

## PROGRESSIVE COVENANTALISTS AS REFORMED BAPTISTS

DANIEL SCHEIDERER

At least three new systems of covenant theology have arisen in Calvinistic Baptist circles in recent decades: new covenant theology, progressive covenantalism, and 1689 Federalism (Reformed Baptists). Each group has its own proponents and its own circles of influence, but churches impacted by each proposal are generally familiar to one another. Because progressive covenantalists initially described themselves as a subset of new covenant theology, arguments against new covenant theology were often simply co-opted for use against progressive covenantalists. This article aims to demonstrate that progressive covenantalists have significant points of continuity with their Reformed Baptist brothers that facilitate mutual benefit between the two camps. To demonstrate this continuity, the covenants of works and grace and the new covenant are examined in the two systems alongside their Particular Baptist forefathers to show that all three groups operate with a basically continuous infrastructure. The benefit of such a study is that it distinguishes the progressive covenantal proposal from the proposal of new covenant theology while avoiding simplistic readings that deny the real differences between progressive covenantalists and Reformed Baptists. The study does not deny the real tension that exists in progressive covenantalists' reinterpretation of the fourth commandment, but it sets aside that debate so that points of clear commonalities may be seen for what they are. Too often conversations about covenant theology have passed one another, and so this article aims to initiate a conversation between two groups that ought to be the nearest allies.

---

“**P**rogressive covenantalism” broke onto the scene in 2012 with Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum’s book *Kingdom through Covenant*. In its opening pages they said their proposal fell under the umbrella of “new covenant theology,” but they preferred their new term. In their later work, however, they include a great many caveats to this identification, saying that some proponents may hold to both new covenant theology and progressive

---

*Daniel Scheiderer ministers at Long Plain Baptist Church, Acushnet, MA, and is completing a PhD at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary under Stephen Wellum on the pactum salutis. A version of this article was originally presented to the biblical theology study group at the Tyndale Fellowship, Cambridge, England, June 27, 2018.*

covenantalism, but there are others within new covenant theology who make proposals counter to the claims of progressive covenantalism. In my view, it is best to understand progressive covenantalism as distinct from new covenant theology. Because of their identification with new covenant theology in the early work, it seems that many critics have superimposed their critiques of new covenant theology onto progressive covenantalism, thus neglecting the due diligence of understanding it on its own terms.<sup>1</sup> My own tradition, Reformed Baptist, has not been immune to this problem. When asked whether they have interacted with progressive covenantalism, Reformed Baptists will often simply point to some critique of new covenant theology.<sup>2</sup> The danger in this approach is reductionism. In this article, I will argue that progressive covenantalism is best understood as a proposal internal to the Reformed Baptist community because it follows the biblical reasoning of the early Particular Baptists and current Reformed Baptists. While I will certainly grant the seriousness of their rejection of the Decalogue as a distilled summary of the moral law, specifically seen in their understanding of the Sabbath command, I contend that the way Reformed Baptists understand the Bible is put together is in continuity<sup>3</sup> with our Particular Baptist forebears.

As I begin, I wish to lay out some clear parameters I have set for myself, parameters which I hope will keep the topic properly grounded rather than chasing rabbit trails that tend to distract our attention from the discussion at hand. First, as mentioned above, I will not be critiquing progressive covenantalism's rejection of the Sabbath command here. I feel the conversation is often derailed at this very point, such that progressive covenantalists are often portrayed as antinomians or Marcionites, while I believe the matter is more complex. It seems also that challengers to progressive covenantalism often repeat arguments from dispensational and new covenant theology debates

---

<sup>1</sup> Wellum expresses great frustration with this imprecision in Stephen J. Wellum with Brent E. Parker, introduction to *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course Between Dispensational and Covenantal Theologies*, ed. Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E. Parker (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 3–4; see esp. n. 7. The authors' identification with new covenant theology is also removed in the 2018 revision of *Kingdom through Covenant*; see Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 35n9.

<sup>2</sup> One anecdotal instance of this may highlight what I mean. When Richard C. Barcellos's work critiquing new covenant theology, *Getting the Garden Right: Adam's Work and God's Rest in Light of Christ* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2017), was released I asked the publishers if it interacts with progressive covenantalism at all. Many had been lumping the two together, but Founders responded that it does only in passing. While there is certainly overlap between the two systems, it is crucial that we allow progressive covenantalism to stand on its own.

<sup>3</sup> "Continuity" in this article is used as a term to describe the nature of progressive covenantalism's proposal as one internal to the Reformed Baptist community. Thus, I am not using the term, as it is sometimes used, to mean that progressive covenantalism is perfectly consistent with or identical to Particular Baptists and Reformed Baptists. Rather, here "continuity" means they are working in the same stream of thought. Thus, I ask the reader to use something like my thesis or this footnote as the definition of "continuity" when they encounter the word in this piece.

