

## REVIEW ARTICLE

### QUESTIONING THE PROGRESS IN PROGRESSIVE COVENANTALISM: A REVIEW OF GENTRY AND WELLUM'S *KINGDOM THROUGH COVENANT*

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**P**eter J. Gentry, professor of Old Testament Interpretation at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and Stephen J. Wellum, professor of Christian Theology at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, have written *Kingdom Through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, which contains a specific diagnosis of problems in current biblical-theological and systematic-theological thinking, along with a proposed solution:

It is our conviction that the present ways of unpacking the biblical covenants across the Canon, especially as represented by dispensational and covenant theology (and their varieties), are not quite right. That is why we believe it is time to present an alternative reading which seeks to rethink and mediate these two theological traditions in such a way that we learn from both of them but also provide an alternative—a *via media*. We are convinced that there is a more accurate way to understand the relationship of the biblical covenants which makes better sense of the overall presentation of Scripture and which, in the end, will help us resolve some of our theological differences. (p. 23)

Fairly early on in the book we are told that both covenant theology and dispensational theology are inaccurate in their presentation of what Scripture teaches. For our present purposes this “new covenant theology” or “progressive covenantalism,” as they call it, and its relationship to covenant theology in particular will be addressed. Addressing the project’s comments on dispensational theology would be worthwhile, but would take more space than is reasonable here.

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### I. *The Aim of Kingdom Through Covenant*

The authors' proposed middle approach seeks to be more biblical than covenant theology. Their method for achieving greater faithfulness to the biblical text is clearly stated:

(1) to exegete the main texts for each of the covenants, paying attention to cultural context, linguistic data, literary devices and structures, and larger story; and (2) to exegete key texts that explicate the relationship between one or more covenants, so that the metanarrative is constructed from Scripture and not from an external metanarrative, i.e., philosophy or worldview. We would claim that classic covenant theology on the one hand and dispensational theology on the other (whether classic or so-called progressive) entail too much in the metanarrative that is external to Scripture. Moreover, the exegesis offered by these classic systems involves categories that are not sufficiently accurate in explaining the meaning of the key texts. (p. 171)

One can certainly be sympathetic to the authors' aim of constructing a metanarrative from Scripture rather than from a source external to Scripture. A methodology that proclaims Scripture's foundational and hermeneutical status as *principium* warrants a heartfelt welcome. Elsewhere, the authors further stress the methodological importance for rightly understanding the relationship between the OT and the NT:

One of the reasons why both popular and scholarly discussions of the relation between the Old Testament and the New have resulted in futile debates over false dichotomies and issues is directly due to a failure to consider properly the literary shape of this text. Instead what is foisted upon the text is a framework or structure it does not clearly indicate itself or possess. (p. 305)

The quoted sections above provide a representative sampling of *KTC*'s analysis of current studies on covenant and its proposed way forward.

#### 1. *The Structural Outline of Kingdom Through Covenant*

At 848 pages, *KTC* divides into three main sections: Part One: "Prolegomena," Part Two: "Exposition of the Biblical Covenants," and Part Three: "Theological Integration," with 100 additional pages dedicated to a lexical analysis of the Hebrew word *berit*, followed by a substantial bibliography. Wellum wrote Parts One and Three, and those sections reflect a more systematic nature, while acting as an overview and summary to the authors' overall argument. Gentry wrote Part Two, and he seeks to provide the expository basis for progressive covenantalism. Regarding the structure of the project, while there are eleven chapters (435 pages) dedicated to a voluminous amount of data on OT passages related to the

covenants, the reader will find no single chapter dedicated to any passage in the NT related to covenant.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. *Exegesis, Literary Analysis, and the Comparative Method*

*KTC* makes clear that any conclusion reached by the authors must be derived from exegetical foundations. Exegesis, according to the authors, should be uncontaminated by elements external to Scripture itself such as external theological assumptions, an external metanarrative/worldview, and so forth. The authors spend a few pages explicitly setting forth an orthodox doctrine of Scripture that affirms Scripture's inerrancy, divine inspiration, the unity within the biblical canon, and the progressive aspect of revelation (pp. 83-92).

The exegetical conclusions of *KTC* depend on the *kind* of exegesis the authors commend and practice. Regarding the authors' own understanding of exegesis, a few quotations give some context for the type of exegesis they have in mind:

Each covenant must be first placed in its own historical/textual context and then viewed intertextually and canonically if we are truly going to grasp something of the whole counsel of God, especially the glory of the new covenant our Lord has inaugurated. (p. 14)

An attempt to determine the meaning of this text according to the historical setting and linguistic usage of the time in which it was written begins with the literary structure, consideration of grammatical and lexical issues, and ancient Near Eastern background. (p. 186)

This brief treatment of Exodus 19–24 seeks to base accurate exposition of this text on (1) closer attention to the larger literary structure, (2) exegesis based on the cultural, historical, and linguistic setting of the text, and (3) consideration of the larger story of Scripture (metanarrative) and explicit indications of how this text fits within this larger story. (p. 301)

Some ideas start to emerge from the representative samples above. The authors operate from an intentionally specific school of thought regarding what exegesis is and how it relates to hermeneutics. The reader is told on multiple occasions that what is crucial to understanding any biblical text is (1) the literary structure of the text, (2) the linguistic and intertextual setting of the text, (3) the cultural and historical setting of the text, and (4) the canonical setting of the text within Scripture as a whole. With the above representational quotes in mind, perhaps it will be helpful to include a brief, specific example of how Gentry applies his interpretive theory and goals to a particular text.

In his treatment of Gen 1:26-28, Gentry is concerned to investigate what "the image of God" means more broadly. Under the traditional view,

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 15 is on "Speaking the Truth in Love" and Eph 4:15, and has less to do with the book's overall argument regarding covenantal structure.

the image refers to mental and spiritual qualities which humans share with the creator God. Since God is invisible (John 4:24), man does not resemble God physically but rather in terms of morality, personality, reason, and spirituality. This interpretation did not originate with the Christian church, but can be traced to Philo of Alexandria, a Jewish philosopher living in the time 30 B.C. to 45 A.D. (*On the Creation* § 69). (p. 186)

The traditional view is inadequate because it is not the result of grammatical and historical interpretation of the text. Rather, it is based largely on a kind of reasoning from systematic theology. It does not come to grips with the fact that “image” normally refers to a physical statue and cannot be exegetically validated *as the author’s intended meaning or the first audience’s natural understanding of the text* in terms of the ancient Near Eastern cultural and linguistic setting. (p. 186, emphasis added)

What follows in the next thirty-one pages of *KTC* is an outline of Gen 1:24-31 (similar to what one might find in a study Bible), linguistic analysis of verb sequences, a chiasmic exposition, comparative study of what “image” would have meant in Egyptian culture during the era Genesis was written, lexical analysis of “likeness” and “image” from the Hebrew and Akkadian-Aramaic, prepositional analysis, analysis of the first person plural, and a thematic treatment of connections between Eden, the tabernacle, and Adam’s royal rule.

Recall the authors’ intentions to be consistently biblical, as well as their warnings against allowing external textual elements to determine meaning. If the above analysis of Gen 1:26-28 is typical of the authors’ exegetical approach, the reader should conclude that linguistic analysis and the ancient Near Eastern setting are *internal* to the biblical text rather than *external*. According to Gentry, to recover accurately the meaning of a scriptural text the interpreter must reconstruct (1) the ancient Near Eastern cultural stage and historical setting of the human author, (2) as much of the psychological intention of the human author as is warranted by the text itself, (3) the original Israelite audience as that audience finds itself within an ancient Near Eastern cultural and historical background, and (4) the psychological state of the author’s (immediate) audience, including the reconstructed audience’s ability or inability to understand possibilities of meaning.<sup>2</sup>

This approach to biblical meaning relies heavily on two hermeneutical schools of thought: grammatical-historical hermeneutics and the comparative method of understanding Scripture’s relationship to ancient Near Eastern texts. A thorough treatment of either method, and especially of both methods, requires significant book-length space beyond the scope here. But key issues and specific direction may be offered to aid further study and analysis of how these approaches relate to the project of *KTC*.

Gentry is consistent and intentional in employing an explicit grammatical-historical hermeneutic.<sup>3</sup> Essentially what grammatical-historical hermeneutics

<sup>2</sup> Mention of the original audience in this regard is made on pp. 186, 204, 254, 369, and 533.

