

**A CRITIQUE OF GENTRY AND WELLMUM’S,  
*KINGDOM THROUGH COVENANT:*  
A HERMENEUTICAL-THEOLOGICAL RESPONSE<sup>1</sup>**

Craig Blaising  
Executive Vice President and Provost, Professor of Theology  
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

*In November 2014, the Dispensational Study Group met at the Evangelical Theological Society annual meeting to interact with scholars Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum concerning their book, Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants. The responders to this book were Craig Blaising, Michael Grisanti, and Darrell Bock. The final three articles in this issue of the journal contain the written responses of these three men as presented at the meeting.*

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**Overview of the Book**

*Kingdom through Covenant [KTC]*<sup>2</sup> presents itself as a work of biblical theology under the label, Progressive Covenantalism. Progressive Covenantalism sees itself as a version of New Covenant Theology, and New Covenant Theology itself is a revision, reformulation, of traditional Covenant Theology, one that refocuses the covenant concept away from the traditional theological covenants of Covenant Theology to biblical covenants, away from the idea of one (or two or three) overarching canon-

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<sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of the paper presented at the national meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in San Diego, CA, November 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 848 pages.

ical covenant theme(s) to a progressive development of covenants from the Old Testament to the New Testament. Progressive Covenantalism believes that in this way it can present a biblical theology that better expresses NT ecclesiology.

The title of the work, *Kingdom through Covenant*, expresses the authors' view that the kingdom of God comes into existence through progressive covenantal change from OT to NT.

The book is structured in three parts:

Part 1: Prolegomena (authored by Steve Wellum): This consists of three chapters:

1. On the Importance of Covenants for Biblical Theology. The canonical narrative is structured by a string of biblical covenants climaxing in the New Covenant which brings into existence the realities of a Baptist/baptistic ecclesiology.
2. Covenants in Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology. Descriptions are given of the varieties of Dispensationalism (following the categories of the book *Progressive Dispensationalism*) and then a description of Covenantalism ending with a focus on the Covenantal View of the church as a mixed assembly with the practice of paedobaptism.
3. Hermeneutical Issues in "Putting Together" the Covenants. Several matters are presented here on how to interpret Scripture which relate to the overall argument of the book. These matters will be taken up in this review as a vantage point from which to assess the book as a whole.

Part 2: Exposition of the Biblical Covenants (authored by Peter Gentry). Part 2 constitutes the majority of the book. It consists of 12 chapters on what the authors identify as the key biblical covenants. After a preliminary chapter on the biblical and ANE context, the remaining 11 chapters are structured as follows:

- 1 chapter on the covenant with Noah
- 1 chapter arguing a covenant with Creation
- 2 chapters on the Abrahamic covenant
- 2 chapters on the Mosaic or Israelite covenant
- 1 chapter on the Davidic covenant
- 2 chapters on the New covenant
- 1 chapter on Ephesians 4:15 as expressive of the New covenant community

[Mike Grisanti and Darrell Bock will offer a brief response to the biblical treatment of covenants and implications drawn from them, Grisanti evaluating it from an OT perspective and Bock from a NT perspective.]

Part 3: Theological Integration (authored by Steve Wellum). This final section consists of two chapters:

1. “Kingdom through Covenant”: A Biblical-Theological Summary. Here Wellum gives a summary of how to read the canon on the basis of Gentry’s chapters.
2. “Kingdom through Covenant”: Some Theological Implications. Here Wellum takes up again some of the issues raised in the Prolegomena and adds further theological reflection. Progressive Covenantalism is presented specifically as a Reformed Baptist reading of Scripture.

### Positive Features

*KTC* sets excellent hermeneutical goals and offers a number of focused exegetical studies that advance biblical scholarship.

The authors state that in order to understand the Scripture, one needs to understand the biblical covenants (12–13). Furthermore, each covenant should be interpreted in context and “then viewed intertextually and canonically” (14). The goal is to understand each covenant, how the covenants relate to each other, and how they inform the canonical narrative.

