

⁵⁹Cf. Malone 1989:211-213.

⁶⁰Barker 1982:6.

⁶¹Campbell 1993:182.

⁶²Thompson 1979:1:792; cf. Dumbrell 1984:175, 184-185, 199-200.

⁶³McKenzie 2000:107; cf. Shelton 2005:49.

⁶⁴McKenzie 2000:59.

adhering to the spirit of the law”.⁶⁵ Moreover, the new covenant, like its predecessor, is rooted deeply in the sacred traditions, writings, and communal life of ancient Israel.⁶⁶

Jeremiah 31:34 declares that the people would no longer need to teach their neighbors and relatives to know the Lord in an intimate and personal way. The reason is that, under the new covenant, all of them—from the least important to the most important—would truly know the Lord. What is the basis for God establishing such a profound covenant with His people? In short, it was God’s forgiveness of the people’s sins. God’s law could not be written on hearts tainted by sin. Thus, the people’s hearts had to be cleansed (by God’s grace) so they could experience all that is promised in the new covenant. Once the Lord had forgiven them, He could deliberately forget their sins. Through Jesus’ sacrifice, the sins of humankind have been dealt with once for all. Indeed, God does not remember them (cf. Ps 103:8-12).

Hebrews 8 provides additional commentary on the interrelationship between the old and new covenants. An examination of this passage indicates that God’s progressive revelation of His covenants is the integrating motif (or the determining, controlling concept) between the testaments. Verses 1-5 reveal that because Jesus’ ministry is heavenly and unlimited, it is superior to that of the Levitical priests. The Savior, as the mediator between God and humanity (1 Tim 2:5), has inaugurated a new and better covenant than the old one based on the Mosaic law. The new covenant is better, precisely because it is “established on better promises” (Heb 8:6). As deSilva noted, “Jesus is the focal point, the lens through which the light of God’s favor and promises come into focus and shine out to humanity”.⁶⁷

The writer of Hebrews argued that if the first covenant had sufficiently met the needs of people and had adequately provided for their salvation, then there would have been no need for a new covenant to replace it (v. 7). But the old covenant was insufficient and inadequate in bringing people to God, and therefore a new covenant had to be established. The nexus of the shortfall was not the covenant in and of itself, but those living under it. God had found fault with the Israelites, primarily because they did not continue in that covenant (v. 8). While God initiated the old covenant with His people, they also willingly agreed to it (cf. Josh 24). Thus, the covenant was a mutual obligation between God and the people. Nonetheless, the people often failed to live up to their part of the obligation (cf. Neh 9; Dan 9:1-19). As a result, human failure rendered the old covenant inoperative (cf. Rom 7:7-25). The establishment of a new covenant naturally implies that the old covenant is obsolete, needs to be replaced, and will eventually disappear from the scene altogether (Heb 8:13).

⁶⁵Barker 1982:6.

⁶⁶McKenzie 2000:89; cf. Kaiser 1978:233-234.

⁶⁷DeSilva 2001:24.

It would be incorrect to conclude from the preceding remarks that the writer of Hebrews disparaged or maligned the old covenant. After all, as Newman points out, the contrast is not between an evil system (namely, the old covenant) and a good system (namely, the new covenant), but between what is good and what is better.⁶⁸ This train of thought, which was common among the Jewish people in the first century A.D., is an “argument from the lesser to the greater”. It is comparable to the rationale offered by Paul in 2 Corinthians 3 on the subject of the greater glory of the new covenant compared to the old covenant. In the case of the Mosaic covenant, it was provisional in nature. With the advent of the Messiah, “a new day in salvation history has dawned”.⁶⁹

3. The Unity of the Covenant People of God throughout Salvation History

Connected with the progressive unfolding of the previously discussed, interrelated covenants is the advancement of God’s revelation to His people concerning His eschatological program.⁷⁰ Hebrews 1:1-2 notes that during the era of the Old Testament, God spoke to His people through His prophets on a number of occasions, and He did so in various portions and in a variety of ways (for example, through visions, dreams, and riddles). The idea is that His revelation was fragmentary, partial, and incomplete; but now with the advent of the Son, the Father’s revelation to believers is ultimate, complete, and final.

Kuyper says the Old Testament is like a “tapestry with many loose ends”.⁷¹ Moreover, the New Testament writers are similar to artisans who judiciously choose “many of the threads to weave them into a newly begun tapestry in which the picture of Christ appears”. The portrait of the Messiah is enhanced by the “color, substance, and background” obtained from the “Old Testament strands”. Furthermore, because the threads from the latter are “thoroughly interwoven into the new fabric”, it is impossible to separate the testaments. Together, they form the Word of God and give profound “beauty and meaning” to the Son.