against progressive covenantalism, and this often stems from the point that they reject the Sabbath. Second, and this should go without saying, I will not be seeking to repeat their entire system. Gentry, Wellum, and other writers have devoted many pages to developing their system in biblical theology, systematic theology, and on particular doctrinal and exegetical points. Because they are still developing the system, and because my goal is more to draw major points of connection than provide an exhaustive survey of continuity, I will not be looking at what they have said at every point. Rather, third, my aim will be to show that their basic interpretation of three points, the skeleton they are filling out, is the same basic organism as the old Particular and current Reformed Baptists. Thus, I will be focusing on the theological covenants of works and grace, and the biblical new covenant. Here I must make two related points. I am not including the Abrahamic, Mosaic, or Davidic covenants, which are vital components of any covenantal system. The reason for this is twofold: first, I want to allow myself more space to examine the other points, and, second, those I include are major points of contention between the two Baptist systems and dispensationalism and covenant theology. Secondly, I am not including the covenant of redemption, which is mentioned by historic Baptist writers, modern Reformed Baptists, and progressive covenantalists. The reason for this is there was also a disagreement among Particular Baptists, specifically, and the Reformed community at large over whether this was a proper distinction from the covenant of grace.<sup>4</sup> Finally, a word about my methodology, which is quite simple given space constraints. For each of the three covenants I will summarize the arguments made by the Baptists, first showing the continuity between the argument from progressive covenantalists and early Particular Baptists, and then between progressive covenantalists and current Reformed Baptists. With these clarifications in place, let's begin.

### I. *Covenant of Works, or Covenant with Creation*

The covenant of works is a commonplace in discussions about covenant theology, and though it has been disputed in the past, it remains a point of regular affirmation among Reformed Protestants. Though I recognize

---

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Keach, *Everlasting Covenant, A Sweet Cordial for a Drooping Soul* (London: H. Barnard, 1693); Keach, *The Display of Glorious Grace, or The Covenant of Peace, Opened: In Fourteen Sermons* (London: S. Bridge, 1698); John Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity: Or A System of Evangelical Truths* (London: Tegg & Company, 1839), 310–11. For the covenant of redemption, see Nehemiah Coxé, *A Discourse of the Covenants That God Made with Men Before the Law*, published with *An Exposition of Hebrews 8:6–13*, by John Owen, in *Covenant Theology: From Adam to Christ*, ed. Ronald D. Miller, James M. Renihan, and Francisco Orozco (Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2005), 54; Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 57–60, 656. To avoid distractions in the conversation, discussion of the covenant of redemption was removed in the 2018 revision of *Kingdom through Covenant*.

progressive covenantalism utilizes the terminology of “covenant with creation” over “covenant of works,” they do so in the midst of arguing for there being such a covenant made with Adam. Wellum makes five points in order to argue for the existence of a covenant with creation, or a covenant of works.<sup>5</sup> (1) The absence of the word “covenant” in Gen 1–2 is overcome by exegetical evidence later in Gen 6 and 9.<sup>6</sup> (2) The structure of Gen 2 and the usage of the term “image” points to a covenantal relationship taken up later in the NT’s Christology. Thus, (3) “Canonically and theologically, the Bible’s entire storyline is centered on two foundational, representative individuals: Adam and Christ. It seems difficult to think of Christ as the head of the new covenant without Adam being the head of some kind of covenant in the original situation.”<sup>7</sup> All biblical covenants, with their federal, or representative, aspect, flow from this initial covenant. (4) The creation covenant is foundational with typological elements, particularly Adam, whose telos is found in Christ, with its Edenic temple setting, Sabbath rest, and marriage. (5) Such a covenant gives a context to the gospel, specifically the issues of how humans are deemed sinners and how God has ordained both forgiveness and justice to be accomplished. It is important, then, to see that progressive covenantalists argue for and make use of the covenant of works, even though they prefer the term “covenant of creation.”<sup>8</sup>

The Particular Baptists left the paragraph on the covenant of works out of their Confession in 1677/89. Both the Westminster and the Savoy Confessions include the statement: “The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam, and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.”<sup>9</sup> In fact, the term “covenant of works” appears only three times in the Second London Confession, twice generically and negatively.<sup>10</sup> The third time, it is used as a dependent clause set in contrast to the gospel promise in Christ.<sup>11</sup> This usage, however, makes

<sup>5</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant* (2nd ed.), 666–85; cf. chs. 5–6.

<sup>6</sup> William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: An Old Testament Covenant Theology*, rev. ed. (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2013), 12–20.

<sup>7</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant* (2nd ed.), 670.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Thomas R. Schreiner, *Covenant and God’s Purpose for the World*, Short Studies in Biblical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 19–29.

<sup>9</sup> WCF 6.2; Savoy Declaration 6.2. For a good defense of the covenant of works’ appearance in the Second London Confession, despite claims to the contrary, see Samuel D. Renihan, *From Shadow to Substance: The Federal Theology of the English Particular Baptists (1642–1704)*, Centre for Baptist History and Heritage Studies (Regent’s Park College, Oxford: Centre for Baptist History and Heritage, 2018), 182–85. In fact, Renihan shows that even though the term is omitted, the concept is even more developed than in the earlier source documents. Another solid defense and exposition of the doctrine as held by Particular Baptists in the seventeenth century is Barcellos, *Getting the Garden Right*, 38–52.

<sup>10</sup> Second London Confession 19.6. Both times the Confession is saying believers are not under “a covenant of works” (emphasis added).

