

# Progressive Covenantalism: Key Points of Definition

## 1. *Relationship to Historic Christian Theology.*

- a. Affirmation of historic, orthodox Christianity: Nicene Creed, Chalcedonian Definition.
- b. Affirmation of Protestant theology as reflected by the 5 solas: *Sola Scriptura*, *Sola Gratia*, *Sola Fide*, *Solus Christus*, *Soli Deo Gloria* and the Doctrines of Grace.
- c. Affirmation of baptistic convictions which entails a view of a regenerate, believer's church in contrast to a church constituted by believers and unbelievers. Also, in principle we affirm most historic Baptist confessions such as the Abstract of Principles.
- d. Affirmation that historic confessions function as secondary standards to Scripture.

## 2. *Overall View of Progressive Covenantalism.*

- a. Our triune God has one eternal plan which is progressively revealed through the unfolding of the biblical covenants in redemptive history (Isa. 14:24-27; Acts 2:23; Eph. 1:4, 11; 2:12; Rev. 13:8). From all eternity, God has planned and foreordained all that comes to pass in history, or what is called in theology, the divine economy.
- b. In Reformed theology, God's eternal plan is called the "covenant of redemption" (*pactum salutis*). We do not object to this language and concept, and indeed affirm its overall theological conclusions, yet we note that Scripture speaks more about God's one plan, which includes within it the glorious plan of redemption.
- c. Our triune God's one eternal plan is unveiled over time through a plurality of covenants that reaches its fulfillment, *telos*, and terminus in Christ Jesus and the new covenant (Heb. 1:1-3; 8:1-13; 12:18-24). The primary biblical covenants are creation (Gen. 1-3); Noahic (Gen. 6-9); Abrahamic (Gen. 12-50); Mosaic/old (Ex.-Deut.); Davidic (2 Sam. 7; 1 Chron. 17), and the new covenant (Jer. 31:29-34; Prophets; Heb. 8-10).
- d. In the ratification of the new covenant, we embrace the "already-not yet" of inaugurated eschatology in understanding how the new covenant is fulfilled in redemptive history. In Christ and the new covenant, *all* that the OT prophesied, predicted, and anticipated through promises and typological patterns is now here in principle (e.g., Matt. 4:17; Jer. 31:34; Rom. 3:21-26; 8:1; Acts 2:32-36; 2 Cor. 5:17), yet we still await the fullness and consummation of the new covenant at Christ's glorious return (e.g., Matt. 6:10; 2 Cor. 5:10; Eph. 1:13-14; Rev. 21:22).
- e. Each biblical covenant contributes to the unfolding and revealing of God's unified plan. To grasp God's plan, we must take seriously how *all* of the covenants reveal God's plan. It is crucial to interpret each covenant in its own redemptive-historical context and think through how it is related to the covenant(s) that precede it and to the covenant(s) that follow it. It is only by reading Scripture this way that we can discern how each of the covenants unveil God's plan over time and how all of the covenants reach their fulfillment in Christ. We do not view the covenants as isolated units; instead, we view them as organically related to each other as God's plan unfolds from creation to Christ. Thus, by the progression or unfolding of the covenants, God's plan is revealed. To apply rightly God's promises to us today, and to know how we ought to live as God's new covenant people, *all* of Scripture must be applied in light of its fulfillment in Christ.