There is both continuity and discontinuity present here, such as the distinction between a seed and a full-grown plant or a caterpillar and a butterfly. While the first gives way to the second, the necessity of the first and its tight interconnection with the second is neither denied nor minimized. Likewise, the progressive unfolding of God’s covenants with His people begins in the garden of Eden with Adam and Eve and culminates in the person and work of the risen Savior. In this construct, the present age occupies an important role in the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Likewise, the church is not an afterthought

⁶⁸Newman 1997:248-249.

⁶⁹Cf. Jocz 1968:243-245; Malone 1989:211.

⁷⁰König 1994:183; cf. the author’s lucid comments on pp. 184-189.

⁷¹Kuyper 1967:13.

in God's eschatological program but stands in continuity with what is foretold in the Old Testament.⁷²

The post-resurrection account recorded in Luke 24 attests to this tight integration between the biblical covenants progressively revealed in the Old and New Testaments. In verses 25-26, the risen Messiah censured two disciples (who were going to a village called Emmaus) for being slow to believe all that the prophets had declared. In fact, Jesus' reference to "Moses and all the Prophets" (v. 27) indicates that the messianic promises extend in a unifying way throughout all the Hebrew sacred writings. Later that day, Jesus enabled the rest of His followers to comprehend what these Scriptures prophetically revealed about the necessity of the Messiah's suffering on the cross and resurrection from the dead (vv. 45-46; cf. Ps 22; Isa 52:13-53:12).

The interlocking relationship between the covenants is discernible in Romans 3:21, where Paul referred to "the righteousness of God" that has been revealed "apart from the law". There is no denying an aspect of discontinuity between the old system and the new one (cf. John 1:17), specifically in the "mode of administration".⁷³ Yet, such notwithstanding, the apostle also referred to this same "righteousness of God" to which "the Law and the Prophets testify". The idea is that the doctrine of justification by faith is taught in the Old Testament (cf. Gen 15:6; Hab 2:4). Moreover, with the incarnation of the Son, this truth is unveiled with greater clarity than before (John 1:14-18).

In Ephesians 3, Paul used the phrase rendered "the mystery of Christ" (v. 4) to refer to the unity of the people of God as each covenant was successively disclosed and inaugurated. An element of discontinuity is evident by the apostle's acknowledgment that the divine secret was not disclosed to people in former generations to the same extent that it has "now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets" (v. 5). The difference to which Paul referred was relative, not absolute. This observation in turn emphasizes the fundamental connection between the covenants of the two testaments, especially when one recognizes glimpses of the divine "mystery" present in the Old Testament (cf. Isa 19:25; 49:6; 1 Pet 1:10-12).⁷⁴

Historically speaking, Gentiles were once "separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise" (Eph 2:12). Through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross (John 10:15-16), He joins believing Jews and Gentiles (17:20-21). In spiritual union with Him, the Gentiles "who were

⁷²Saucy 1993:28; Ware 1992:96-97.

⁷³Karlberg 1987:4. The author states that the primary objective of his essay is to "indicate how the old and new covenants differ in 'mode of administration'". In addition to such familiar distinctions as "promise and fulfillment, shadow and reality," the author discusses the "temporal conditions and regulations" of the old covenant as well as its restriction to "one nation under the old economy" (Karlberg 1987:4-5; cf. Jocz 1968:238; Kil Ho Lee 1993:40-44).

⁷⁴Gerstner 2000:225-228; Saucy 1992:142-151; Saucy 1993:163-165.

once far away have been brought near” (Eph 2:13). The truth of unity and equality between Jews and non-Jews is further seen in their being “members together of one body”, namely, the spiritual body of Christ (3:6).⁷⁵

In brief, the divine secret is that through the preaching of the gospel, kingdom promises that were once the exclusive domain of ethnic Israel (Exod 19:6; Deut 7:6; Rom 9:4-5), are now enjoyed by both believing Jews and Gentiles (Eph 3:6; cf. the extensive discussion offered by Saucy 1992:127-155). As the “Israel of God” (Gal 6:16), they jointly are “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, [and] God’s special possession” (1 Pet 2:9; cf. v. 10; Rev 1:6). As Campbell notes, this is not a circumstance “in which Israel’s privileges are transferred to Gentiles”.⁷⁶ The inclusion of non-Jews is not by the exclusion or displacement of Israel and the abolishment of God’s promises to them; rather, it is by permitting saved Jews and Gentiles to jointly share in Christ’s eternal blessings.⁷⁷

Hebrews 12:22-23 further reinforces what has been said. In making reference to the unity of the covenant community in both the Old and New Testaments, the author of the epistle stated that “Mount Zion” is the place where they reside with the Lord. This celestial abode is also called “the city of the living God” and “the heavenly Jerusalem”. Incalculable numbers of angels are found there, along with “the church of the firstborn”. This “church” is simply all Christians on earth. Jesus, the first to rise from the dead (1 Cor 15:20; Col 1:18; Rev. 1:5), redeemed them from destruction and set them apart for service to God as His priests in His heavenly sanctuary (cf. Num 3:11-13; Eph 2:21-22; 1 Pet 2:4-5). The Messiah enables them to be “heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ” (Rom 8:17).