<sup>11</sup> “The covenant of works being broken by sin, and made unprofitable unto life, God was pleased to give forth the promise of Christ...” (ibid., 20.1).

evident a sort of presupposition in the confessional writers/editors about the doctrine of a covenant of works. They believed that there was such a covenant, and that it has been counteracted by the gospel promise. One Particular Baptist that dealt with the doctrine was Nehemiah Coxe who, notably, also used the term “Covenant of Creation” nearly synonymously with covenant of works.<sup>12</sup> Coxe argued the structure of the Genesis narrative and the consequences of Adam’s disobedience for all mankind mean it was not necessary that the term “covenant” be used. “Had he only been under a law to God,” Coxe says, “his sin would have remained on himself. It could not have redounded on the whole world of mankind by a just imputation as it now does, any more than the sin of any particular person can now be imputed to another man that is not actually guilty of it.”<sup>13</sup> Benjamin Keach concurred nearly two decades later, saying, “God gave a Law, or entered into a Covenant of Works with the First Adam and his Seed, and in that Covenant he gave himself to be our God, even upon the strict and severe condition of perfect Obedience.”<sup>14</sup>

What is clear in the comparison of the two presentations of the covenant of works is that they are non-contradictory. Though Gentry and Wellum’s explanation includes things that were not included previously, the substance of what they are saying is not opposed to what was said by the earlier Particular Baptists. I will make one point on which they contradict each other, and one point that may seem to be a contradiction, but I do not think this point undercuts my claim that progressive covenantalists are in continuity with Particular Baptists. Coxe considers the terminology of “establishment” in the Noahic covenant to be God’s “making” of a covenant.<sup>15</sup> He draws continuity by connecting this covenant to the covenant of grace, rather than to the covenant of creation as Wellum and Gentry do. Thus, progressive covenantalism is drawing on a new argument, not in such a way as to remove the doctrine of the covenant of creation, but to strengthen it.<sup>16</sup> The area where there appears to be a contradiction, but there

---

<sup>12</sup> Coxe, *Discourse of the Covenants*, 39, 46, 49, 53, 58, 59. Cf. “foedus,” “foedus creationis,” “foedus naturae,” and “foedus operum” in Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 126, 127, 130–31. It is also important to recognize that, minimally, the church Nehemiah Coxe pastored received the London Confession immediately in 1677, and, as has been postulated elsewhere, “Nehemiah Coxe and William Collins are the most likely candidates to have served as the editors of the document” (James M. Renihan, introduction to *Covenant Theology: From Adam to Christ*, 20). For a background to the publication of the Second London Confession, including especially Nehemiah Coxe’s role in Baptist life at the time, see S. Renihan, *From Shadow to Substance*, 173–81.

<sup>13</sup> Coxe, *Discourse of the Covenants*, 48–49.

<sup>14</sup> Keach, *Display of Glorious Grace*, 14. Keach was also important for the confessional identity of Particular Baptists as one of those who called the General Assembly together to endorse the Confession in 1689, as a signatory, and as a writer of dozens of theological works.

<sup>15</sup> Coxe, *Discourse of the Covenants*, 65.

<sup>16</sup> I do not here wish to reiterate some of the concerns with drawing that connection too closely. For instance, “what does Gentry’s conflation of both covenants do to the biblical understanding

is not, is in Wellum's argument that the telos of the covenant with Adam at creation is Christ. Keach and others strove to demonstrate the discontinuity between the covenant with Adam and the covenant with Christ, following Paul's example. In Rom 5 and 1 Cor 15, Paul argues Adam and Christ are two covenantal heads whose works bring about diametrically opposed consequences for those they represent. What we see in both the Pauline and Baptist emphases is that the similarities emphasize the difference. One man sinned, all died; one man was righteous, all live. Though parallel, these two are set in opposition. Similarly, Keach's "purpose herein is to shew you the vast difference betwixt the covenant of grace, and the Covenant of Works,"<sup>17</sup> but Wellum wants to help you see the good the beginning pointed toward. "The creation covenant," Wellum says, "plants in seed form structures and patterns that, as the covenants unfold, reach their full mature growth in Christ, the new covenant age, and the church."<sup>18</sup> What these later Baptists are doing is filling out what the earlier Baptists believed, not contradicting it.<sup>19</sup>

### *Reformed Baptists*

While Reformed Baptists have largely been concerned with historical studies, and thus concerned themselves with simply describing earlier beliefs, they have made some constructive theological arguments as well. One of the best and most recent accounts is Richard Barcellos's book *Getting the Garden Right*. His book, which is a revised response to new covenant theology,<sup>20</sup> is broken into an argument for the covenant of works and an argument for the Sabbath. In arguing for the covenant of works, Barcellos first explains why new covenant theology sometimes rejects the covenant of works, usually from an unhealthy

---

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? Of course the reader may understand Noah as another *type* of Adam in many senses, but to rule out the newness of the Noachic covenant relative to the Adamic covenant seems unnecessarily to bind and limit both covenants because of thin linguistic data" (Jonathan M. Brack and Jared S. Oliphint, "Questioning the Progress in Progressive Covenantalism: A Review of Gentry and Wellum's *Kingdom through Covenant*," *WTJ* 76 [2014]: 198). The questions raised do seem to be of crucial concern.

<sup>17</sup> Keach, *Display of Glorious Grace*, 177.

<sup>18</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant* (2nd ed.), 675.