<sup>3</sup> See pp. 34 n. 30, 93, 124 n. 94, 186, for some examples.

seeks to do is reconstruct and recreate as much as possible the initial arena and context in which the original text was both written and received.<sup>4</sup>

The comparative method of hermeneutics for an ancient Near Eastern background serves the broader grammatical-historical hermeneutical approach for Gentry. Though Gentry does not explicitly mention this method by name or whether he intentionally uses it, a number of places in *KTC* indirectly indicate that the comparative method is used. For example, in the section referred to above on what “the image of God” means in Genesis, Gentry says, “The key to correct interpretation, therefore, is to *compare and contrast* the biblical text and the data from the contemporary cultures” (p. 190, emphasis original). After stating this interpretive principle, Gentry then applies it:

Having this image as background suggests that the Israelites were not to imagine any other gods in the presence of Yahweh. Scholars could have arrived at this meaning by simple lexical study, but without the benefit of the ancient Near Eastern material, the results of the lexical study made no sense to interpreters. Consequently, they devised alternative explanations, even though when the prepositional combination that occurs in the Hebrew text takes a personal object the meaning is consistently spatial. Using comparative cultural information, we have recovered a neglected sense of the text that was there all the time. *In view of the information provided from outside the Bible, this spatial sense gains credibility.* (p. 205, emphasis added)

Notice that information from *outside* (external) the Bible gives a particular interpretation credibility. What is key here is not the mere study of the ancient Near Eastern background as it relates to biblical texts, but rather that background’s *priority* in biblical hermeneutics. John Currid helpfully poses the question of what to do with ancient Near Eastern texts:

It is certainly undeniable that the historical, geographical, and cultural context of the Bible is the ancient Near East, and study of the era has much to add to our understanding of the Old Testament. But it is also true that the Old Testament worldview is unique in the ancient Near East, and this is immediately confirmed by its all-pervasive monotheism. It simply does not swallow ancient Near Eastern thought hook, line, and sinker. And so, the question for modern minds in this regard is, what precisely is the relationship of the Old Testament to ancient Near Eastern literature?<sup>5</sup>

What is hermeneutically controlling for Gentry is data that lie outside of and external to the text of Scripture, data that reveal the biblical text’s ancient Near Eastern background. In his helpful article “The Ambiguity of Biblical

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<sup>4</sup> For a helpful summary of the grammatical-historical method by one who practices the approach, see Craig L. Blomberg’s chapter and responses in *Biblical Hermeneutics: Five Views* (ed. Stanley E. Porter and Beth M. Stovell; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> John Currid, *Against the Gods: The Polemical Theology of the Old Testament* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 9.

'Background,'" Noel Weeks begins by stating, "In theory any information that one can obtain about the background of a biblical passage is to be welcomed as an aid to interpretation."<sup>6</sup> What is suspect is not the mere *study* of biblical background, but its function and *priority* in biblical exegesis and hermeneutics. Weeks is concerned to highlight what the comparative method assumes, both in its methodology and in some of the conclusions drawn from that methodology. When scholarship uncovers facts and information regarding ancient Near Eastern cultural background, the comparative method must assume, in varying degrees, a speculative (1) uniformity transculturally between similar ancient Near Eastern cultures, and (2) uniformity within particular ancient Near Eastern cultures.

Don Collett also raises pointed concerns regarding the comparative method in his article "Hermeneutics in Context: Comparative Method and Contemporary Evangelical Scholarship."<sup>7</sup> Collett describes the comparative method as a procedure that must bracket out theological claims that Scripture itself makes in order to read the OT "on its own terms." He states his main contention with the comparative method:

It is crucial for us to realize that this bracketing out procedure establishes a new set of exegetical priorities for how we gain access to the Bible and understand its meaning. In effect, the comparative method subordinates the Bible to a new set of exegetical priorities in which the primacy of the Bible's historical environment over its canonical form is assumed from the outset.<sup>8</sup>

If the comparative method contains the dangers that Collett indicates, is there a hermeneutical alternative? A canonical approach, where "canonical" refers to the biblical canon's priority and function in hermeneutics, is one possibility. (The term does not imply that a canonical reading is wholly absent in those who subscribe to the comparative method.) Again Collett:

A canonical approach does not seek to overcome the objective reality of the biblical text by effectively merging it into its external environment, thereby confusing biblical interpretation with ancient Near East commentary, nor does it surrender the objective status of the canonical text by inserting it into its effective history, thereby reducing it to a species of the hermeneutics of Second Temple Judaism. Instead, it attempts to respect the order and priorities established by the text itself.<sup>9</sup>

Richard Gaffin, in the tradition of Geerhardus Vos, offers an alternative to the comparative method and strict grammatical-historical hermeneutics when

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<sup>6</sup> Noel Weeks, "The Ambiguity of Biblical 'Background,'" *WTJ* 72 (2010): 219.

<sup>7</sup> Don Collett, "Hermeneutics in Context: Comparative Method and Contemporary Evangelical Scholarship," *Trinity School for Ministry, Faculty Writings*, <http://www.tsm.edu/sites/default/files/Faculty%20Writings/Collett%20-%20Hermeneutics%20in%20Context.pdf> (accessed March 20, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

he argues for a redemptive-historical approach to biblical interpretation. Just as in the reference above from Collett regarding a canonical approach, this method's name should not imply that the grammatical-historical approach, or Gentry/Wellum's version of it in particular, never interprets the biblical text redemptive-historically. Rather, the shorthand label is meant to express what is of primary importance and priority in its hermeneutic. Gaffin has particularly pointed words regarding attempts to bracket the OT from what the NT says about it:

In any event, multivalent, even contradictory, trajectories will appear to be the case when the Old Testament documents are read "on their own terms" in the sense of bracketing out fulfillment in Christ and the interpretive bearing of the New Testament. For new-covenant readers, submissive to both the Old and New Testaments as the Word of God, such a disjunctive reading of the Old Testament is illegitimate, as redemptive-historically (and canonically) anachronistic. To seek to interpret the various Old Testament documents for themselves and apart from the vantage point of the New exposes one ultimately to misinterpreting them. The Old Testament is to be read in the light of the New not only because Jesus and the New Testament writers read it this way, but also because Jesus and the New Testament writers are clear about the continuity in intention and meaning that exists between themselves and the various Old Testament authors and what those authors wrote in their own time and place.<sup>10</sup>

For a redemptive-historical approach, the task would not *first* be to speculate about what the original OT audience may or may not have understood. For one reason, the absence of particular historical and cultural markers in the text may be a *deliberate* and intentional absence by the human (or divine) author, seeking to highlight a text's transcendence.<sup>11</sup> Second, much of both the OT and the NT was not understood by its original audience. Not all of Israel understood the texts of the OT when they were received. The Pharisees lacked understanding of much of Jesus' teaching. Even Jesus' own disciples did not understand much of his teaching. Conjecture on what would have been adequately understood by Scripture's original audience is a poor test for what qualifies as biblical exegesis.

By highlighting Gentry and Wellum's self-conscious, intentional, and functional dependence on grammatical-historical hermeneutics and the comparative method, and the bracketing of OT exegesis while excluding NT exegesis, the reader of *KTC* may more clearly understand Gentry and Wellum's methodology and interpretive grid, which may in turn supply further clarity for how the authors arrive at their theological conclusions.

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<sup>10</sup> Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "The Redemptive-Historical View," in *Biblical Hermeneutics: Five Views*, 101. See also Lane G. Tipton, "The Gospel and Redemptive-Historical Hermeneutics," in *Confident of Better Things* (Willow Grove, Pa.: Committee for the History of the OPC, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> See Collett, "Hermeneutics in Context," 22.

## II. *Covenantal Implications: Soteriology and Redemptive History*

### I. Kingdom Through Covenant's *Understanding of Covenantal Theology*

Since the beginning of covenant theology in the Reformed tradition, there have been a number of ways to categorize the many biblical covenants. A covenant can be a covenant of works or a covenant of grace, a covenant of law or a covenant of promise, an unconditional covenant or a conditional covenant, a unilateral covenant or a bilateral covenant. For each biblical covenant—Adamic, Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, the new covenant, the covenant of redemption—there has been a range of Reformed belief on how to categorize each administration. How one does so has systemic implications for understanding law and gospel, the relationship between the OT and NT, the degree of newness for the new covenant, and a host of other topics. For present purposes, particular focus will be on how *KTC* characterizes covenant theology's understanding of the covenants, as well as *KTC*'s own covenant categories.

Because Reformed theology has not been monolithic in its understanding of covenant,<sup>12</sup> one would expect *KTC* to reflect this century-spanning, rich diversity in its characterization of covenant theology. While brief recognition is given to historical figures (Witsius, Cocceius, Calvin) and a few contemporary figures (Vos, Murray, Gaffin, Kline, Ferguson, Poythress), no mention is made of significant figures such as Owen, Goodwin, Turretin, Bavinck, and others in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries who wrote extensively and influentially on the topic.

*KTC* instead uses a small sampling of sources to describe covenant theology. Michael Horton's books are cited frequently<sup>13</sup> and Douglas Wilson's works are mentioned a good bit,<sup>14</sup> but the authors of *KTC* seem to have chosen a couple of representative figures for their description of covenant theology rather than addressing a historical sweep of figures within the past five centuries of Reformed thinking on this topic.<sup>15</sup> Such a decision may not affect their overall argument, and an exhaustive treatment of covenant theology should not be expected, but the lack of breadth in covering covenantal thinkers throughout the book should be noted.