In the initial chapters, Wellum states that the goal is to be “**more biblical**” than alternative interpretations (81). We can certainly applaud this goal. The more biblical one is, the better. Additionally, he argues that Scripture must be read canonically in a “thick,” not a “thin,” manner. I would completely agree with this. My criticism, for reasons stated below, is that *KTC* does not succeed in this goal measured against a holistic interpretation of Scripture such as that given in Progressive Dispensationalism.

Again, Wellum states that *KTC* seeks a “more accurate way to understand the relationship of the biblical covenants which makes better sense of the overall presentation of Scripture and will help us resolve some of our theological differences” (23). He speaks of the importance of knowing where one is in the biblical narrative for one’s understanding of God, the blessings of salvation, and the church (97 n. 34).

*KTC* argues that the kingdom of God is based on covenant promises and that New Covenant fulfillment is the means by which the kingdom comes into fulfillment. Also, the authors argue that fulfillment comes through Jesus Christ, that the canonical narrative reaches its culmination in and through Him. Progressive Dispensationalism, the perspective from which this review is given, would and has affirmed all these things. However, as will be seen below, there are differences in the ways in which this fulfillment is understood. And it is precisely here that the claims about a **thick** and **more biblical** reading of Scripture will be tested.

The book does offer a wealth of exegetical analysis and interacts with a select range of scholarly interpretations of biblical texts treating the divine covenants. While we do differ on some exegetical conclusions, it is more often the implications that are drawn from them, the broader hermeneutical claims made for the canonical narrative, and the omission of key elements of the biblical text in making those broad claims where one finds problems.

## Critique

### Structural Problems

*KTC* attempts to give a biblical theological reading of Scripture without any direct treatment of the NT (except for a chapter on Ephesians 4). However, the authors' claim that OT covenant promises are fulfilled in a "heightened" reality in the NT that differs in meaning from what was literally promised in the OT really depends on proof from the NT that such is the case—proof which I would argue is non-existent. Although they include references to the NT while analyzing OT covenant texts, the book is weakened by the absence of focused attention on the NT itself.

### Hermeneutical and Theological Problems

#### Overall criticism

While *KTC* offers a "thick" exegetical analysis of some features of the biblical covenants in several OT texts, with respect to the overall canonical narrative, contrary to its claim, it offers a "thin" reading. Its construal of the canonical narrative is not fully informed by crucial textual details, which when taken into account lead one, I believe, to a rich, holistic understanding of Scripture. The specific criticisms offered below will justify this overall criticism.

#### Inadequate Hermeneutical Tools

The authors' perception of these textual details may be blurred somewhat by some hermeneutical tools that would best be abandoned (in the case of *continuity or discontinuity*) or reformulated (in the case of *typology*).

**Continuity and Discontinuity:** Steve Wellum frames the hermeneutical options for reading the canonical narrative using terminology borrowed from John Feinberg, expressed in the title of Feinberg's edited volume: *Continuity and Discontinuity*.<sup>3</sup> This might seem to be useful since (1) Feinberg contrasts Covenantal and Dispensational readings of Scripture using these conceptual tools and since (2) Wellum and Gentry want to offer a *via media* between the two systems. However, in light of much that has been written on the interpretation of narrative, it does not seem that *continuity* and *discontinuity* are helpful or even suitable for narrative analysis. It would be better to avoid these abstractions and refocus the issue on plot development and resolution. A plot may develop with the addition of new features. It may develop with twists and turns. The challenge is to understand the story as a coherent narrative, to understand how all its different features, wherever in the story line they are introduced, come together to make the overall story.

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<sup>3</sup> The discussion of Feinberg's work begins on p. 109. But, the conceptual framework of continuity and discontinuity is used elsewhere by Wellum as well. It appears to be a key conceptual tool for him in explaining the movement of the canonical narrative.

Focusing on plot development and narrative resolution offers a better conceptual framework for accomplishing the authors' goal of evaluating covenantal and dispensational readings of the Bible, especially Progressive Dispensationalism.