<sup>19</sup> Here I should add a further note of difference. Coxe seems to distinguish God's demand on man by virtue of his creation from what is positively added by holding out the tree in the midst of Eden, what is usually meant by the covenant of works. It does seem to me that the distinction is correct. Gentry and Wellum more directly connect the very creation of mankind to covenantal relationship, in some ways collapsing the distinction. Compare Coxe, *Discourse of the Covenants*, 42–45, to Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 177–221, 611–18; cf. S. Renihan, *From Shadow to Substance*, 233–36.

<sup>20</sup> For his earlier response, see Richard C. Barcellos, *In Defense of the Decalogue: A Critique of New Covenant Theology* (Enumclaw, WA: Winepress, 2001), 120.

biblicism, sometimes painting itself into logical corners regarding terminology.<sup>21</sup> After explaining the doctrine as it was held by the Particular Baptists, Barcellos gives a biblical defense of the covenant of works. He says (1) we must not deny the *concept* of a covenant of works based on the absence of the *word* covenant, (2) other words are applied to the garden later in biblical literature that were not included in the original Genesis narrative,<sup>22</sup> and (3) the Bible itself looks back on the garden and Adam in explicitly covenantal terms.<sup>23</sup> Subsequently, Barcellos defines and defends the covenant of works as “that divinely sanctioned commitment or relationship God imposed upon Adam, who was a sinless representative of mankind (or a public person), an image-bearing son of God, conditioned upon his obedience, with penalty for disobedience, all for the bettering of man’s state.”<sup>24</sup> He then breaks this into its five parts: (1) divine imposition, (2) Adam’s federal headship, (3) conditioned on obedience, (4) penalty for disobedience, and (5) reward for obedience. Does *Kingdom through Covenant* argue for these five components?

One very important distinction Barcellos continues to draw on, and one that seems to call into question my claim that the two systems (i.e., progressive covenantalism and Reformed Baptist) are in continuity, is the distinction between what it meant for God to be in covenant with man by virtue of his creation and what it meant for God to be in covenant with man particularly in the person of Adam in the location of the garden. I want to answer, hopefully, both the question of whether *Kingdom through Covenant* affirms the components of a covenant of works provided by Barcellos and the question of whether they distinguish the two covenantal statuses at the same time. First, Gentry and Wellum are admittedly unclear about whether there is a distinction between man’s responsibility as creature and the covenant in Eden. However, what makes it unclear is simply that they almost exclusively discuss and defend what is normally included in the covenant of works. In his parallel between Adam and Christ, while discussing Christ’s active obedience, Wellum says that “all the biblical covenants are unconditional or unilaterally guaranteed by God’s sovereign grace and power. By starting with Adam in creation...”<sup>25</sup> Again, Wellum is arguing for Christ’s federal representation, and the parallel to that in Adam, “the first man and representative head of the human race,” so the issue

---

<sup>21</sup> For instance, new covenant theologians will sometimes reject the terminology of “covenant of works” regarding the situation of the garden because of the absence of the word, but they will then simply replace it with other extra-biblical terminology. See Barcellos, *Getting the Garden Right*, 31–37.

<sup>22</sup> For example, Luke calls Adam the “son of God” (*ibid.*, 55).

<sup>23</sup> Barcellos, *Getting the Garden Right*, 54–56.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>25</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant* (2nd ed.), 778. Though this does not seem exactly like “divinely imposed,” Wellum then explains that in the covenants, including that with Adam, God “demands” something of his covenant partner.

of federal headship is unquestionable.<sup>26</sup> He then says that “it is best to think of God’s initial arrangement with Adam as holding forth a conditional promise of everlasting life” implicit in the tree of life’s presence and explicit through canonical development.<sup>27</sup> “God’s specific command and warning to Adam” help us see the federal role of Adam that is put in place in Gen 2.<sup>28</sup> In these various statements, we see Wellum operating with the same conception of the garden narrative as Barcellos, the former even including each component of the latter’s definition in his development.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, while we do not see the sort of distinction between the law of nature, that is, what God demanded of Adam as a creature, and the law of works, that is, what God demanded of Adam as a federal head, we cannot conclude that progressive covenantalists deny the covenant of works as articulated by Reformed Baptists. Their terminology, precision, and emphases differ, to be sure, but the basic argument of the two positions are continuous and complementary, or congruous, on this point.<sup>30</sup>

## II. *Covenant of Grace*

The doctrine of the covenant of grace, in its Baptist expressions, is deceptively difficult to summarize. The reason for this is because we are often, by and large,

---

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 778–79; see also 253.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 778–80. Consider how this mirrors Barcellos’s defense of the covenant of works above.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 778.

<sup>29</sup> For a little more interaction with the covenant in the beginning, though not covering this doctrine exclusively, see Ardel B. Caneday, “Covenantal Life with God from Eden to Holy City,” in *Progressive Covenantalism*, 101–26. Contrast the substantial work done by Wellum with the statement by Brack and Oliphint: “The aforementioned aspects of the Adamic covenant [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] are not picked up in any substantial way in Parts One and Three” (Brack and Oliphint, “Questioning the Progress,” 199).