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<sup>12</sup> This is not to say that there has been no consensus on the topic itself or even within its sub-topics. The Westminster Confession (ch. 7) certainly states precise theological language on the topic, yet the divines intentionally allowed its language to make room for a diversity of opinions on covenantal language, terms, and concepts.

<sup>13</sup> Pp. 21, 32 n. 22, 56 n. 54, 57, 59-61, 63, 66, 91, and others.

<sup>14</sup> Pp. 64 n. 76, 67 n. 83, 74 n. 104, 75, and others.

<sup>15</sup> For a helpful walk-through of the topic of covenant within the Reformed tradition, Geerhardus Vos covers much historical ground in his article in *The Princeton Theological Journal* that appears as "The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1980), 234-67. The authors of *KTC* reference this work on pp. 56 n. 54 and 59 n. 65.



## 2. Kingdom Through Covenant's *Understanding of the Particular Covenants*

*KTC*'s understanding of the particular covenants is difficult to discern, primarily due not to any high level of argumentation, but to the disparate structure of the book and the extent of spadework in the expository section on each covenant. The prerequisite knowledge for the expository section is not unreasonable, but a familiarity with Hebrew and linguistic matters helps in understanding some of the details. How those details relate to the overall argument and the sub-arguments of the book within each chapter is, on many occasions, unclear and often unstated.

The authors believe that the categories of bilateral and unilateral covenants "are not helpful or fruitful if one desires to accurately represent the biblical text" (p. 174). They state that "The traditional language describing covenants as being either unconditional or conditional is inadequate" (p. 279) and "needs to be overhauled" (p. 286). The authors also state, "Viewing the biblical covenants as either unconditional or conditional is not quite right" (p. 608). So we should not expect them to use these traditional categories of the covenants.

There is a difference, however, in stating that the covenant of grace is *primarily* bilateral/unconditional and whether a covenant, including the covenant of grace, is *exclusively* bilateral/unconditional. While the former is certainly the case in Reformed theology, there was recognition early on in covenant theology that faith was, in one sense, a *condition* of the Abrahamic covenant and of the covenant of grace, making the covenant of grace conditional in a qualified sense.<sup>16</sup> Quoting John von Rohr: "In the terminology of the Puritans the covenant of grace is *both* conditional and absolute" (emphasis added). Some covenant theologians thought it absurd to speak of a covenant as unilateral, as that kind of language is reserved for a mere *promise*, not for the reciprocity of a *covenant* situation.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, covenant theology sees no conflict between understanding one transtestamental covenant of grace on the one hand, and particularities and progression of individual covenant administrations on the other.

(1) *The Noahic Covenant*. For *KTC*, treatment of the specific covenants begins non-chronologically, starting with the Noahic covenant because Gen 6:18 is where the word "covenant" first appears in Scripture (p. 147). Two ideas are important to Gentry: (a) that the Noahic covenant be connected with the Adamic covenant and (b) "establishing a covenant" (*hēqim bērit*) is mutually exclusive to "cutting a covenant" (*kārat bērit*). Because of the language of "establishing" a covenant in Gen 6:18, Gentry sees lexical warrant for the Noahic covenant reestablishing the prior Adamic covenant, rather than understanding the Noahic covenant as a new, different covenant.

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<sup>16</sup> See Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, eds., *A Puritan Theology* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2012), 266, 307.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

In this chapter, Gentry also argues for the presence of a prelapsarian covenant with Adam.<sup>18</sup> According to Gentry, the parallels between the Adamic administration and the Noahic administration are demonstrated through parallels in the *language* used in Scripture for both covenants, providing the necessary warrant for Gentry to highlight the aspect of “new creation” under Noah, the new Adam.

Much ado is made of the Hebrew expression *hēqīm bērit* in the Noahic narrative, solidifying the connection between the Adamic and Noahic covenant. Gentry believes,

the construction *hēqīm bērit* in Gen. 6 and 9 indicates that God is not initiating a covenant with Noah but rather is upholding for Noah and his descendants a commitment initiated previously. This language clearly indicates a covenant established earlier between God and creation or God and humans at creation. (p. 156)

However, certain implications follow from denying that the Noahic covenant was initiated. Gentry does not follow through in answering many questions that come from portraying the Adamic covenant and the Noahic covenant as one covenant in two phases of establishment and reestablishment. Certainly both covenants contain creational and new creational elements, but what does Gentry’s conflation of both covenants do to the biblical understanding of Adam’s unique prelapsarian role as federal head of all of humanity? Is the covenant with Noah also a covenant of works? How does Noah, as a sinful mediator, relate to Adam, a sinless mediator under the Edenic, protological probationary period?<sup>19</sup> Of course the reader may understand Noah as another *type* of Adam in many senses, but to rule out the newness of the Noahic covenant relative to the Adamic covenant seems unnecessarily to bind and limit both covenants because of thin linguistic data.

(2) *The Covenant with Creation.* Gentry then moves chronologically backward to the Adamic covenant and presents his exposition of Gen 1–3, the covenant with creation. He is concerned to demonstrate the importance of

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<sup>18</sup> Quite unhelpful, however, is Gentry’s somewhat offhand remark on p. 164 that “The divine-human relationship is *essentially* and *fundamentally* covenantal, because covenant is intrinsic to the being of God himself,” a belief stated again by Gentry on p. 179. Though it is unclear whether Gentry has the covenant of redemption, or *pactum salutis*, in mind, the *pactum* is an *ad extra* covenant rather than a necessary covenant essential to the Godhead. To affirm that “covenant” is *intrinsic* to the being of God is to attribute by implication an *essential* element to God that includes an *ad extra*, *creational* category (covenant). Covenant theology, and WCF 7.1 in particular, instead articulates that God *voluntarily* condescended through covenant, not that covenantal condescension is essential to his nature. It is unclear whether Gentry would affirm the statement’s implications, whether Wellum would affirm the same point, or whether Gentry affirmed something he did not fully consider.

<sup>19</sup> Meredith Kline’s comment may be helpful here: “The difference between pre-redemptive and redemptive covenant is not, then, that the latter substitutes promise for law. . . . The difference is rather that redemptive covenant *adds* promise to law” (*By Oath Consigned* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975], 31-32).

man, specifically as it relates to the image of God. As mentioned above in the section on *KTC*'s method, Gentry's understanding of man in the image of God is achieved through thematic categorization, word counts, the sequence and patterns of clauses and verbs, chiasms, and so forth.

If the reader expects Gentry to weigh in on aspects of the Adamic covenant such as protology/eschatology, the covenant of works and its relation to Christ as second Adam, the theological implications of Adam as federal head, and the like, the reader will be disappointed. Though we are told from the outset that the chapters in Part Two are limited strictly to exegesis, the aforementioned aspects of the Adamic covenant are not picked up in any substantial way in Parts One and Three. Given the foundational aspect of the Adamic covenant to much of covenant theology's typology, eschatology, and overall theology, this seems to be a significant topical absence.

(3) *The Abrahamic Covenant*. Gentry spends two chapters on the covenant with Abraham, totaling seventy-six pages. For the average reader, this section will be undoubtedly confusing. As it begins, Gentry introduces the covenant with Abram by describing how God makes a new start after Adam and Noah, and he argues for understanding Gen 12 as yet another "new creation."

Gentry then argues that Israel is the *last Adam*.<sup>20</sup> His argument moves from specific connections between Abraham and Adam to concluding that Abraham and his generation, Israel, constitute the last Adam. Gentry concludes this despite the explicit language of Paul referring to Christ in 1 Cor 15:45: "Thus it is written, 'The first man Adam became a living being'; *the last Adam* became a life-giving spirit." If Israel was the last Adam, what is Christ? The reader is given no direction on this matter, and the same 1 Cor 15 passage is even cited in *KTC*'s section on typology (p. 105). On the other hand, Wellum states that "it is *only* in Christ that we have the 'last Adam'" (emphasis added). There seems to be an inconsistency between the two authors on this matter.

(4) *The Mosaic Covenant*. A familiar pattern in method, execution, and goal should begin to come into focus by the time the reader reaches the two chapters on the Mosaic covenant in Exodus and Deuteronomy. We can now expect a series of word counts/studies, translation work, lexical analysis, pattern outlining, plot structuring, discussion of ancient Near Eastern background and influence on the text, and brief mention of broader biblical-theological contexts relating to the covenant.

Gentry comes to a few conclusions in the summary section on the covenant with Moses in Exodus. He rejects the legal categorizations of moral, civil, and ceremonial law because these classifications are "foreign to the material and imposed upon it from the outside rather than arising from the material and *being clearly marked by the literary structure of the text*" (p. 355, emphasis added). Relating again to the previous discussion on *KTC*'s method, it is clear that Gentry is looking to literary structures to decipher meaning and priority within

<sup>20</sup> Gentry further employs the terminology of Israel as "last Adam" on pp. 235, 245, and 321.

a text. When no literary marker is found for a possible category, that category is dismissed.