**The Function of Typology in *KTC*:** The authors argue that the series of covenants in the Bible constitute the skeletal structure of the canonical narrative. But they also claim that typology is a crucial means by which the canonical narrative unfolds. Typology is the progressive movement which directs the narrative from promise to fulfillment.<sup>4</sup>

Wellum constructs the following definition of typology from Davidson: “typology as a NT hermeneutical endeavor is the study of the OT salvation-historical realities or “types” (persons, events, institutions) which God has specifically designed to correspond to and predictively prefigure their intensified antitypical fulfillment aspects (inaugurated and consummated) in NT salvation history” (103).

The definition is elaborated by an explanation of how types are believed to “work in Scripture.” First, they are to be construed within a pre-understood “‘promise-fulfillment’ pattern of redemptive-history” in which “all types find their fulfillment in Christ” (105). Secondly, typology has an “*a fortiori* (lesser to greater) quality” which is to say that there is an “*escalation* as the type is fulfilled in the antitype” (106).

The definition, based on Richard Davidson, is not really defended. It is simply employed. The problem is there is no agreed definition of typology as various authors on the subject admit.<sup>5</sup> At the very least, typology has to do with repeated patterns which form a correspondence in the biblical narrative between some earlier and later events, persons, and institutions. Interpreters of Scripture who take the canonical narrative seriously can agree on this. As evangelicals, we can agree that this pattern repetition is providential because we believe in providence and in inspiration. Certainly we can agree as well that Christ himself is the greater historical reality in the canonical narrative. Consequently, He is himself an escalated feature in the story of the Bible, because He, unlike any of the human persons in preceding history is God Incarnate. Because of that fact alone, types applied to Christ in the NT have an “intensified antitypical fulfillment.” They are part of a narrative intensification due to the progression of the story line to the appearance and activity of the Christ in whom and by whom the divine plan moves toward culmination. However, *KTC*, like traditional Covenantal treatments of typology, focuses its attention almost exclusively on this issue—the NT application of OT patterns to Christ. It is with reference to this that such works speak of prefiguration, prediction, and escalation.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> “In fact, one of the crucial means by which God’s redemptive-historical plan unfolds, indeed how the “promise-fulfillment” motif is developed in Scripture, is by the use of God-given “typology” (101).

<sup>5</sup> See W. Edward Glenny, “Typology: A Summary of the Present Evangelical Discussion,” *JETS* 40 (1997): 627–38. See also, David Baker, *Two Testaments, One Bible*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Downers Grove: IVP, 2010), 170–71.

<sup>6</sup> Doug Moo warns against “a certain circularity of procedure [which] is often evident at this point, as scholars—according to the definition they have established—select what they think are genuine instances of New Testament typology” (Douglas Moo, “The Problem of Sensus Plenior,” in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986]), 196.

But typology is not limited to the NT narrative of Christ, nor, as David Baker has noted, does it always involve escalation.<sup>7</sup> In some cases, patterns are repeated from the “greater” to the “lessor.” Even Wellum admits that types are repeated through the narrative without any “escalation” until one comes to Christ (106). Understanding the greater function of typology may help to temper *exaggerated claims about the significance of typological escalation*.

One would think that in order to defend our authors’ notion of typological escalation to “heightened realities” which are supposedly in the NT, that they would have to go to the NT to show that they are in fact there.<sup>8</sup> But *KTC* takes the peculiar approach of wanting to base itself on OT plot development and to indicate from the trajectory of that development what must be the nature and character of type escalation in the NT. One really needs to go to the NT to see how the patterns are actually applied to Christ in conjunction with what is said there in the story line. Failing to do this may very well lead to exaggerated claims about the nature of escalation in the NT, about the resolution of the story line, and about how biblical typology functions with respect to it.