<sup>30</sup> One further note, progressive covenantalists put much more work into developing a federal covenant at creation, i.e., a covenant of works, than does the one Reformed Baptist who has written a complete Covenant Theology. In fact, progressive covenantalists insist on the federal headship of Adam and on his place as the seed for all that follows in the unfolding of the redemptive storyline, while Nichols rarely looks further back than Noah. Progressive covenantalists arranged *Kingdom through Covenant* in such a way that the covenant with Noah (which begins their biblical-theological treatment) demands that you look further back (e.g., Gentry begins with Noah in ch. 5 and follows with a chapter on Gen 1–3). What we see, then, is that progressive covenantalists stand closer to their Reformed Baptist brothers than do others who either wear the label “Reformed Baptist” or new covenant theology. I certainly admit that Nichols includes an explanation of the “Adamic Covenant” as a closing appendix, but even that fact testifies to the removal of the creation covenant from the organic development of the *historia salutis*. See Greg Nichols, *Covenant Theology: A Reformed and Baptist Perspective on God’s Covenants* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2011). In addition to the structure of the book, see esp. pp. 7–8. Most polemical arguments against a covenant in the beginning—as well as against Christ’s active obedience—on the new covenant theology side appear on internet blogs. Their arguments contrast quite distinctly with Wellum’s in his explanation and defense of Christ’s active obedience.



distinguishing what we believe and what Presbyterians and other Reformed Protestants are saying when we each refer to the covenant of grace.<sup>31</sup> It may be unwise to venture into this doctrine to demonstrate continuity because it is complex and debated, and, what's more, Wellum has called for "a moratorium on 'covenant of grace' as a category" in the past.<sup>32</sup> He has since said, however,

If you mean the covenant of grace is the one plan of God, that's fine, but it's important to let the unfolding plan of God take place to see how each covenant is contributing to the revelation, the unfolding of God's plan, and then ask how each covenant is building on the previous, that's setting up for what comes later, and then how all of it is fulfilled in Christ.<sup>33</sup>

How are we to reconcile the two statements? It is quite simple really: Wellum is concerned that the term "covenant of grace" is often used to flatten the biblical development, though he is not hostile to it if we simply mean God's unfolding plan that culminates in Christ.

Is this what Particular Baptists meant by "covenant of grace"? It certainly seems to be consistent. The Second London Confession of 1689 states,

This covenant [i.e., of grace] is revealed in the gospel; first of all to Adam in the promise of salvation by the seed of the woman, and afterwards by farther steps, until the full discovery thereof was completed in the New Testament; and it is founded in that eternal covenant transaction that was between the Father and the Son about the redemption of the elect; and it is alone by the grace of this covenant that all the posterity of fallen Adam that ever were saved did obtain life and blessed immortality, man being now utterly incapable of acceptance with God upon those terms on which Adam stood in his state of innocency.<sup>34</sup>

There are three main movements in this statement. First, there was a covenant, or "transaction," "between the Father and Son about the redemption of the elect." Next, we see that the covenant of grace, which is itself the topic of the paragraph, was revealed to Adam as a promise, "and afterwards by farther steps." Finally, it says that the covenant "was completed in the New Testament." "The New Testament," says Pascal Denault, "brings the full revelation of the

---

<sup>31</sup> It should go without saying, but there are certainly exceptions to this on both sides.

<sup>32</sup> Stephen J. Wellum, "Baptism and the Relationship between the Covenants," in *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas Schreiner and Shawn Wright (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2006), 127.

<sup>33</sup> It should be noted that Wellum made the same remark when he called for the "moratorium," saying, "In reality, the 'covenant of grace' is a comprehensive theological category, not a biblical one. This does not mean that it is illegitimate.... If the theological category, 'the covenant of grace,' is used to underscore the unity of God's plan of salvation and the essential spiritual unity of the people of God in all ages, it is certainly helpful and biblical. But if it is used to flatten the relationships and downplay the significant amount of progression between the biblical covenants, which then leads us to ignore specific covenantal discontinuities across redemptive-history, then it is unhelpful, misleading, and illegitimate" (*ibid.*, 126–27).

<sup>34</sup> Second London Confession of Faith 7.3.

Covenant of Grace since the New Covenant is its accomplishment. The Baptists considered that the New Covenant and it alone was the Covenant of Grace.... [Before Christ] it was not yet a formal covenant, but a promise.”<sup>35</sup> The Baptists, here the Particular Baptists, were keen on avoiding simple flattening of the covenants across redemptive history for the sake of unity. James Renihan says, tellingly, of Second London Confession 7.3,

One might expect that Baptists would be more historically sensitive in their formulation [of the covenant of grace], and that is exactly the case. Their emphasis on the forward movement of redemptive history, especially in their sensitivity to the distinct subjects of circumcision and baptism and their role as positive laws within specific historical covenants, brought an awareness of the progress from one covenant to another.<sup>36</sup>

Notice, then, that the critique Wellum has of using the concept of a “covenant of grace” is not lobbed against his Baptist compatriots. Nor, as he says in exhaustion in a footnote, does he *deny* the covenant of grace.<sup>37</sup> What he desires is that the covenant of grace not be a means of ignoring redemptive-historical development, and in this he stands alongside his Baptist forebears.