After an extensive discussion of the ancient Near Eastern background documents of Deuteronomy and how that information informs the dating of the book, Gentry concludes that the ancient Near Eastern information supports a date for Deuteronomy during the era of Moses. Following this, Gentry states, “The book of Deuteronomy is the center of the entire Old Testament, in terms of both metanarrative and theology” (p. 363). The conclusions reached at the culmination of the chapter are that “the exodus from Egypt is a fulfillment of the covenant with Abraham” and “by means of the Israelite covenant, God intends for the nation to fulfill the Adamic role reassigned to Abraham” (p. 388).

(5) *Jeremiah and the New Covenant*. Nothing substantially new is argued in Gentry’s chapters on the Davidic covenant, Isaiah/Ezekiel, and Daniel. Jeremiah and the new covenant will have more pride of place as a key exegetical argument for their NT ecclesiology, so interaction with this section will take place later in this review. Still, it would be prudent to mention the authors’ view of typology and how it relates to the OT. This will help frame the argument for the exegesis involved in Jeremiah and the new covenant alongside other ecclesiastical concerns.

(6) *Typology*. Wellum helpfully includes a section in Part One on “The Nature and Importance of Typology,” contrasting typology with allegory and offering some positive remarks on the topic. For Wellum, typology is a *NT hermeneutical* endeavor.<sup>21</sup> He offers this summary:

Typology ought to be viewed as a subset of predictive prophecy, not in the sense of verbal predictions, but predictions built on models/patterns that God himself has established, that become gradually known as later texts reinforce that pattern, with the goal of anticipating what comes later in Christ. (p. 103)

So types are not only predictive but hidden as well. They are hidden because they are indirect and because it is only later in the text that types are revealed (p. 105). Given the nature of the discussion on OT types and to what they look forward, one might expect a treatment of eschatology in this section, given that eschatology precedes both typology and soteriology.<sup>22</sup> However, eschatology is not discussed until Part Three of *KTC*, with a brief but generally helpful overview of the “already and not yet” aspects of eschatology.

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<sup>21</sup> This seems like a confusing way to speak of typology. The reader of special revelation from the perspective of the NT era will have the benefit of the antitype, Christ, revealed. But to locate typology primarily from the NT biblical reader’s perspective seems to limit the discipline unnecessarily. If Heb 8:5 and 9:24 are correct, the property of “type” seems to be an *inherent* part of OT realities. The OT holy places made with hands simply *are* a type, and the hermeneutical implications follow from the reality of their OT typological status.

<sup>22</sup> This relationship between eschatology and typology has been acknowledged for centuries in covenant theology. See *Puritan Theology*, 228, for a discussion of Adam’s eschatological fate under the hypothetical scenario of passing the Edenic probationary period.

Though the eschatological “already/not yet” distinction described in *KTC* is appreciated, Wellum seems to move the discussion immediately to the eschatological already/not yet in the life of the individual believer (redemption applied), focusing less on the more fundamental *accomplishment* of redemption and its eschatological aspects and implications. For example, for Wellum the “reception of the Spirit” and being “in Christ” are markers of the new eschatological era:

Thus, the reception of the Spirit means that one has become a participant in the new mode of existence associated with the future age and now partakes of the powers of the “age to come.” (p. 597)

Thus, in this overlap of the ages, this in-between the times, even though we as the people of God are no longer associated with “this present age” since we are no longer “in Adam” but are now “in Christ”; even though we are participants in the future age and now have eternal life, justification before God, and the Spirit who indwells us (all realities associated with the “age to come”); we still await the fullness of Christ’s victory and the arrival of his kingdom in consummated glory. (p. 600)

For many of these categories, Wellum is less explicit in drawing the implications for OT believers, but the contrast is not difficult to pick up, given what he says about the soteriological differences in NT believers. For Wellum, NT believers experience different soteriological benefits than did OT saints. More on that below.

### III. *Ecclesiology and the New Covenant*

How might all of this biblical methodology and OT exegesis help structure Gentry and Wellum’s “via media” NT ecclesiology in contrast to traditional Reformed ecclesiology? First, the ecclesiology offered by Gentry and Wellum abandons the *vital/formal* distinction in the NT and offers instead a purely “vital” understanding of the covenant. In our view, Gentry and Wellum not only discard the vital/formal distinction, but by implication they discard the classic doctrine of the visible church. Second, in order to dismiss the vital/formal distinction in the NT, one must hurdle the frequent occurrence of apostasy passages which are hermeneutically foundational for a Reformed/covenantal structure of ecclesiology. Third, abandoning the vital/formal distinction alongside the dismissal of the apostasy passages will lead Gentry and Wellum to a one-sided view of baptism that ignores the dual sanctions involved in the ordinance.

#### 1. *The Vital/Formal Distinction*

Wellum and Gentry acknowledge that the vital/formal distinction was present in the OT, and they call the formal aspect the “mixed” community. In their view there was a formal community in the OT and a regenerate (vital) community, but in the NT the “mixed” aspect of ecclesiology is done away with.

Wellum writes,

The church, unlike Israel, is new because she is comprised of a regenerate, believing people rather than a mixed group. The true members of the new covenant community are only those who have professed that they have entered into union with Christ by repentance and faith and are partakers of all the benefits and blessings of the new covenant age. (p. 685)

Here we should ask about the nature of the word “true.” Does “true” mean one thing in the OT and another in the NT? Herman Bavinck offers a way that avoids this confusion. He points out that the visible/invisible church and thereby the vital/formal distinction is a continuous reality for every redemptive-historical epoch revealed in Scripture:

The visible and invisible church are two sides of the one and the same church. The same believers are viewed in one case from the perspective of the faith that dwells in their heart and is only known with certainty to God; and in the other case they are viewed from the perspective of their witness and life, the side that is turned toward us and can be observed by us. Because the church on Earth is in process of becoming, these two sides are never—not even in the purest church—identical. There are always unbelievers within and believers outside the church. Many wolves are within and many sheep are outside the sheepfold. The latter occurred in the Old Testament, for example, in the case of Naaman the Syrian and is still true today of all who for one reason or another live outside the fellowship of organized (“instituted”) churches and yet have true faith. But all of this in no way detracts from the fact that the essence [vital nature] of the church consists in believers alone.<sup>23</sup>

Bavinck shows himself to be in the tradition of both Calvin and Augustine in that they too maintain the visible/invisible distinction for *both* Testaments:

Therefore according to God’s secret predestination (as Augustine says), “many sheep are without, and many wolves are within.” For he knows and has marked those who know neither him nor themselves. Of those who openly wear his badge, his eyes alone see the ones who are unfeignedly holy and will persevere to the very end—the ultimate point of salvation.<sup>24</sup>

Paul states in Rom 2:29 that there was always a “true” covenant people in the OT. The true covenant people were always a smaller group than those who were historically in covenant with the Lord. For Paul, the condition of being “truly” in the covenant for the OT is “circumcision of the heart,” which according to Paul is only and always ἐν πνεύματι (“in the Spirit”).

(1) Ordo Salutis *and* Historia Salutis. It would be helpful to gain insight as to why Gentry and Wellum see a “mixed” community being done away with in the

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<sup>23</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (ed. John Bolt; trans. John Vriend; 4 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–2008), 4:306.

<sup>24</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; 2 vols.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 2:1022.

NT. What is the reason behind such a radical structural change?

With the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, all of the previous covenants have reached their fulfillment, so that the salvation realities that Jesus achieves and applies to his people are not exactly the same as under the old covenant. (p. 684)

This condition for an ecclesiastical shift comes from what Wellum sees as an *application* difference between the NT and OT. In other words, Christ Jesus *applies* something different to the NT people than he does to the OT people; the *ecclesiastical* change comes from a *soteriological* change. So what exactly is the application shift for Wellum? He names two key salvation applications that do not exist for the OT believer:

Covenant theology tends to argue that the salvation experience of the Old Testament believer is basically the same as that of the new covenant believer, thus reading new covenant realities such as the *indwelling of the Spirit and even union with Christ* back into the old covenant. (p. 113 n. 74, emphasis added)

We deny . . . that the Old Testament saint experienced the *same access to God, the indwelling of the Spirit*, and other experiences unique to the coming and work of our Lord. (p. 684 n. 70, emphasis added)

Based on the above quotations, Wellum is arguing for an OT salvation that in some ways lacks both the Spirit and Christ. This means that the "*solus*" in *solus Christus* only *becomes* true when Jesus appears on the scene. This reveals a confusion of *historia salutis* (the history of redemption)/*ordo salutis* (the order of salvation) categories. Instead of keeping with strictly *historia* categories across the redemptive-historical plain, the authors have allowed *ordo* categories to creep in and thereby render two different salvations between the two covenants.