### 3. *The Biblical Covenants.*

- a. In agreement with covenant theology, we view the covenants as more than a unifying theme of Scripture. Instead, we view them as the ordained means by which the triune God has chosen to enter into relationship with his people and his creation and to make himself known to us. The covenants function as the backbone to Scripture's unfolding storyline, and they are central to grasping the Bible's metanarrative of the establishment of God's kingdom through covenants, all leading to Christ and the new covenant.
- b. In contrast to covenant theology, we do not divide the covenants in redemptive history into the two categories of "the covenant of works" (Law) and "the covenant of grace" (Grace/Gospel). Although "Law" and "Gospel" are helpful *theological* categories, which we affirm in regard to their theological content, Scripture does not divide up the biblical covenants this way. By "Law," we affirm that God's will and nature *is* the law and that God makes an absolute demand on his creatures; by "Gospel," we affirm that God, by sovereign grace, takes the initiative to redeem a people for himself and that he must achieve our redemption from beginning to end, but we do not think that each covenant can be simply divided under one of these two categories to the exclusion of the other. So, instead of categorizing each covenant as either unconditional or conditional, it is best to see a combination in each covenant, culminating in Christ and the new covenant. By unconditional, we mean that God takes the initiative by grace to act and redeem, which is true in every covenant. By conditional, we mean that God demands complete loyalty and love from his covenant people, and thus perfect obedience, yet, sadly, we do not render it. This sad fact is important to remember since a crucial way the Bible's story progresses is that each covenant progressively reveals and anticipates the coming of the perfect covenant-keeper, our Lord Jesus Christ, who acts on our behalf and secures our eternal redemption by his entire life, death, and resurrection.
- c. As we think of the Bible's overall metanarrative, it is best to think of God's one plan unfolding through a plurality of covenants, first starting with Adam and culminating in Christ and the new covenant. The creation covenant under Adam lays the foundation that continues in all the covenants and is fulfilled in Christ and his obedient work. God's plan, then, moves from creation in Adam to consummation in Christ (Rom. 5:12-21; 1 Cor. 15:21-22; Heb. 2:5-18). *Starting* with the creation covenant is crucial for grasping the Bible's story for at least two reasons.
  - i. First, the creation covenant is *foundational* for all future covenants since *all* subsequent covenants unpack Adam's role in the world. Adam, and all humanity, is created as God's image-son, a priest-king to rule over creation. Adam is created in relationship with God as he mediates God's rule to the world; he does not need to merit favor before God. Yet, God, as holy and just, demands perfect obedience from his covenant partner. *All* subsequent covenant heads will function as subsets of Adam, who, in God's plan, will point forward to Christ. Even though the amount of space devoted to Adam is small, his role as the representative head of creation defines what comes after him, and the entire work of Christ (Rom. 5:12-21; Heb. 2:5-18).
  - ii. Second, the creation covenant is foundational for establishing various typological patterns that eventually reach their *telos* in Christ and the new covenant (e.g., the *rest* of the seventh day in Sabbath [Gen. 2:1-3; Ex. 20:8-11] and salvation rest in Christ [Heb. 3:7-4:13]; Eden as a temple sanctuary which is fulfilled in Christ as the new temple; and marriage which points to a greater reality, namely, Christ's relationship to his people

[Gen. 2:24-25; Eph. 5:32]). *All* of these patterns will eschatologically terminate in Christ and God's new covenant people.

- d. Unfortunately, Adam disobeyed resulting in sin and death (Gen. 3; Rom. 3:23; 6:23). However, our triune God did not leave us to ourselves. Instead, God the Father chose to redeem his people by sovereign grace by the provision of God the Son, who by his incarnation, life, death and resurrection secured our eternal salvation. As the *incarnate* Son, Jesus, as the last Adam, perfectly obeyed for us as our covenant head (Rom. 5:12-21; Phil. 2:6-11; Heb. 5:1-10). As the *divine* Son, he bore the penalty of our sin and satisfied God's own righteous demand against us (Rom. 3:21-26). By our covenantal faith-union in Christ, wrought by the regenerating work of God the Spirit, we stand justified before God as his redeemed, reconciled, and adopted sons (Rom. 8; Eph. 2:1-10). As new creations in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17), we are restored to the purpose of our creation, namely to know, love, serve, and glorify God, now and forevermore, in a new heavens and new earth (Rev. 21-22).
- e. The justification of God's people has always been by grace through faith in Christ alone (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4). There is only one way of salvation and one Mediator, namely our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 2:5-6). Yet, the knowledge and identity of Christ Jesus, our Redeemer and covenant head, has been progressively revealed over time through the biblical covenants. God's initial promise of a coming Redeemer is first given in Genesis 3:15. Those who believe God's promise of a coming Savior are justified by grace through faith. As each covenant is established, in a variety of ways, God's promise of who will redeem us and how he will do so is revealed, predicted, and foreshadowed in a more detailed way, which will ultimately culminate in the establishment of a new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34). Through the covenants, then, we discover that the coming Redeemer will be Abraham's true Seed (Gal. 3:16), a greater than Moses (Deut. 18:15-18; Heb. 3:1-6), the true, obedient Israel (Matt. 2:15; John 15:1-8), our great prophet, priest, and David's greater Son (Matt. 1:1; Acts 2:32-36; Rom. 1:3-4; Heb. 1 [cf. Ps 2, 45, 110]). He will be the Suffering Servant (Isa. 53), who as our King-Priest (Ps. 110), will offer himself as our penal substitute. OT saints believed God's promises centered in the coming of Christ. They related to their Creator and covenant Lord under their respective covenants, yet all the covenants pointed forward to the coming of Christ and the new covenant.
- f. In fact, in and through the OT covenants, God re-establishes humanity's lost rule in Adam by the establishment of his kingdom and saving reign (Heb. 2:5-18). In embryonic form, the OT covenants restore what was lost in the fall, yet always pointed forward to the coming of the Redeemer/Messiah who alone establishes God's kingdom and the new creation by his life, death, resurrection, ascension, and Pentecost by the ratification of a new covenant (Luke 22:20; 2 Cor. 3; Heb. 8-10).