### Some Problematic Claims about Typology in *KTC*

1. Typology is the means of “establishing” the divine plan.<sup>9</sup> The problem here is the word *establish*. It would be better to say that the divine plan is established in the story of the Bible by the words of explicit divine declaration in the language of the covenant promises—promises which Gentry and Wellum see as the skeletal structure of the canonical narrative. It is reasonable to assume that if there were to be any change in God’s plan, it would be revealed verbally by explicit divine declaration, in like manner as the plan was originally revealed. Types enhance the narrative presentation

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<sup>7</sup> Baker, 183.

<sup>8</sup> Wellum writes, “. . . in order to discern properly how Old Testament types/patterns are brought to fulfillment in God’s plan, we must first observe not only how those types are *intertextually* developed *within* the Old Testament but also how they are applied and developed under the new covenant. In other words, Jesus and the new covenant becomes the hermeneutical lens by which we interpret the fulfillment of the types/patterns of the Old Testament” (606). He also states that “typological patterns are discovered exegetically” (105 n.53), and that “given the *indirect* nature of it, not only does typology require carefully [*sic*] discernment; it also requires the passing of time in order to determine how the ‘type’ is fulfilled in the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ” (104). Progressive dispensationalists do not disagree with any of this. The issue is, what exactly does the NT teach about type fulfillment? What is the best way to read biblical typology within the entire biblical narrative? However, before one can even address these things, extended treatment of NT theology and NT typology is needed. However, extended exegetical and biblical theological analysis of NT employment of type patterns is precisely what is missing in *KTC*.

<sup>9</sup> The importance of typology for reading the biblical narrative is succinctly stated by Wellum as follows: “Not only does the *a fortiori* quality of typology serve as the crucial means by which Scripture unpacks the unique identity of Christ, it is also **the way in which Scripture grounds the uniqueness of the entire era of fulfillment associated with the dawning of the new covenant.** In other words, it is the means by which a legitimate *discontinuity* between the old and new in God’s unified plan is **established.** When **the antitype arrives** in history, or better, when it is inaugurated, not only are the previous types brought to their *telos* but the entire era introduced entails massive changes in many areas” (107, underlining and bold font added). See also footnote 10 below. It is this understanding of typology, or rather the typological reading of the covenant promises such that their fulfillment takes place in a different antitypical reality from what was explicitly promised that is the focus of this criticism.

of the plan. They signal divine action in the narrative. But it is an exaggerated claim to say that they establish the divine plan. The critic is right to be suspicious of a claim like this (that types are the means of establishing the divine plan) when the claim is employed to contravene, suppress, or subvert the meaning of explicit covenant promise, and even more so when the NT explicitly repeats and reaffirms the same promise as declared in the covenants of the OT. This leads to the second point:

2. Typology “establishes” a major discontinuity in the divine plan which explicitly or implicitly changes the meaning of OT promises. Gentry and Wellum believe that a major change occurs in the plot line of the Bible (Wellum speaks of “massive changes” [107, 598, 649]) whereby NT “higher” realities replace OT “lower realities” thereby constituting a change in the meaning of divine promises. The “fulfillment” of the promise thereby differs in meaning from the “promise” itself. And, they claim that typology establishes this reality shift.<sup>10</sup> But, this expects too much from narrative pattern repetition. A shift in meaning of this magnitude is not likely to be based on pattern repetition. Greater attention to textual detail is necessary to establish the claim. Actually, in my opinion, greater attention to textual detail demonstrates that the claim is superficial at best and actually wrong.