In contrast to this approach, covenant theology maintains a *historia/ordo* distinction across the economy of covenants in Scripture. Salvation that is something other than *Spirit-wrought union* is a fiction according to the NT (Eph 4:5; John 14:6). Although there is greater liberty in the NT because the yoke of the OT is done away with, the *ordo salutis*, which is by grace through faith in Christ, remains normative throughout the old covenant. Witsius is helpful in this regard:

Now let us proceed to the *second things*, which we undertook to prove; that *in Christ*, and in the virtue of his suretiship, the fathers of the Old Testament also obtained salvation even as we. Which Peter declares almost in so many words, Acts xv.11. "but we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, we shall be saved even as they." Where the pronoun *they* is to be referred to the fathers, on whose neck an insupportable yoke of ceremonies was put. . . . To sum up the whole, then, in short, the apostle here declares three things. 1st, That the fathers *were saved*. 2dly, *By the very same covenant* that we are. 3dly, *Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ*: intimating likewise by all this reasoning, that there can possibly be but one way of salvation.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man: Comprehending a Complete Body of Divinity* (2 vols.; Edinburgh: Thomas Turnbull, 1803), 1:306-7.

Wellum identifies new *covenant* realities with new *soteriological* realities. He identifies *redemptive-historical* administrations with *individual* salvific benefits. This raises a host of questions, starting with *KTC*'s understanding of OT soteriology. If an Israelite's soteriological benefits are identified with and dependent on the current covenant administration he is under, what soteriological benefits accrue from Noah to Abraham to Moses to David to Christ (and what would the scriptural warrant be for arguing the case)? In the NT, what are the soteriological benefits while Christ was on earth but before he died and was raised? Tying soteriological benefits to covenant administrations and mediators seems to raise more questions (and problems) than it answers. We are told by Wellum that,

The notion of Christ as covenantal head is intimately associated with union with Christ. However, our union with Christ is not due to his incarnation. Even though Christ shares a common nature with us, he does not share new covenant blessings of forgiveness of sins through his flesh. This comes only by rebirth by the Spirit and through faith. In contrast to Adam, those whom Christ represents are believers, born of the Spirit. (p. 677 n. 58)

Covenant theologians will likely want to give a hearty "Amen" to the cited paragraph. New covenant blessings are by "rebirth by the Spirit" and through faith. But according to *KTC*, this rebirth to which Wellum refers cannot be the same as regeneration since Wellum earlier affirmed that even old covenant believers were regenerated. This new rebirth, which is somehow different from regeneration, must have something to do with the Spirit's indwelling of new covenant believers, something that Wellum denies for old covenant believers. Wellum elsewhere puts it this way:

And we, as the new covenant people of God, receive the benefits of his work in only one way—through individual repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ—which then, by God's grace and power, transfers us from being "in Adam" to being "in Christ," with all of the benefits of that union. Furthermore, the New Testament is clear: to be "in Christ" and thus to be a member of the new covenant entails that one is a regenerate person, since the New Testament knows nothing of one who is "in Christ" who is not effectually called of the Father, born of the Spirit, justified, holy, and awaiting glorification (see Rom 8:28-39). (p. 126)

What is further confusing about these passages is not what is affirmed but what is denied. Wellum insists that being "in Christ" is *only* a new covenant reality, denied for old covenant believers. But, according to Scripture, the only alternative to being *in Christ* is being *in Adam*, a scary fate for OT saints if 1 Cor 15:22 is to be taken at face value: "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive." Not to be taken in isolation, this verse is representative of Pauline theology as a whole in understanding Adam as representative federal head of those who are spiritually dead and under the curse, while Christ is representative of those who are alive in him (1 Cor 15, Rom 6, Eph 2). If old covenant



saints are not in Christ, according to *KTC*, are we to suppose a middle salvific way between being in Adam and being in Christ?

What also may be asked at this point is how old covenant believers obtained any soteriological benefits before Christ came. What was salvifically efficacious under the old covenant? In other words, if in the new covenant no one is regenerated, has faith, and is justified/sanctified/adopted apart from union with Christ, how are old covenant believers regenerated, how do they have faith, and how are they justified/sanctified/adopted apart from union with Christ?

Scripture teaches there is one gospel (Gal 1:6-7). This one gospel was “promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son” (Rom 1:2-3). Because of this gospel, it is *in Christ* that we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing (Eph 1:3). When one hears this gospel and believes in Christ, that believer obtains salvation and is “sealed with the promised Holy Spirit” (Eph 1:13). The old, cursed administration under the first Adam has been conquered by the death and resurrection of the second and last Adam, which was anticipated in the OT (1 Cor 15:3-4). For individuals, no one can be under the curse of Adam while also regenerate, justified, or obtaining any other salvific benefit. Any soteriological blessing flows from union with the one who was the firstfruits of those soteriological blessings, whether those blessings are applied to NT believers after Christ’s death and resurrection or whether the blessings are retroactively applied to OT believers in union with Christ. “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time” (1 Tim 2:5-6).

It should be clear that what we are discussing here are soteriological *realities*. What is not primarily in question is whether the OT reveals a fully worked-out soteriological system (it does not), nor whether any or every old covenant believer would have (a) recognized each soteriological reality he or she was given, and/or (b) was able to articulate fully any or all of those realities (they likely would not have been able to do so). Seeking to answer those questions is not how one goes about determining OT soteriological realities. What *is* soteriologically determinative is what Scripture itself has to say about how one receives the benefits of salvation. We might ask whether there is any indication in Scripture, in either testament, that there are soteriological differences between old covenant believers and new covenant believers. If the answer is negative, the continuity between OT and NT soteriological benefits should be upheld. There seems to be no scriptural warrant for conflict between transtestamental soteriological continuity and the transtestamental *discontinuity* between the redemptive *administrations* of promise (OT) and fulfillment (NT).

Where might Wellum and Gentry gain textual support for their position that demands a different soteriological application structure? They base a key ecclesiological structural change from old covenant to new covenant primarily on Jer 31:29-34. In the OT dispensation, so the argument goes, the knowledge of

the Lord and the Spirit of God were only poured out on leaders (i.e., prophets, priests, and kings). The OT believer only had *mediate* access to God through a leader, not *immediate* access. Even though there were regenerate OT believers, they did not experience the *full new covenant realities* of the Spirit's work. In the new covenant, all the people will know the Lord and have his Spirit, in contrast to the old covenant. Similarly, Wellum and Gentry argue, Jeremiah looks forward to a day, unlike the old, in which all will know the Lord and have full forgiveness of sins (Jer 31:31-34). If one scans the rest of this section of *KTC* for other OT texts that support such a radical structural change, they will not be found. Thus, this seems to be a "Jer 31-centered" ecclesiology. To put it another way, if Jer 31 can be shown to mean something other than what Gentry and Wellum take it to mean, the textual support for their radical structural change will be absent.

(2) *Jeremiah 31*. Wellum argues that the text of Jer 31 speaks of massive changes in the *structure* and *nature* of the new covenant community. The structural changes are twofold: there will be a tribal change and there will be a "Spirit empowering" change. This first change will be from a "tribal" community into an individualistic community. In other words, people will not be punished for the sins of their leaders/fathers. This line of argumentation is taken from Jer 31:29-30 where the prophet speaks of everyone being punished for their own sins as opposed to the sins of their fathers.

It is important to note that Gentry and Wellum are not just speaking in *historia* categories, they are also speaking in *ordo* categories. For them, the punishment for sin and the subsequent condemnation for both father and son was only a reality in the old covenant, while the new covenant has punishment for sins held out only to the individual, since the tribal principle is done away with. In contrast, Calvin keeps *ordo* and *historia* categories intact by stressing the fact that no children were ever punished unjustly. He writes,

Ezekiel shows that it was a complaint commonly prevailing among the people, that they suffered for the sins of their fathers. . . . Such then was the arrogance of the Jews, as to strive with God, as though he punished them, while they were innocent; and they expressed this by using a proverb, "If our fathers have eaten sour grapes, what is the reason that our teeth are set on edge?" . . . Then the Prophet says, that this proverb would no longer be used, for after tamed by evils, they would at length know that God had not dealt so severely with them without a just cause . . . that is, at that time the just judgment of God shall be exalted, so that there will be no place for these insolent and blasphemous clamors.<sup>26</sup>

What is Jeremiah foretelling in 31:30? Compared to Calvin, Gentry and Wellum argue a difficult exegetical position given other biblical passages that address trans-generational responsibility. For example, Deut 24:16 reads:

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<sup>26</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations* (ed. and trans. J. Owen; 5 vols.; Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1851–1855), 4:123-24.

“Fathers shall not be put to death because of their children, nor shall children be put to death because of their fathers. Each one shall be put to death for his own sin.” Paul, like Calvin, is so bold as to say that this state of affairs has been present since the fall (notice the expansive epochal movement from *Jew first* to *Greek also*):

He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, *the Jew first and also the Greek*, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, *the Jew first and also the Greek*. For God shows no partiality. (Rom 2:6-11)

Or to argue in the opposite direction, why is it that Paul speaks of children as lacking uncleanness due to the holiness of the believing parent (1 Cor 7:14)? Or why is it that elders are restricted from office if their children show themselves to be “open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination” (Tit 1:6)? Or, even more to the point, why does Jer 32:39 include children in the blessings of the new/everlasting covenant? Both the OT and NT teach that children are connected to their parents *and* that children are held accountable to the Lord without partiality.