### *Reformed Baptists*

Beyond the difficulty of arguing for a doctrine on which one adherent called for a moratorium is the difficulty on the Reformed Baptist side. Unlike the covenant of works, which has received some treatment due to denials of there being such a covenant and rejections of the Sabbath as a command in creation, Reformed Baptist literature on the covenant of grace is almost exclusively historical. For example, the only major works done recently with substantial work on the covenant of grace are Pascal Denault’s *Distinctiveness of Baptist Covenant Theology* and Samuel Renihan’s *The Federal Theology of the English Particular Baptists (1642–1704)*. The issue with both works is that they share the aim of simply outlining the covenant theology of early Particular Baptists. With this in mind, it is perhaps safe to say that both progressive covenantalists and Reformed Baptists neglect to treat the covenant of grace theologically (in distinction from historical treatment), though they perhaps agree on what a doctrine of the covenant includes (progressive, promise-to-establishment) and excludes (same substance, different administrations).<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Pascal Denault, *The Distinctiveness of Baptist Covenant Theology: A Comparison Between Seventeenth-Century Particular Baptist and Paedobaptist Federalism* (Vestavia Hills, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2013), 63–64.

<sup>36</sup> James M. Renihan, “Covenant Theology in the First and Second London Baptist Confessions,” in *Recovering a Covenantal Heritage: Essays in Baptist Covenant Theology*, ed. Richard C. Barcellos (Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press), 66–67.

<sup>37</sup> Wellum, introduction to *Progressive Covenantalism*, 4n7.

<sup>38</sup> Lest it seem that I am being too dismissive, I acknowledge that some works do treat the covenant of grace, but they are not done as stand-alone treatments the way Barcellos treats the covenant

### III. *New Covenant*

Though I would like to have gone through the covenants with Abraham and on Sinai, space demands that here we begin to examine the progressive covenantalism doctrine of the new covenant. As a Baptist theological system, this specific doctrine is the point where there seems to be the most obvious agreement, specifically because progressive covenantalists and Reformed Baptists, and even dispensationalists, all argue that there is something substantially new in the new covenant.<sup>39</sup> What makes this belief obvious to the watching world is the constitution of our churches as consisting only of believers, and specifically believers who have been baptized upon profession of faith according to the NT model. Where progressive covenantalists and Reformed Baptists agree, and where they disagree with dispensationalists, is in their development of a progressive covenant theology that makes sense of the baptism of believers alone. Where they are distinct is in Reformed Baptists' desire to equate the covenant of grace with the new covenant and the progressive covenantalists' hesitancy to use the term "covenant of grace," as was demonstrated above.

So how do progressive covenantalists argue for the new covenant? Gentry says, in speaking of OT references, "Five times they [the prophets] refer to the 'everlasting covenant,' three times to a 'covenant of peace,' and three times to a promise that God will give his people a new heart and a new spirit. Only once is the phrase 'new covenant' actually used. *But all these phrases are referring to the same thing.*"<sup>40</sup> This is reversed in the NT, where "the same covenant is referred to as the 'new covenant' five times . . . and only once as the 'everlasting covenant.'"<sup>41</sup> Ardel Caneday lays out the four features that make the new covenant new: "every member of the covenant: (1) knows the Lord, (2) is a recipient of forgiveness of sins, (3) belongs to the people of God, and (4) has God's laws engraved upon their hearts."<sup>42</sup> "By way of contrast," says Schreiner, "members of the old covenant weren't necessarily regenerate. . . . Here we see one of the most profound differences between the covenants. The covenant with Israel and the covenant with Abraham had a genealogical principle."<sup>43</sup> In the new covenant, which has been ratified in Christ, the people of the covenant are all regenerate members with the gift of the Holy Spirit.<sup>44</sup> The result, then,

---

of works, and Nichols's work has been rejected by some in the Reformed Baptist community for his writing on the covenant of works. See, for instance, Jeffrey D. Johnson, *The Kingdom of God: A Baptist Expression of Covenant and Biblical Theology* (Conway, AR: Free Grace Press, 2016), 230; Nichols, *Covenant Theology*, 123–43.

<sup>39</sup> "Substantially" in distinction from other systems that would say the substance is the same while the form is different.

<sup>40</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant* (2nd ed.), 488, emphasis added.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* The five "new covenant" references are Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6; Heb 8:8; 9:15. The "everlasting covenant" shows up in Heb 13:20.

<sup>42</sup> Caneday, "Covenantal Life with God," 110; Schreiner, *Covenant and God's Purpose*, 89–119.

<sup>43</sup> Schreiner, *Covenant and God's Purpose*, 93.

<sup>44</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant* (2nd ed.), 800 ff.; see esp. 802.

is that the sacraments of this covenant, specifically baptism, are not identical to the sacraments of the old covenant. Thus, circumcision, which belonged to the old covenant community, mixed as it was with believers and unbelievers and grounded in the genealogical principle, does not carry over to baptism of believers *and their children*.