#### **4. *The Relationship between Israel and the Church.***

- a. God has *one* people (Deut. 4:10; Isa. 2:2-4; Matt. 16:18; 1 Cor. 11:18; Heb. 10:25), yet there is an Israel-church distinction due to their respective covenants. The church is *new* in redemptive history since she is God's *new* covenant people due to Christ's coming and work, yet she is in continuity with OT saints who in faith looked forward to the fulfillment of God's promises in Christ (Heb. 12:18-29).
- b. The Israel-church relationship must be viewed both covenantally and Christologically. The church is not *directly* the "new Israel" or her replacement. Rather, in Christ, the church is God's new creation, comprised of believing Jews and Gentiles, because *Jesus* is the last Adam and true Israel, the faithful seed of Abraham who inherits the promises by his work.

- Thus, in union with Christ, the church is God's *new* covenant people in continuity with the elect in all ages, but *different* from Israel in its nature and structure. This view of the Israel-Christ-Church relationship differs from dispensational and covenant theology in two areas.
- c. First, contrary to dispensationalism, Jesus is the antitypical fulfillment of Israel and Adam and in Christ, *all* of God's promises are fulfilled and the beneficiaries of those promises are for Christ's people, namely, the church.
    - i. This also includes the land promise which is ultimately fulfilled in the new creation, which Israel's land was a type of, and in God's plan, pointed forward to the dawning of the new creation (Rom 4:13; Eph 6:3; Heb 11:10, 16; cf. Matt 5:5).
    - ii. Furthermore, the church is God's new covenant and new creation people. Contrary to dispensational theology, the church is not merely a parenthesis or present-day illustration of what Israel as a national-ethnic people and Gentile nations will be in the future. Instead, the church is Christ's bride, the elect from every tribe, nation, and people, which also includes within it OT saints. The church is God's holy nation, a kingdom of priests, the true eschatological Israel that lasts forever and it is not displaced by believing nations in the future that are constituted as nation-states and not as the church (Gal. 6:16; 1 Pet. 2:9-10; cf. Ex. 19:6).
    - iii. In regard to Romans 9-11, there are a variety of compatible positions, but we do not see this important text as teaching a restoration of national Israel in the future. One would have to establish this point from other texts since there is nothing in Romans 9-11 that requires this interpretation. Compatible positions would include: many ethnic Jews will be restored to faith in Christ during the entire interadvental age; or, a large number of ethnic Jews will be brought to salvation at the end of the age; or a more minority view that "all Israel" refers to the church as "spiritual" Israel (Jews and Gentiles) who are brought to salvation until Christ returns. But note: all of these possible options argue that Jewish believers will be brought to faith in Christ and incorporated into the new covenant church, and not the establishment of a distinct nation of Israel over against Gentile nations in the millennium and eternal state.
  - d. Second, contrary to covenant theology, Jesus' *new* covenant people are different from Israel in nature and structure, as they were constituted under the old covenant.
    - i. Under the old covenant, Israel visibly was constituted as a *mixed* community of believers and unbelievers (Rom. 9:6), ruled by various Spirit-empowered leaders (prophets, priests, and kings), hence the famous visible-invisible distinction. However, under the new covenant, the church is constituted as a believing, regenerate people, united to Christ by faith and those who have minimally experienced the forgiveness of sin, new birth and gifting by the Spirit, and heart circumcision (Rom. 6). No doubt, not all people who profess faith in Christ show themselves to be truly regenerate. Yet, the church, unlike Israel under the old covenant, is constituted by those who have professed true saving faith in Christ. Thus, our view of the visible-invisible church is different than covenant theology. We affirm that the visible church is a professing believer's church, while the invisible church pertains to God's one people in all places and throughout time (Heb. 12:18-29).
    - ii. Given what the church is, this is why baptism, the sign of the new covenant, is only applied to those who profess faith. Covenant theology makes a "covenantal category mistake" by equating circumcision and baptism as signifying the same realities. Although both function as covenant signs under their respective covenants—circumcision under the Abrahamic/old covenants and baptism under the new covenant—they do *not* signify the same realities due to their respective covenantal differences.