A proper *historia/ordo* distinction, coupled with an *already/not yet* understanding of the future fulfillment in Jer 31 must be maintained. From an OT vantage point, picture someone exiled for the sins of their fathers, like Daniel, who longs for Jer 31:30 to come true (*historia*), even though he has salvation *already* (*ordo*) before God (Dan 6:22). From a NT vantage point we can say that in Christ we have been set free from sin’s power *but we continue* to suffer under the curses of the fall inherited from our first father, Adam. Thus, even though we are already received by faith into membership in the covenant (true of both OT and NT), a Sabbath rest still remains (not yet). In other words, only when we reach Sabbath rest will the vital/formal distinction cease and the *not yet* will become the *already*.

The other major structural change according to our authors’ understanding of Jeremiah will be from the Spirit empowering *only* leaders, to the Spirit empowering everyone. In regard to this new gift of the Spirit poured out on everyone, Wellum writes, “In fact, the New Testament presents the Spirit as the agent who not only gives us life but also enables us to follow God’s decrees and keep God’s laws, thus making us covenant keepers and *not* breakers” (p. 687). For Wellum, the OT structure was one in which the Spirit empowered leaders alone, while in the NT the Spirit empowers the entire covenant community. He writes, “No longer will the Spirit merely empower leaders but instead there will be a *universal* distribution of the Spirit” (p. 687). This is also a difficult position to maintain with consistency. In fact, just two paragraphs later Wellum writes, “We are *not* to conclude from this that no OT saint knew God, was regenerated,

or was forgiven of his or her sins. Instead, under the old covenant these realities were true for the remnant (elect) within the nation in a typological, shadowy, and anticipatory way" (p. 687).

Notice how the Spirit's work is reserved for leaders alone, but at the same time the elect community has the benefits of the Spirit (forgiveness, regeneration, knowledge of God). But according to key NT passages, the gifts of the Spirit are never separated from the indwelling of the Spirit. Regeneration is *only* effected by the Holy Spirit (John 3:8; Rom 8:9). Knowledge of God is also *only* by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 2:14). Another awkward consequence would be that no one in the OT, except leaders, can genuinely pray the thrust of Ps 51: "Take not thy Holy Spirit from me."

Even if Spirit-wrought heart circumcision seems to be unusual or even infrequent in the OT, it is nonetheless a basic requirement. Gaffin, in the tradition of covenant theology, is helpful in this area when he writes, "To appeal to the fact that in Israel such heart-renewal was not typical, perhaps quite infrequent, is really beside the point. It may not have been typical but it was *normative*."<sup>27</sup>

Likewise, Witsius avoids *ordo salutis* bifurcation between leaders and their people in the giving of the Spirit. He writes,

And since Christ cannot be separated from his Father and his Spirit, we are at the same time called to the communion of the undivided Trinity. "That our fellowship may be with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ," 1 John i:3 to which Paul joins the communion of the Holy Ghost, 2 Cor. xiii.14. And it is the very top of our happiness, to exult in God as ours, and sing aloud to him, *My God*, while he himself calls to us, *My people*, Hos. ii.23.

Moreover, as all the elect are partakers of one and the same grace, they are all likewise called to mutual communion with one another, "that ye also may have fellowship with us," 1 John i:3. Believers of the New Testament with those of the Old; the Gentiles with the Jews, being all of the same body, Eph. iii:6, in Christ, who hath made both one, Eph. ii:14. Nay, those on earth with those in heaven.<sup>28</sup>

While Gentry and Wellum are correct about the redemptive-historical transition from the old covenant to the new covenant in their reference to prophecy, this gift of the Spirit should not cause confusion between *historia* and *ordo* categories. Granted that the prophets alone have the Spirit of prophecy in the OT, and the high priests alone have special access to God in the temple, these are all to be understood as *historia* categories under a different mode and covenant administration, which at that time were types and shadows later to be fulfilled by Christ. In the new covenant we all, including children, share in the knowledge of Christ and in free access to the throne of grace, but once again, in the *historia salutis* sense.

<sup>27</sup> Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "Pentecost: Before and After," *Kerux* 10 (1995): 19.

<sup>28</sup> Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants*, 1:349.

Both the Westminster Confession of Faith and the London Baptist confession hold to this view. Westminster Confession of Faith 7.5 affirms that the types and ordinances in the OT were efficacious “*through the operation of the Spirit.*” Section 7.6 argues against any difference in substance between the two dispensations, and section 8.6 speaks of the benefits of Christ being efficacious unto the elect from “*the beginning of the world.*” Section 20.1 is most instructive:

The liberty which Christ has purchased for believers under the Gospel consists in their freedom from the guilt of sin, and condemning wrath of God, the curse of the moral law; and, in their being delivered from this present evil world, bondage to Satan, and dominion of sin; from the evil of afflictions, the sting of death, the victory of the grave, and everlasting damnation; as also, in their free access to God, and their yielding obedience unto Him, not out of slavish fear, but a child-like love and willing mind. All which were common also to believers under the law.

The Jer 31 prophecy is not simply a prophecy concerning confessing adults. The prophecy includes *all* covenant people. Accordingly, the movement from the old covenant to the new covenant is a movement from Israel to the Gentiles, as they now share in the commonwealth of Israel (Eph 2:12). True Israel is expanded, not narrowed to include only adults who can make a credible profession. Knowledge of the Lord will include children (Jer 32:39), so even according to Jeremiah it would be redemptive-historically retrograde for the promises now to be withheld from children in a household of faith. The Acts 2:29 promise from Peter is to “you, and your children, and to all those who are far off.”

The fulfillment of Jer 31, inaugurated in the NT, is not to be restricted to an “already” reality. The fulfillment has both an “already” and “not yet” aspect to it. Our authors are on the right track when they helpfully point out that one main distinction between the old covenant and new covenant is that the first was able to be broken and the last is not able to be broken (p. 688). Yet they don’t seem to go far enough in stressing why the old covenant was breakable to begin with. Beale is helpful when he stresses that the reason for the old covenant’s ability to be broken is due to the temporal, inherently imperfect nature of the old covenant. In other words, even if there was a complete lack of disobedience, the old covenant in and of itself was still impotent to save. There is a covenantal distinction in Jeremiah specifically referring to the covenant at Mt. Sinai (Jer 31:32), not the covenant made with Abraham. The elect remnant still retained, while under the law, blessings of the “unbreakable” Abrahamic covenant, and therefore the blessings of the new covenant. Beale states, “God’s gracious initiative in establishing a relationship with Israel at Sinai *overlaps* with the new covenant, since God will again exercise a gracious initiative toward Israel.”<sup>29</sup>

What one should ask our authors at this point is whether or not the covenant of grace was ever breakable. Could Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob break the

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<sup>29</sup> G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 732.

covenant? In one sense (formal) the answer is yes. In another sense (vital), the answer is absolutely not.

Where this leads us is *how* exactly the new covenant is being fulfilled. It is true the new covenant is realized in an “already” sense, but there is also a “not yet” aspect still waiting to be realized. The church of Jesus Christ, therefore, lives in this “time between the times.” Even though Christ has inaugurated the “days” Jeremiah spoke of, a “Day” (Heb 10:25) still awaits the people of God. In light of this present tension, it is proper to speak of Jer 31 as being fulfilled in the people of God. The simple fact that there still remains temptation that is common to all men (1 Cor 10:13) also means that the church is presently a mixed community in a vital/formal tension, wherein there are some who are in Christ formally (John 15:2) yet do not abide and will be thrown out into the fire. Gaffin gives practical advice concerning the temptation to move too quickly to an over-realized ecclesiology:

All of us then, are involved in a continuing struggle—against our deeply rooted eschatological impatience to tear away that veil and our undue haste to be out of the wilderness and see the realization of what, just because of that haste and impatience, will inevitably prove to be dreams and aspirations that are ill-conceived and all too “fleshly.”<sup>30</sup>

## 2. *Apostasy Passages*

If Gentry and Wellum seek to do away with the vital/formal distinction in the NT in order to pave the way for a purely invisible church that has only regenerate members, then naturally they will have to reckon with the many NT apostasy passages. Covenant theologians will understand the apostasy passages as sturdy exegetical support for the reality of a vital/formal distinction existing in the NT. Knowing this, our authors argue that covenant theologians appeal to an Arminian hermeneutic when interpreting such apostasy passages. Wellum writes, “The Bible does not teach that true Christians (elect) can lose their salvation. Ironically, however, they [covenant theologians] agree with the Arminian exegesis and conclusion *as applied to full covenant members who are not the elect*” (p. 75). He summarizes the Hebrews apostasy discussion this way:

Was the intent of Christ’s death merely to make the salvation of all people possible though all without exception will not be saved (the Arminian, general atonement view)? Or, was the intent multiple in the sense that one intent of the cross was for Christ to secure the certain salvation of his elect, while another intent was for Christ to pay the penalty for the sin of all people universally thus making possible for all who believe to be saved (the modified Calvinist, general atonement view)? Or, was the intent of the atonement specially to render certain the salvation of the elect, in