This has clear correlations in the Particular Baptist movement. For instance, Edward Hutchinson says,

For if it should be granted, that the visible Church is Abraham's family, under the Gospel, as well as under the law: yet it is so altered from what it was, so different in its constitution, that it is even turned upside down, and in a manner nothing remains as then it was. For as the covenant is not the same, with that of the law, so neither is there the same Mediator, nor the same Priesthood, nor the same Law, nor the same Law-giver, nor the same promises: That being of an Earthly, this of an heavenly inheritance, nor the same holy seed, to which the promises are made: that being to the Typical seed, Isaac and his posterity, this to the true seed Christ and believers Nor the same ordinances, theirs being Circumcision and the Passe-over, ours Baptism and the supper.<sup>45</sup>

It had been that the members of the promised covenant of grace were also members of the old covenant, natural children of Abraham in both cases and instructed by the law of Moses, but the new covenant is radically new such that the genealogical principle is done away with along with the old covenant. Spilsbury says, "But as there is a new King, so there must be a new Law, and as a new covenant, so a new subject; a new Church must have a new state, and a new ordinance, a new commandment, so that as all things are become new, even so must all be of God."<sup>46</sup> The new covenant is the covenant of grace in its essence, and none outside the covenant of grace are in the new covenant community. Since the covenant of grace was only promissory in the old covenant, we expect something quite different in the makeup of the covenant when the essence comes, and this is exactly what we find. The new covenant is Christ, and all who are in Christ are in the new covenant, and none who are outside of Christ are included. Thus, the new covenant community cannot include those who do not know Christ.

Though I will not be evaluating the Abrahamic covenant at length, it is important to recognize its role in progressive covenantalism and Particular Baptist new covenant theology. Jason DeRouchie distinguishes between progressive covenantalism and covenant theology:

---

<sup>45</sup> Edward Hutchinson, *A Treatise concerning the Covenant and Baptism: Dialogue-Wise, between a Baptist & a Poedo-Baptist* (London: Francis Smith, 1676), 11.

<sup>46</sup> John Spilsbury, *A Treatise Concerning the Lawfull Subject of Baptism* (London: Henry Hills, 1652), 22.

Many covenant theologians miss that Gen 17 distinguishes *two* progressive eras for the everlasting Abrahamic covenant—the first national (Gen 17:7–8) with a genealogical principle as its guide and circumcision as its sign (17:9–13); and the second international with the patriarch’s fatherhood being established by spiritual adoption and no longer bound by biology, ethnicity, or the distinguishing mark of circumcision.... Christ’s arrival inaugurates the age of fulfillment, thus shifting the covenant community’s makeup away from the genealogical principle to one of corporate identity, established through spiritual adoption by faith.<sup>47</sup>

This distinction made between two seeds, or better “twofold seed,” of Abraham is reflected well in the Particular Baptist writings as they draw upon Gal 3 to mark out the spiritual seed in Christ.<sup>48</sup> The Seed is Christ, and the new covenant mercy is found in him. The natural seed of Abraham, both regenerate and reprobate, received the external sign of circumcision, but as the promise and signs reach their antitype in Christ, they fall away and all of Abraham’s seed is spiritual.

### *Reformed Baptists*

Reformed Baptist Jeffrey Johnson continues this train of thought. He argues, “Notwithstanding ... differences in emphasis, we observe in both the Old and New Testaments the two dimensions of the kingdom of God, one natural and the other supernatural. We need to remember that both dimensions have their roots in the Abrahamic covenant.”<sup>49</sup> Christ fulfills both aspects, and Christians in him gain adoption as children of Abraham. Like DeRouchie, Johnson argues that the spiritual kingdom has fulfilled the earthly kingdom, and he also draws on inaugurated eschatology to explain the kingdom’s awaiting consummation. “The expansion of the tent of Abraham would be so extensive that the borders of Israel would be unable to contain the kingdom of God.”<sup>50</sup> The new covenant, according to both progressive covenantalists and Reformed Baptists, is the fulfillment of the promises to Abraham, that which brings into reality what was only a shadow and ends the era of types. While the new covenant community extends outward, the typical function of the genealogy does not go with it because all those who are in the covenant know the Lord.

---

<sup>47</sup> Jason S. DeRouchie, “Father of a Multitude of Nations: New Covenant Ecclesiology in OT Perspective,” in *Progressive Covenantalism*, 34–35, emphasis original. For more on the “various aspects of the Abrahamic covenant,” see Wellum, “Baptism and the Relationship between the Covenants,” 132–37.

<sup>48</sup> See especially Spilsbery, *Treatise Concerning the Lawfull Subject of Baptism*, 6–12; S. Renihan, *From Shadow to Substance*, 83–91.

<sup>49</sup> Johnson, *Kingdom of God*, 4.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

#### IV. Conclusion

I would like to offer some concluding thoughts on the relationship between progressive covenantalism and Reformed Baptist theologies. These, I hope, will go some way toward helping those within the two systems interact with one another and those outside see the commonalities.

First, Reformed Baptists must recognize that the two most pressing concerns that arose out of debates with new covenant theology are not the same as in progressive covenantalism. New covenant theology proponents have sometimes denied the covenant of works with Adam and the active obedience of Christ. These are certainly concerning denials, but they are not present in progressive covenantalism. While progressive covenantalism does not prefer to use the term “covenant of works,” opting instead for “covenant of creation,” they nevertheless affirm the federal headship and covenantal setting of Adam in the garden, and they do so in much the same way as arguments for a covenant of works. Further, they affirm the active obedience of Christ. The relationship between the two doctrines was seen earlier when Wellum was shown to affirm Adam’s federal headship as a correlate to Christ’s active obedience.