3. The Covenants relate to each other typically with all covenants being fulfilled in the New Covenant as their antitype.<sup>11</sup> But the covenants are not related to each other as types. Rather, they are successive promises in the narrative of Scripture revealing and advancing the divine plan. They are best read as declaratory speeches in the narrative not as type patterns that function to shift narrative reality. Furthermore, reading the New Covenant as a mechanism for shifting the entire promise-fulfillment process to a “higher reality” which in effect changes the meaning of “promise” in that process

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<sup>10</sup> Wellum argues for a change in meaning from promise to fulfillment in his dispute with John Feinberg on pp. 122–24. And this meaning shift is crucial to the way Progressive Covenantalism reads the biblical metanarrative. Wellum notes, on 122–23, that “Feinberg acknowledges that a common way to view typology, such as we [ie. Wellum and Gentry] maintain, is . . . that ‘the meaning of the antitype supersedes and cancels the meaning of the type in its own context’” (underlining added). In a footnote to this statement, Wellum writes, “we strongly agree that types must be given their due meanings in their own context, but we disagree that types are not predictive/prophetic, and that when that to which they point arrives (i.e. the antitype), they have reached their terminus. Further, we know God’s intention regarding the type by tracing the intertextual development of it, eventually culminating in its fulfillment in Christ” (123 n.89, underlining added). This last sentence is important. Wellum is saying that God’s intention is not to be found in the type itself but in its alleged antitype. Given the fact that in this discussion the word *type* refers to covenant promise, the distinction between the meaning of the type (promise) in its own context and the meaning of the antitype (fulfillment of the promise) in its context needs to be noted. The issue at dispute is precisely the predictive meaning of the promises. Accordingly, Wellum quotes Feinberg as saying that a proper typology “does not allow us to ignore or cancel the meaning of the type or substitute the meaning of the antitype for it. . . . NT antitypes neither explicitly nor implicitly cancel the meaning of OT types” (123). To this statement, Wellum responds, “it should be obvious that we differ with Feinberg on typology and that we are working with different understandings of it” (ibid.).

<sup>11</sup> Wellum’s chapter which summarizes the argument of the book begins the section on the New Covenant in this way: “It is the new covenant which all of the previous covenants anticipate and typify, and it is in this way [ie. anticipation and typification] that the new covenant *supersedes* all the previous covenants” (644–45, underlining mine). The summary explanation on pp. 644–52 of how the New Covenant works in the biblical metanarrative unpacts this typological and supersessionist view of the New Covenant as Wellum understands it.

is not only highly exaggerated but misreads the carefully detailed presentation of the New Covenant in Scripture, both OT and NT. It misses the fact that the Abrahamic Covenant promise of land and nation are foundational to New Covenant promise and remain unchanged as the soteriological blessings of the New Covenant are revealed.

### **Hermeneutical Concerns and Textual Details Calling for a “Thicker” and “More Biblical” Reading of the Canonical Narrative than KTC.**

#### 1. Performative Language Interpretation of Divine Promise.

Performative language, or speech-act analysis is mentioned in *KTC* but not employed in its study of the covenants. The key insight of speech-act analysis is that language has a performative force. By language, people not only refer to things, they also do things. And, the paradigmatic example of a speech-act, which J. L. Austin (the formative thinker on performative language) himself cited, is a promise.<sup>12</sup>

A promise entails an obligation. When somebody makes a promise, they're not just stating something, they are doing something. They are forming a relationship and creating an expectation that carries moral obligation. Failure to complete a promise is a violation of one's word. It is a serious matter. Certainly, we can make promises with conditions. The language of promise will make that clear. But once the promise is made, a relationship has been enacted and an expectation has been grounded in personal integrity.

Compare for example, the performative language of a wedding ceremony. As Richard Briggs has noted, when one says in a wedding ceremony “I do”, there is no convention by which one can turn around an hour later and say “well, really, I didn't”.<sup>13</sup> To say “I do” in the wedding ceremony is a performative speech act by which one formally accepts the marriage relationship. By those words one forms a relationship with another person which carries expectations and obligations.

A speech-act occurs in God's communication to Abraham in Genesis 12—a promise is given concerning a land, a people, a nation, and blessing to all nations. In Genesis 15, Abraham questions God about this promise of a land asking, “How shall I know that I will inherit it?” (Gen 15:8). So God adds the convention of a covenant ceremony so that Abraham would know that his descendants would inherit the promised land. Gentry gives an extended analysis of the Abrahamic Covenant but fails to consider it from a performative language perspective.