According to Hebrews 12:23, those who share in this eternal, glorious inheritance include “the spirits of the righteous made perfect”. Most likely, these are believers from the Old Testament era, such as the men and women mentioned in chapter 11. They have been made perfect in the sense that their souls have been cleansed of sin through faith in the Son (cf. 11:40). As “the mediator of a new covenant” (12:24; cf. 8:6), Jesus brings forgiveness, joy, and confidence to the united, heavenly assembly of Old and New Testament saints. Here we see with unmistakable clarity that believing Jews and Gentiles share the same eternal destiny. While the ethnic provenance of the former is affirmed, both entities remain ontologically joined together as the covenant people of God.⁷⁸

⁷⁵For an affirmation of the unity of the people of God throughout salvation history, cf. Mathison 1995:38-42; Woudstra 1988:221-238. For an affirmation of clear-cut distinctions between ethnic Israel and the church throughout salvation history, cf. Fruchtenbaum 1994:113-130; Ryrie 1980:137-140; Saucy 1988:239-259.

⁷⁶Campbell 1997:205, 208.

⁷⁷Cf. Compton 1986:258-265.

⁷⁸Poythress 1994:123.

The testimony of Scripture is that the new covenant brings to completion God's eschatological plan for redeemed humanity and the rest of creation (cf. Rom 8:18-23). In the eternal state, "heaven and a renewed earth are joined into regained and consummated Eden".⁷⁹ Of particular interest is "the Holy City, the new Jerusalem" (Rev 21:2) that descends "out of heaven from God".⁸⁰ The Lord magnificently adorned the new Jerusalem (the bride) for her husband (the groom). The implication here is that the city surpassed the beauty of everything else God had made. Some think the new Jerusalem will be a literal city where God's people dwell for all eternity. Others think the holy city is symbol of the united, redeemed community in heaven. In either case, it's clear that a new world is coming, and it will be glorious beyond imagination.

A loud voice from the heavenly throne revealed that in the eternal state God will permanently dwell, or tabernacle, among the saved of all ages. They will be His people, and He will be their God. The voice also disclosed that five scourges of human existence will not exist in the eternal state—tears, death, sorrow, crying, and pain. The new order of things will eliminate all these forms of sadness (vv. 3-4). Furthermore, God promised to give water from the life-giving fountain to everyone who was thirsty. This promise is a vivid reminder of the refreshment and satisfaction believers throughout the ages will enjoy in heaven. In the eternal state, God will satisfy the yearnings of the soul. This assurance is grounded in the Lord's own nature. Those who overcome in this life will receive an eternal inheritance and an eternal relationship. They will be the eternal children of the eternal God (v. 7).

4. Conclusion

This essay has sought to elaborate on the concept of progressive covenantalism, as broached by Patton and Dyck. It is a new working model for comprehending the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. The goal is to articulate a consistent understanding of how to put together seemingly heterogeneous portions of Scripture. This integrating motif asserts that God's progressive revelation of His covenants is an extension of the kingdom blessings He first introduced in creation. Affiliated claims are that the various covenants revealed in Scripture are interrelated and build on one another, that the people of God throughout the history of salvation are united, and that they equally share in His eschatological promises.

As Patton and Dyck have noted, and as the findings of this essay affirm, there are five advantages to progressive covenantalism: 1) it seeks to synthesize the valid points of all relevant positions; 2) it understands that converted, ethnic Israel has a future; 3) it understands that the establishment of the Church is an advancement of God's kingdom program, just as the creation of the nation of Israel was an advancement of it; 4) it recognizes the historic and future unity of all the people of God; and 5) it focuses on the sovereignty and grace of God as

⁷⁹Van Groningen 1996:131.

⁸⁰For a detailed discussion of the New Jerusalem, cf. Lioy 2003:148-155.

expressed through His covenants. In this approach, the divine eschatological program is not akin to a ship with separate, watertight compartments; rather, it is like a flowing river in which there is coherence and fluidity.

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