Second, progressive covenantalists and Reformed Baptists could certainly use each other to develop their respective systems. Thus far, progressive covenantalism has been almost completely void of any historical theology as an integrated aspect of their system, which has been one cause of alarm among some. Similarly, Reformed Baptists have devoted much of their energy to doing historical theology with the result being sometimes superficial or traditionalistic interpretations of the text.<sup>51</sup> Progressive covenantalists can lean on their Reformed Baptist brothers to gain a wider perspective on biblical exegesis and theological reasoning, and Reformed Baptists can lean on their progressive covenantalism brothers to bolster their biblical arguments for the *historia salutis*.<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> For instance, a lot of energy has been spent arguing for particular interpretations of the Second London Confession, and explaining the theological apparatus of the seventeenth century, when there could certainly be more space devoted to biblical exegesis. This is a bold claim, but consider the fact that the main theological texts produced by Reformed Baptists have been Denault’s historical theology, Waldron’s *Exposition of the 1689*, a republication of Coxe’s and Owen’s work in *Discourse of the Covenants*, and the recent work by S. Renihan on *The Federal Theology of the English Particular Baptists*. Jeffrey Johnson’s *Kingdom of God* is where the claim of superficiality comes in because it is the closest thing to a biblical theology that occurs in Reformed Baptist literature, but it purposely avoids non-biblical footnotes in the section covering the biblical survey. This is acceptable in a popular level book, which it is, but it serves to demonstrate the gulf between a biblical-theological development along the lines of a tome like *Kingdom through Covenant* and what Reformed Baptists are producing in terms of biblical theology. The notable exception, of course, is Barcellos’s work, such as his book *Getting the Garden Right*, which seeks to integrate historical theology and exegesis in its theological construction.

<sup>52</sup> It is worth noting at this point that S. Renihan has demonstrated the sort of integrative work this article calls for in his recent work on covenant theology. See Samuel Renihan, *The Mystery of Christ: His Covenant and His Kingdom* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2019). Malcolm Yarnell even refers to the book as a work of “progressive covenantalism” in his endorsement.

Consider S. Renihan's statement about progressive covenantalists' timorous attitude toward covenant theology's terms:

Though the model of the covenant of grace passing through multiple administrations may be the dominant paedobaptist portrayal, it is not the dominant portrayal of the history of Baptist federal theology. A good dose of Baptist historical theology might be of great benefit.<sup>53</sup>

There are three things to notice from this statement. First, the major theological systems in existence among evangelicals are classical covenant theology and dispensationalism, so it is not absurd that *Kingdom through Covenant* focuses on those two systems rather than historic Baptist covenant theology.<sup>54</sup> Second, Renihan is right to conclude that progressive covenantalism should incorporate "a good dose of Baptist historical theology," which I hope to have demonstrated is possible. Third, the authors of *Kingdom through Covenant* have been explicitly critiquing and countering "classical covenant theology," so Reformed Baptists must be careful to read their critiques as such rather than against covenant theology in general.

Finally, those who critically engage *Kingdom through Covenant* externally should also be careful to recognize many of the continuities between these new Baptists and those who preceded them. Though Baptist covenant theology is no more monolithic than Presbyterian/Reformed covenant theology, neither are current arguments developed *de novo*. Many of the theological arguments, while framed differently, are made to defend the same doctrines Baptists have held since they broke off from the Church of England. Rather than saying they have "abandoned" some doctrine, like the vital/formal distinction of the church, as Brack and Oliphint do in their review article, it is often more appropriate to say they have kept to historic Baptist categories.<sup>55</sup> Thus, as critics

---

<sup>53</sup> Samuel Renihan, review of *Kingdom through Covenant*, by Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Journal of the Institute of Reformed Baptist Studies* (2014): 166.

<sup>54</sup> This is an especially important point when one considers that among Baptists, the more common theological system is dispensationalism, and among Calvinists in general, the dominant system is "classical" covenant theology.

<sup>55</sup> "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" (Brack and Oliphint, "Questioning the Progress," 199). Compare that statement with an anonymous early Baptist who wrote, "I deny that Baptism is the formal constituting cause of Church-Membership" and then goes on to make arguments about why that is the case (*Truth Vindicated, in Several Branches Thereof: And Many Objections Fairly and Soberly Answered* [London: Printed for the Author, 1695], 1–2, cf. 9, 37, 62–65, 124).

of progressive covenantalism engage their works, they must do due diligence to represent major sections of their arguments as continuous with Particular Baptist/Reformed Baptist doctrine.

Though my claim that progressive covenantalists are Reformed Baptists is slightly hyperbolic, since they do not hold to the Second London Confession *in toto*, there is perhaps no better community to associate them with. They clearly differ from Presbyterian/Reformed covenant theology and dispensationalism, and they have important points of difference from some proponents of new covenant theology. Like Particular Baptists and Reformed Baptists, progressive covenantalism affirms a covenant with Adam in which all people are fallen; a covenant of grace that speaks of the singular plan of God across time, in which there is a singular people in Christ; and the new covenant is the covenant of grace which had only been promised, the shadow become reality. There are certainly points at which we may disagree with progressive covenantalism's proposal, perhaps with how they frame the covenant of works or what they do with the Decalogue, but their proposal is best understood as within the Reformed Baptist community based on the major points of continuity between them and past and current adherents to the Second London Confession.