When God takes the covenant upon Himself in Genesis 15, a relationship of expectation is grounded in the integrity of God Himself. Divine intention and resolve could not be more clear. Later, God adds to the ceremonially reinforced promissory word the further convention of a solemn oath (Gen 22:15–18). God *swears* that He will accomplish that which He has explicitly promised. The writer to Hebrews says

<sup>12</sup> See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Univ. Press, 1962); John Searle, *Speech-Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Univ. Press, 1969).

<sup>13</sup> Richard Briggs, “Speech-Act Theory,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 763. Austin himself uses the marriage ceremony as an example of a conventionally structured promise; Austin, 12f.



that “when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath” (Heb 6:17). The promise and the oath are “two unchangeable things” (Heb 6:18) given to the recipients as “a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul” (Heb 6:19). God’s word is certain, which means His people can confidently rely on what He promises. And the fact that Hebrews speaks of these things as “unchangeable” should caution one from assuming that shadowy type correspondences mentioned elsewhere in that book somehow mean that the Lord’s explicit speech acts promising a nation and a land have somehow been dissolved, replaced, or transformed in their meaning.

Not only are the promises made and reiterated in performative language early in canonical narrative, but in the later narrative they are reinforced by additional prophetic speech acts of swearing, reaffirming, and emphatically restating God’s resolve to fulfill them as promised. The resolve is further underscored in several texts by sweeping rhetorical features like Isaiah’s posing impossible odds, unsurmountable obstacles only to dismiss them as trifles to the powerful Creator of all things, and by dramatic scenes, such as Hosea’s depiction of the anguish and sorrow of adultery or the pain of parental rejection which in spite of punishment, hurt, and suffering is nevertheless overcome by an unquenchable, triumphant love. The dramatic presentation in Hosea is particularly strong. Gentry’s remark that God “divorced” Israel (442) is simply wrong.<sup>14</sup> Hosea explicitly teaches that in spite of hardened and repeated adultery on Israel’s part, *he will not divorce her*. Separation—yes, even for a long time. Awful pain and suffering—yes, but no divorce! (This is the God, after all, who in Mal 2 condemns divorce [some readings of 2:16: “I hate divorce!”] and who then says a few lines later, “I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O Israel, are not consumed!” [3:6].) Instead, an inscrutable love will restore her to himself in a loving and faithful relationship!

Interpreting the canonical narrative to say that Israel is redefined and that God’s promise of the land is substantively changed is not congruent with this line of prophetic reaffirmation and restated divine resolve. It is a thin, superficial, and actually

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<sup>14</sup> Speaking of Isa 54:4–10, Gentry writes, “this marriage relationship was broken by Israel’s unfaithfulness, and God brought the curse of exile upon Israel, and so he forsook (i.e., divorced) his unfaithful wife” (442). However, it should be noted that Gentry goes on to speak of a future renewing of the marriage: “The marriage relationship was broken, the wife forsaken/widowed, but now reconciliation brings about renewing of the marriage . . . . Israel may feel like a woman who was married . . . and then rejected. This, however, is only a momentary turning away. . . . The marriage relationship will be restored. There will be a new covenant. . . .” (442–43). The problem might be considered an unfortunate word choice (“divorced”) to explain the “separation” language used to illustrate the divine wrath. However, given the fact that Gentry believes that Israel is redefined in the New Covenant such that the meaning content of the covenant promise establishing Israel’s particular identity—the identity of the partner in the marriage covenant—is changed, would seem to justify his use of the word *divorce* in the divine separation from Israel prior to the establishment of the new covenant. When the New Covenant is established, it is established with a “new [that is, *different*] Israel.” Since Gentry sees the marriage being “renewed” to a *different Israel*, it would seem appropriate for him to speak of the Lord having “divorced” the old Israel. But the point being made in this review is not only that the language of divorce is unsuitable to explain the rejection, abandonment, separation language of the prophets, but also that the renewal of the marriage relationship in the prophets is to the same Israel—that is, Israel considered as a particular ethnic, national entity—that had received the covenant promises. While Gentry appears to include ethnic Jews within this “new Israel,” Israel itself is no longer the particular, national entity that was the recipient of the covenant promises. *That* Israel has been rejected and discarded.