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<sup>30</sup> Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., “Theonomy and Eschatology: Reflections on Postmillennialism,” in *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique* (ed. William S. Barker and W. Robert Godfrey; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 224.

terms not only of putting away the sins of the elect but also of ensuring “that they would be brought to faith through regeneration, and kept in faith for glory, and that this is what it was intended to achieve” (the Calvinist, particular redemption view)? It is our conviction that the latter view is correct. (p. 671)

Wellum locates the discussion of atonement in terms of “the intent of Christ’s death.” Richard Muller offers a lucid summary of the differences in views on the atonement:

Historically, framed in language understandable in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there were two questions to be answered. First, the question posed by Arminius and answered at Dort: given the sufficiency of Christ’s death to pay the price for all sin, how ought one to understand the limitation of its efficacy to some? In Arminius’ view, the efficacy was limited by the choice of some persons to believe, others not to believe, and predestination was grounded in a divine foreknowledge of the choice. In the view of the Synod of Dort, the efficacy was limited according to the assumption of salvation by grace alone, to God’s elect. Calvin was quite clear on the point: the application or efficacy of Christ’s death was limited to the elect. And in this conclusion there was also accord among the later Reformed theologians.<sup>31</sup>

Given the sufficiency of Christ’s death for all, where does the ultimate cause of non-universal salvation occur—with man’s choice or with God’s election? The former answer is Arminian and the latter answer is given by the Reformed.

It is unfortunate that Wellum and Gentry do not provide a detailed analysis of NT apostasy texts. Nevertheless, they have charged the covenant theologian with holding Arminian conclusions. But the covenant theologian could just as easily charge Gentry and Wellum with taking a hyper-Calvinist position on these passages. They write, “In order for their argument to carry any weight, they must first prove that the nature of the covenant communities is essentially the same, but we have already given reasons to think this is not correct” (p. 692).

Do covenant theologians mistakenly fall into an Arminian exegesis when handling the apostasy passages? Writing on Heb 10:26, Calvin goes out of his way to disassociate himself with the soteriological synergism of Novatus. He writes,

Those who *sin*, mentioned by the Apostle, are not such as offend in any way, but such as forsake the Church, and wholly alienate themselves from Christ. For he speaks not here of this or of that sin, but he condemns by name those who willfully renounced fellowship with the Church. But there is a vast difference between particular fallings and a complete defection of this kind, by which we entirely fall away from the grace of Christ. And as this cannot be the case with any one except he has been already enlightened, he says, *If we sin willfully, after that we have received the knowledge of the truth*; as though he had said, “If we knowingly and willingly renounce the grace which we had obtained.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Richard Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition: On the Work of Christ and the Order of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 61.

<sup>32</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 243.

Bavinck likewise uses a frequently cited apostasy passage (Heb 6:6) to oppose Arminian theology. He understands this text as speaking to those *in* the church:

It may also happen that a person is temporarily brought to a halt in one's sinful career, that by a special event in one's life one is momentarily brought to one's senses, that he is deeply impacted by the preaching of the law or the gospel (Matt.13:20-21), and plans to amend his life, joins the church, and even tastes the heavenly gift and the powers of the coming age (Heb. 6:4-5). Yet later, despite all this, he will still be offended and fall away when oppression or persecution makes itself felt.<sup>33</sup>

As to the specific challenge on whether or not the nature of the covenant community is *essentially* the same, Calvin writes, "The covenant made with all the patriarchs is so much like ours in substance and reality that the two are actually one and the same. Yet they differ in the mode of dispensation."<sup>34</sup> At the end of this section in the *Institutes*, Calvin summarizes his argument:

The Old Testament or Covenant that the Lord had made with the Israelites had not been limited to earthly things, but contained a promise of spiritual and eternal life. The expectation of this must have been impressed upon the hearts of all who truly consented to the covenant. . . . Christ the Lord promises to his followers today no other kingdom of Heaven than that in which they may "sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" [Matt. 8:11]. Peter declared that the Jews of his day were heirs of the grace of the gospel because they were "the sons of the prophets, included in the covenant which the Lord of old made with his people" [Acts 3:25]. That this might not be attested in words only, the Lord also approved it by deed. At the moment of his resurrection, he deemed many of the saints worthy of sharing in his resurrection and let them be seen in the city of Jerusalem [Matt. 27:52-53]. In this he has given a sure pledge that whatever he did or suffered in acquiring eternal salvation pertains to the believers of the Old Testament as much as to ourselves. Truly, as Peter testifies, they were endowed with the same Spirit of faith whereby we are reborn into life [Acts 15:8].<sup>35</sup>

Stuart Robinson also highlights the form and structure of the successive covenants made in Scripture. He writes,

Whilst everywhere in Scripture special pains is [*sic*] taken to guard against the error that the blessings of salvation, according to the covenant of grace, have any respect to natural descent, and to declare that the true elect are born not of blood nor the will of man, yet, on the other hand, special prominence is given to the principle that, as concerning the outworking in time of the scheme of redemption, the children of those who are themselves parties to the covenant have a birthright to the privileges or the penalties of the covenant.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:138.

<sup>34</sup> Calvin, *Inst.* 1:429.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:448-49.

<sup>36</sup> Stuart Robinson, *The Church of God* (Willow Grove, Pa.: The Committee on Christian Education in the OPC, 2009), 44.



Notice how Robinson avoids any notion of presumptive grace. The *ordo salutis* is constant (true elect) yet the *historia salutis* occurs in the outworking of the scheme of redemption. Robinson demonstrates this scheme of redemption with respect to the parties (children) and their privileges:

Thus, by virtue of the covenant of works with Adam, every child born of Adam is born to die. By virtue of the covenant with Christ as the second Adam, every mortal that dies must rise again from the dead. By virtue of the covenant with Noah not to destroy again with a flood, every child born of Noah, as the second father of the race, has, as a birthright, the guarantee of God against another flood. By reason of the covenant with David, his male offspring in every generation had, as a birthright, a claim to the throne. . . . Now, this principle stands forth with special distinctness in the great Church-covenant with Abraham. His children in successive generations are not only recognized as having a birthright in its peculiar privileges, but as born members of the great visible community which this covenant, as a charter, founds and organizes, they are required to be made formally parties thereto by affixing, through their parents, their seal to the covenant. And so intimate a part of the structure is this principle, that, no matter what extent of significancy be given to the covenant itself, or what the degree of its development in subsequent eras of God's revelation, this feature holds precisely the same relative position in the covenant, nor can it be effaced from it without destroying the structure of the covenant itself.<sup>37</sup>

In so many words, Robinson demands demonstration of any covenant that left children without consequence/birthright in the covenants made with their parents. These birthright privileges, which are celebrated by a Reformed ecclesiology, are not a leftover residue from Roman Catholic sacerdotalism, nor are they a result of reading old covenant realities into the NT. They are built on the exegesis of Scripture, especially including the apostasy passages. This does not at all threaten a particularist view of redemption. It did not in the OT and it does not in the NT.

(1) *Hebrews 10:26-29*. In order to test the radical structural change defended on the basis of only one OT passage (Jer 31), we'll interact with one of the disputed NT passages mentioned by the authors, Heb 10:26-29:

For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?

Notice how the apostasy passage argues from a lesser-to-greater formula. Verse 28 speaks of how apostasy was punishable by death in the OT (lesser), and how much more it will be under the Son's administration (greater). This does not

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

mean the OT is of a *different* reality than the NT; it means the NT is of a *greater* reality, thus making the warning passages greater in *degree*, not different in substance. The fact that apostasy is defined as occurring within the covenant community in v. 28 presents a challenge to Gentry and Wellum. The shift is not a structural one, but one in which greater punishment will be given by the Son, not by Mosaic legislation. (Notice that Moses is a worker in the *same house* as the Son in Heb 3:5.) Verse 29 speaks of those who will be punished as ἡγιασθη (“sanctified”). “Sanctified” is a difficult word to get around in this case, being in the singular, passive voice.<sup>38</sup> To this we must ask, “Sanctified from what?” If the apostates are in the same position as the rest of the world, then they are not sanctified from anything or anyone. The only way to understand this passive indicative is through a vital/formal distinction; those who have formal membership in the church and were sanctified from the rest of the world. The entire section under discussion is an OT echo of Deut 17. There we find the Lord speaking to those who “transgress his covenant” (Deut 17:2) with the added requirement to “purge the evil from among you” (Deut 17:7). Any exegesis that ignores both the grammar and the OT allusions will be found wanting.