Circumcision is an outward sign that sets the nation apart as God's covenantal-priestly nation and instructs the nation for a needed circumcision of heart (Gen. 17:9-14; Deut. 30:6; Ezek. 36:25-27; Rom. 2:25-29). Yet, baptism signifies that one has been circumcised of heart by the Spirit and brought into faith-union with Christ (Rom. 6; Gal. 3:26-29).

### 5. *The Application of the OT to Christians Today.*

- a. The entirety of Scripture, including the OT, is to be applied to Christians today, but in and through its fulfillment in Christ and the new covenant (2 Tim. 3:15-17). We do not embrace the hermeneutical options of either all of the OT applies to us unless explicitly abrogated (covenant theology), or none of the OT applies to us unless explicitly repeated (dispensational theology). Instead, as Christians under the new covenant, we are not directly under the previous covenants *as covenants*, yet we apply the entire OT to us *as Scripture* and in light of its fulfillment in Christ. For us, the "law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2) is the entirety of God's Word applied to us in and through the new covenant, while also carefully applying the Bible's creation, fall, redemption, new creation structures to us.
- b. For example, as we approach the Decalogue, we do not simply divide the Mosaic/old covenant into a threefold division: moral, civil, and ceremonial. Such an approach insists that the civil and ceremonial parts of the old covenant are now fulfilled and abrogated for Christians, yet the Decalogue continues as God's eternal moral law for all people. No doubt, this approach is helpful and it often yields similar conclusions on how the Christian ought to live and obey God today, yet there are some hermeneutical problems with it. The old covenant is best viewed as a unit which has now reached its fulfillment in Christ and the new covenant. As Christians, we are no longer under the old covenant *as a covenant* (Rom. 6:14-15; 1 Cor. 9:20-21; Gal. 4:4-5; 5:13-18). Merely to appeal to the Decalogue as *the* principle by which we establish moral law today is not sufficient, and it faces difficulties with the Sabbath command. Instead, we ought to apply the Decalogue to us (as embedded in the entire old covenant) in light of its fulfillment in Christ. When we do so, we discover that the Decalogue comes over to us with greater expectations in light of Christ's work applied to us by the Spirit.
- c. Regarding the Sabbath, like the Decalogue, we obey the Sabbath command in light of its fulfillment in Christ (Heb. 3:7-4:11). We do so by first setting the Sabbath command within its covenantal location (old covenant). This allows us to see how it functioned as a command/sign to Israel (which no longer applies to us), but also how it typologically pointed forward to a greater salvation rest that is now here in Christ (which does apply to us). In this way, Christians "obey" the Sabbath by entering into the rest that it typified and predicted, namely salvation rest in Christ.

### 6. *Millennial Views.*

- a. There are a variety of millennial views consistent with progressive covenantalism, including historic premillennialism, amillennialism, and even postmillennialism.
- b. However, dispensational premillennialism, given its Israel-church distinction, and secret and visible comings of Christ, would not be consistent with how we understand the flow of redemptive history, Christ as the fulfillment of the covenants, and the way inaugurated eschatology works in the NT.