subversive reading of the text. But even more, it creates a major theological problem for Progressive Covenantalism because it calls into question the integrity of God. In spite of recognition in *KTC* that divine integrity, divine *emet* and *hesed*, is tied to covenant promise fulfillment, they downplay the seriousness of the divine word of resolve expressed in the performative language of covenant promise and restatement.<sup>15</sup>

## 2. Holistic Anthropology

*KTC* fails to account for the national, tribal, ethnic dimensions of biblical anthropology. They miss the national, ethnic, aspects of humanity as a key feature of the biblical narrative from its appearance in Genesis 10–11 to the final eschatological scene in Revelation 22. This accounts in part for an inadequate understanding of the Abrahamic Covenant (which promises blessings for nations) and the role of ethnic, national Israel in the plan of God from the promise covenanted to Abraham to the eschatological consummation. This tribal, national dimension of human life is a creation-based design that formed as humanity multiplied. Paul positively affirms this design rooted in creation when he says in Acts 17:26, “And he [God] made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place.” These anthropological dimensions do not just characterize the story up to the inauguration and consummation of the New Covenant. They do not disappear when the New Covenant is established. The national and territorial aspects of human reality continue into the new earth at the end of the book of Revelation where the kings of the earth (the whole territory of the new earth) bring the glory of the nations (the multi-national dimension of human life in the eschaton) into the City (that is, from their various locations on the new earth outside the City into it).

Related to this is a misuse of a quotation from D. A. Carson (*Showing the Spirit*, 152–53; *KTC* 686–87). Even if Carson’s point was that giving the Spirit eradicates the corporate “tribal” structures of humanity, the claim could hardly be considered as a credible interpretation of Jer 31:31 (“they will all know me, from the least to the greatest”). Rather, his point seems to be that the gift of the Spirit to all changes the nature of instruction from a situation in which only tribal leaders in Israel were gifted by the Spirit (although even that exaggerates the text) to one in which all know the

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<sup>15</sup> The connection of covenant promise to divine integrity is addressed in *KTC* within the discussion of the conditionality of the covenants (608–11). Wellum notes the emphasis in Scripture on divine *emet* and *hesed* and states, “He always remains true to himself, his own character, and his promises, and it is on this basis alone that we can hope, trust, and find all our confidence in him” (609). He cites Heb 6:17–18, and states that the Lord “keeps his promises—and as such they can never be thwarted” (610). All of this is applied to maintaining an “unconditional” force in the covenant structure until its fulfillment by Christ (611). But Wellum does not connect divine integrity to the meaning content of the promises as originally given! *KTC* does not see that changing the meaning content of promise in the supposed move from the giving of the promise to its fulfillment calls divine integrity into account. Simply affirming divine integrity and citing Heb 6:17–18 does not address the problem.

Lord.<sup>16</sup> However, they then turn the point to argue for a de-tribalization on the anthropological level. Certainly, there is no logical reason why giving the Spirit to all creates “massive changes” to the anthropological reality of genetic tribal structures. Even the text which Carson as well as Gentry and Wellum cite—Jer 31:31—explicitly states that the New Covenant blessing of “they will all know me” will be given to “the House of Israel and the House of Judah.” The reference is to a tribal reality which in context is continued and blessed as such with the blessing of all members knowing the Lord.

Nevertheless, this obscure argument is put forward to try to de-tribalize, and denationalize the promise in Jer 31:31–37 which speaks of Israel “being a nation forever before me (31:36)” set in the context of the well-known section of Jeremiah whose theme is “I will restore your fortunes” (Jeremiah 30–33).