(2) *2 Peter 2:20*. Another key apostasy passage, though not dealt with in *KTC*, is in Peter’s second epistle. Peter writes, “For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first.” Peter speaks of the apostates in this passage as having two different *states*. For those who have genuine knowledge of the Lord, and may at one time have escaped the defilements associated with worldliness, and are *again* entangled in worldliness, the last state (ἔσχατα) has become worse for them than the first (πρώτων). Why does Peter not say, “the last state is the *exact same* for them as their previous first state before they escaped the defilements of the world?” Just as the author of Hebrews does in Heb 10:26-29, here Peter is speaking of people who are at one time considered to be of the household of God, even bought by Jesus Christ (v. 2). Because of their covenantal status, their judgment will be greater than those outside the covenant. This is in continuity with Peter’s first epistle, where he argues that judgment will first begin at the household of God (1 Pet 4:17). If everyone in the new covenant community/household of God is regenerate, then in Peter’s mind what or whom is the Lord coming to judge within this household?<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> James White takes this to mean that “Christ was sanctified.” This is troubling given that the connecting conjunction καί following the passive verb speaks of “enraging the Spirit of grace,” which is also in the passive voice. So Christ was not only sanctified, but he also enraged the Spirit of grace? See James White, “The Newness of the New Covenant: Part 2,” *Reformed Baptist Theological Review* 2 (2005): 85-97. Others take “sanctified” as referring to the covenant and not a person in the covenant (see Denault Pascal’s work, *The Distinctiveness of Baptist Covenant Theology* [trans. Mac and Elizabeth Wigfield; Pelham, Ala.: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2013]). Nevertheless, the surrounding context and grammar, alongside the OT allusion to Deut 17, gives more than enough warrant for “sanctified” having reference to the person within the covenant.

<sup>39</sup> For an even fuller treatment of the idea of judgment coming to the visible church, see Beale’s massive commentary on Revelation. There he argues extensively on the real threats given from

In this present time, we, like the OT saints, walk towards a Sabbath rest that still awaits, knowing that in this present “time between the times,” we will see with our eyes many professing Christians “falling from grace” (Gal 5:4) because they fail to “obey the gospel” (Rom 10:16). Many will make a shipwreck of their faith (1 Tim 1:19) and will need to be handed over to Satan. There will be “brothers” who fall into condemnation (Jas 5:12). For those who do, the last state of excommunication from the covenant has become worse than their former position in the covenant community (2 Pet 2:20).

### 3. *Baptism and Its Sign*

Under the section, “Kingdom through Covenant and the Baptismal Divide,” Wellum writes,

The most fundamental *meaning* of baptism is that it signifies a believer’s union with Christ, by grace through faith, and all the benefits that are entailed by that union. It testifies that one has entered into the realities of the new covenant and, as such, has experienced regeneration, the gift and down payment of the Spirit, and the forgiveness of sin. It graphically signifies that a believer is now a member of the body of Christ (Eph. 4:22-25). It is our defining mark of belonging as well as a demarcation from the world (cf. Acts 2:40-41). (pp. 697-98)

To this, covenant theologians extend another hearty “Amen.” For covenant theology, baptism is a sign of union with Christ, yet it is simultaneously a sign of curses and warnings. Meredith Kline is helpful on this point:

Baptism symbolizes the divine judgment ordeal and, indeed, the curse of death. The outstanding water ordeals of the Old Testament are identified in the New Testament as baptisms. (On the Noahic deluge ordeal, see 1 Pet. 3:20-22; and for the Red Sea ordeal, 1 Cor. 10:1, 2.) John the Forerunner describes Messiah’s impending judgment of the covenant community as a baptism and he interpreted his own ministry of water baptism as symbolic of that (Matt. 3:11, 12). Also, Jesus referred to his death on the cross as a baptism (Luke 12:50).<sup>40</sup>

Beale also offers helpful insight in this area when speaking of apostates,

These people do not overcome the curse of death through the resurrection of Christ, since they do not possess the reality symbolized by the signs of Christ’s vicarious death and of resurrection in the liturgical act of their baptism. However, one could say that they are partly spiritually identified only with the baptismal curse sign of death but not at all spiritually with the sign of resurrection, so that they remain in the condition of spiritual death. Thus, they remain in their sins and condemned state because they also do not possess the full reality of the baptismal

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Christ himself to the seven churches: G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

<sup>40</sup> Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue* (Overland Park, Kans.: Two Age Press, 2000), 317.

curse sign symbolizing Christ's substitutionary death on their behalf. Therefore, they spiritually experience death, which is the inward reality of the external curse sign of their baptism.<sup>41</sup>

Baptism constitutes dual-sanctions (in continuity with circumcision) because threats and curses *presuppose* a vital/formal distinction. First Corinthians 11:20-34 affirms that dual sanctions continue in the new covenant. Those saints who do not properly partake of the Lord's Supper will be "guilty of the body and blood of the Lord." The new covenant inaugural signal of the baptism at Pentecost serves this dual function as well. Gaffin writes,

While the accent in the Pentecost fulfillment is no doubt on the Holy Spirit as blessing, the presence of the fire in the form of tongues resting on each one present (Acts 2:3) should not be forgotten. Without trying to settle the question here, this phenomenon should be understood against the backdrop of John's prophecy, either as indicating that the baptismal fire of destructive judgment has been exhausted in the case of the church and will not consume it, or as signifying the refining, purifying aspect of the Spirit's work in the church (for the latter alternative, see especially Mal. 3:1-3).<sup>42</sup>

While Gentry and Wellum do highlight the blessings of baptism, they ignore the curses, perhaps because of what the sanctions imply: a vital/formal distinction. The new covenant's inauguration still has a "not yet" feature and implies that the church, as a wandering pilgrim people, lives in a time between the times. It is with this backdrop that the apostasy passages, as well as the NT sign of baptism, should be interpreted. Kline is again helpful in many respects:

But the decisive and clear historical fact is that both blessing and curse are included in the administration of the true New Covenant. The Christ who stands like the theophanic ordeal pillar of fire in the midst of the seven churches addresses to them threats as well as promises, curses as well as blessings. By his apostle he warns the Gentiles who are grafted into the tree of the covenant that just as Israelite branches had been broken off for their unbelief, they, too, if they failed to stand fast through faith, would not be spared (Rom. 11:17-21; Matt. 8:12; John 15:1-8; Heb. 6:4ff.). Again, when the Lord appears in the final ordeal theophany as the Judge of the quick and the dead, taking fiery vengeance on them that obey not the gospel, he will bring before his judgment throne all who have been within his church of the New Covenant. There his declaration of the curse of the covenant will fall on the ears of some who in this world have been within the community that formally owns his covenant lordship, so that still in that day they think to cry, "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works?" (Matt. 7:21-23; cf. 13:24-30, 36-43, 47-49; 25:1-30; Rom. 14:10; II Cor. 5:10).<sup>43</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Beale, *New Testament Biblical Theology*, 813-14.

<sup>42</sup> Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *Perspectives on Pentecost* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1979), 17-18.

<sup>43</sup> Kline, *By Oath Consigned*, 77-78.

It should be noted that the vital/formal distinction in covenant theology does not mean that children are only baptized into formal membership, or only given the sign of judgment upon their baptism. A Presbyterian cannot distinguish between vital and formal membership in children any more than in his own session. Nevertheless, the children were given the sacramental rite in every previous covenant administration (including baptism; 1 Cor 10:1-2).<sup>44</sup> It is perplexing to imagine Peter refusing baptism to children after he has told a largely Jewish crowd that this promise is for “you and your children.” It is equally perplexing that Paul speaks of the children of believing parents as being “in the Lord” (Eph 6:1), yet would not consider them to be “in the church.” We might ask Gentry and Wellum, “Who is *in the Lord* while not also *in the covenant*?”

#### IV. Conclusion

Though *KTC* has been delivered with the most noble intentions of basing biblical theology and systematic theology foundationally upon Scripture rather than on what is external to Scripture, the project unintentionally achieves the opposite goal in many respects. A hermeneutic based on grammatical-historical interpretive bracketing of the OT from the NT, coupled with heavy, primary dependence on ancient Near Eastern sources, riddles the book with problematic methodology. Additionally, confusing the categories of redemption accomplished (*historia salutis*) and redemption applied (*ordo salutis*) contributes to an equally confused understanding of each covenant’s relationship to the other covenants.

On a structural level, the reader naturally could ask, why is a detailed exposition of Heb 8–10 not included? Where is the potentially equally voluminous exposition of 1 Cor 15 and the first Adam/last Adam schema? Galatians 3? What *KTC*’s blockhouse exegesis achieves, despite the great number of pages used, is only a lexical-comparative analysis of some key texts in the OT on covenant; nothing more, and this by design. Because biblical theology and systematics are understood to pollute exegesis somehow, the interpretive method of the project prevents the conclusions that the book sets out to achieve in the first place: a biblical-theological and systematic case for progressive covenantalism. Without organically employing biblical theology and systematics *within* the exegetical work, the lexical-comparative analysis in Part Two must by design remain disconnected from *KTC*’s overall argument. For these reasons and others, it is difficult to see where *KTC* is successful in establishing any of its major theses.

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<sup>44</sup> It is helpful to remember that Abraham was commanded by the Lord to circumcise both Ishmael and Isaac, even though one was born according to the Spirit and the other was born according to the flesh.

