

A REVIEW ARTICLE

Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants

Reviewed by
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Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants, by Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012. 848 pp. \$45.00.

When I arrived as a student at Detroit Baptist Seminary in 1993, it was only a matter of days before I discovered a driving passion of my new mentor, Rolland McCune. Early that semester he opined in chapel that dispensational theology would never flourish as a merely reactionary movement against Covenant Theology. Dispensationalism needed to isolate and develop a “unifying center of all God’s activity with reference to the universe”—a *mitte* that was superior to the covenant of redemption motif proposed by Reformed Theology.² The mere trumpeting of discontinuities would never do, he insisted; dispensationalism needed to discover the axis around which everything turned.

On that morning he handed us his twelve-page proposal of a unifying center and encouraged us to make it our enduring ambition to perfect it. I did not know it at the time, but this proposal was McCune’s personal Mona Lisa—a theological masterpiece on which he had been tinkering for decades at the behest of *his* mentor, Alva J. McClain. In time I became acquainted with McClain’s *magnum opus* on this topic, his 1959 book *The Greatness of the Kingdom*.³ This book was a superb venture into the field of “biblical theology” long before biblical theology became the rage that it is today. In his book McClain identified as the unifying theme of Scripture a twofold kingdom: (1) a universal kingdom that God himself oversaw via civil structures and

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²A final, published form of his thoughts on the topic may be found in his *Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity*, 3 vols. (Allen Park, MI: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2008–2010), 1:135–54.

³Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959. Incidentally, McClain’s idea was not original either: he was perpetuating a dispensational tradition that had begun almost a century earlier—a tradition epitomized in George N. H. Peters’s three-volume work, *The Theocratic Kingdom* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1884).

natural law and (2) a developing theocratic kingdom that sported a line of divinely hand-picked human mediators that would suddenly climax in Christ himself.

What struck me about McClain and McCune's model (they are similar enough to be treated as a unity) was the fact that personal redemption did *not* receive pride of place at the center. I rarely heard the storyline of the Bible referenced as "redemptive history" in seminary (this would be too narrow); instead the Bible was read as a kind of doxological history: God was garnering self-glory through a complex of interrelated but more-or-less sovereign spheres.⁴ The pistis/redemptive sphere was surely one of those spheres, but it was by no means the *only* such sphere. God also received glory through non-redemptive civil structures (Gen 9:1–6; much of the Mosaic Law; Rom 13:1–7; etc.), marital/family structures (Gen 2:24–25; Song of Solomon; etc.), providence and common grace (Esther, Jonah, et al.), angelic activity (Ps 103:20–21; 148:1–6), the reprobation of the irredeemable (Ps 76:10; Rom 9:22; Phil 2:11) and, significantly for this review, a complex of natural/scientific blessings associated with man's dominion over the physical earth (Gen 1:26–30 and the land motif that unfolds through Scripture). While the individual blessings of unconditional election and vicarious atonement were amazing in scope, I learned, these should never be so magnified as to eclipse or cancel out the multiplex of other, more common means whereby God in Christ was bringing glory to himself. Being thusly liberated from my Platonic cave, I embraced this remarkable theory of everything.

I soon found out that McCune and McClain were not alone in their quest for a dispensational unifying center. In 1965 Charles Ryrie, the leading voice at Dallas Theological Seminary, similarly opined that the third aspect of the dispensational *sine qua non* was a "philosophy of history" or "underlying purpose of God in the world" that centers not on redemption but on God's glory:

The covenant theologian in practice makes this purpose salvation and the dispensationalist says the purpose is broader than that, namely, the glory of God. To the dispensationalist the soteriological or saving program of God is not the only program but one means God is using in the total program of glorifying Himself. Scripture is not man-centered as though salvation were its main theme, but it is God-centered because His glory is the center. The Bible itself clearly teaches that salvation, important and wonderful as it is, is not an end in itself but is rather a means to the end of glorifying God (Eph 1:6, 12, 14).⁵

My early opinion of dispensationalism, as such, was that it offered a robust emphasis on unity in diversity, and that its genius was in penetrating the complex ebb and flow in God's administration of the many

⁴I did not know it until later, but Kuyper's idea of sphere sovereignty was an early influence on my thinking on this matter, probably by osmosis through a sympathetic reading of Cornelius Van Til.

⁵*Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), 46.

spheres and vehicles of doxology as they intersected variously in the outworking of his all-wise plan.

And so it was with great interest that I picked up Stephen Wellum and Peter Gentry's *Kingdom through Covenant* to discover the organizational *mitte* that they offered as a *via media* between covenant and dispensational theology. The book begins with three chapters of theological introduction. These chapters are rather aggressive in nature, generating support for the center by criticizing both poles. Dispensational theology, I discovered, denies the Bible's unity and has no *mitte*; instead, it exists for little reason other than to trumpet biblical discontinuities, most visibly (1) a distinction between Israel and the church (a distinction that, they affirm, is "in our conviction...*the* [only] *sine qua non*" of the movement), and (2) manifold experiences of salvation that are "qualitatively different" for the elect of the Old and New Testaments, respectively (p. 42). Covenant theology, on the other hand, exhibits too much continuity, especially in their identification of circumcision with baptism, which the authors (both Baptists) cannot tolerate. In view of these deficiencies, Wellum and Gentry suggest that a *via media* is needed to rectify the Covenant Theologian's static, one-covenant *mitte* without capitulating to the dispensationalist's anthology of disconnected covenants, each existing as a hermetically sealed pact.

The solution, Gentry and Wellum suggest, is a sort of "progressive covenantalism" (a label they have chosen for their model) that sees the various covenants, their human representatives, their "peoples," and their "lands" as dynamically progressing biblical motifs, with each historical layer both improving on the previous layer and further typifying what will ensue in the next. So, for instance,

- The Noahic Covenant is not a separate covenant, but a recapitulation of Adam's, not only featuring a recapitulated law (fill the earth), but also a recapitulated Adam (Noah), a recapitulated fall (Noah's drunkenness), a recapitulated garden (the postdiluvian earth), a recapitulated *evangelium* (a rainbow), a recapitulated community (human government), etc. All the covenants, we come to find, are marked by a similarly robust array of recapitulations.
- Of peculiar import to the (Baptist) authors is the fact that the new covenant community (the church) has continuity with, but not precise identity with the old covenant community (Israel). The new covenant community is a recapitulated Israel—an evolving community that *improves upon* its OT counterpart, most significantly in its superior reincarnation as an exclusively regenerate community that one enters by credobaptism rather than by paedocircumcision.
- The land promises offered to Abraham and Israel find a similar reconstitution in the new creation secured in Christ. This development is again justified because it represents an *improvement* on the previous promise. To insist on a literal fulfillment of self-evidently typological land promises is misguided, in the authors' opinion, in light of the arrival of a superior antitype. To offer a contemporary

illustration, one might imagine me insisting that a friend, after handing me a ticket to the Super Bowl, keep his earlier promise to join me in watching the game on TV at my home. In such circumstances, all would agree, I should allow my friend to amend his promise because he is *improving upon* or offering me something *better than* what was originally promised. Such is the nature of the hermeneutical deference that we should regularly extend to Gentry and Wellum's progressively covenantal God.

Since developing types and shadows are a dominant feature in the Bible, it stands to reason that we should spend a great deal of time discovering them. It is to this end that the next twelve chapters are dedicated. This section, the heart of the book, represents a breathtaking display of intertextuality that is frankly quite captivating. The amount of exegetical spadework necessary to writing these chapters was immense in its scope, and I would be in error to be tepid in my praise of the efforts here displayed. Due to the enormity of this section of the book, however, it is impossible for me to comprehensively detail my specific commendations and concerns. Instead, I will move immediately to two summary observations, viz., that (1) intertextuality is an extremely slippery discipline unless very strict parameters are invoked, and (2) the authors did not invoke such parameters. Instead, they deluged the reader not only with clear and explicit instances of intertextuality but also with an array of ill-defined types, shadows, allusions, coincidences, concurrences, and other tantalizing links all concatenated with little distinction to construct a great (and heretofore undiscovered) mosaic. And I could not shake my suspicion that the authors' euphoria to fit everything into that mosaic may have unleashed an unfettered propensity to "find" intertextual connections when they do not exist.

In the end, I found little relief here for the concerns that have been raised by dispensationalists for generations. Philosophically, while progressive covenantalism retreats from the stark Platonism found in older forms of amillennialism, a certain pessimism about here-and-now forms (e.g., *land* and *ethnicity*) persists. Theologically, it offers us a God inclined to progressively amend the terms of his promises rather than a God whose promises are irrevocable in all of their literal simplicity. Thematically, while the model improves on the Reformed *mitte* of the covenant of redemption, it fails, in my opinion, to present a true theory of *everything*, offering instead a neocalvinist kingdom of benefits that accrue primarily to and through the church. And scripturally, it approaches the Bible as a literary work like no other, accessible via a hermeneutical method like no other.

The book is not without value, of course. Its authors are undoubtedly Christian (who else would take the time to write about such matters?), and I recognize the book to be an attempt by two distinguished, well-informed, and fundamentally orthodox brothers on the noble quest of more fully comprehending God's plan. Their work will undoubtedly have the effect of fostering rapprochement and unity

between some schools of thought—if not between Reformed Confessionalism and Traditional Dispensationalism (strict proponents of which will likely have nothing to do with the model), at least between (1) Reformed and Baptist theology and between (2) neocalvinism and progressive dispensationalism. The work offers a robust and eminently biblical view of soteriology that I can only hope will come to unite evangelicals of every stripe. And it offers a wealth of intertextual study that, despite my stated tensions with the whole, cannot be ignored in its parts: among some dubious textual links there are surely many valid textual links that should be the object of anticipation and awe rather than suspicion and scorn. To these ends I encourage the reading of this book. But I also encourage the *critical* reading of this book, because it does not present to us the comprehensively unifying panacea that some are hoping it to be.