A deficient anthropology will almost certainly leave one unprepared to grasp the holistic nature of the eschatological kingdom, since that kingdom is presented in Scripture as a multi-*national* not just multi-personal reality. And this deficiency in turn cripples the attempt to explain the significance of the inaugurated aspects of that kingdom in relation to its consummation.

Understanding that national, tribal features remain as part of biblical anthropology even into the eschatological consummation (whether that consummation is pictured in the OT [Isa 11:19 is just one text] or in the NT [Matt 19:28; Rev 21:24–26; 22:2]) enables one to grasp the significance of the promise repeated in both the OT and the NT of the restoration of national Israel. The NT repetition of a future for national Israel, in texts such as Acts 1, 3, and Romans 11, is not to be dismissed as

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<sup>16</sup> Gentry and Wellum both emphasize this point in contrast to traditional covenantal interpretations of the New Covenant community today as a mixed body of believers and unbelievers. Progressive dispensationalists would completely agree that the church is not a mixed body. The authors’ stated intention, as is Carson’s, is to stress the giving of the Holy Spirit to every member in the New Covenant relationship. However, they also relate this “structural” change in the tribal condition of Israel to what they claim is its reconstitution as a multi-ethnic reality. Gentry’s treatment of the matter can be found on pp. 508–13 which concludes the de-tribalization process with “a restored Israel, in which Jew and Gentile are created to be the new humanity” (512). Wellum, making the argument again from the Carson quotation about the Spirit given to each one in the New Covenant community, concludes: “Yet, the covenant community that he mediates is not structurally the same as the previous covenant communities. Those who come under his mediatorial rule and reign include both believing Jews and believing Gentiles” (647). Progressive dispensationalists agree that the rule and reign of Christ includes both believing Jews and believing Gentiles, but Wellum’s point on pages 644–52 is that in the process of creating the New Covenant community and extending the blessings of the Holy Spirit to Gentiles, a new non-ethnic, non-tribal reality, the church, has come into existence as the new Israel: “The New Testament is clear: what the Old Testament anticipated and promised has now arrived in Christ . . . The benefits of his work are now applied to the church—a new international community—joined to him by faith by the work of the Spirit” (652). Since he sees no ethnic, national Israel receiving what was “anticipated and promised” in the Old Testament but rather sees the church—“a new international community”—as the recipient of those promises, he has effectively de-tribalized the promise. The problem here appears to be a failure to consider the possibility of an eschatological outcome in which believing Jews and believing Gentiles receive the Holy Spirit in and through Christ—thus each and every one directly related to Him by the Spirit—and yet at the same time the national, tribal anthropological dimensions of divine promise and prophecy are also fulfilled. Progressive Covenantalism does not (apparently it conceptually cannot) maintain both of these together. Progressive Dispensationalism affirms both.

an anomaly needing hermeneutical correction. Rather, it fits harmoniously in a holistic reading of the entire biblical story. It is a thin reading of the canonical narrative that misses these details. It is an unreliable reading that deliberately subverts them.

### 3. Land, Earth, and the Holistic New Creation

In the past couple of decades, many theologians have come to embrace what I call New Creation eschatology. New Creation Eschatology believes that the eternal state is not a heavenly, timeless, non-material reality but a new heavens and new earth, such as in Isaiah 65, 2 Peter 3:13, and Revelation 21 and 22. The dwelling place of the redeemed in that new creation is not in heaven but on the new earth. *KTC* says that it affirms this idea of the new creation.<sup>17</sup> However, it fails to draw the logical consequences of this view for its understanding of the land promised to Israel. And that failure raises questions about the conceptual clarity of the new creation in Progressive Covenantalism.

The imagery of refinement in new earth prophecies extending from Isaiah to 2 Peter points to the fact that the new earth will not be an utterly new creation from nothing but a refinement and renovation of the present earth. God's plan for His creation is not to destroy it and start over from nothing but to redeem, cleanse, and renew it. Paul's comments about the liberation of creation in Romans 8 harmonizes with this. In light of this, it is clear that New Creation Eschatology envisions not a non-material eternity nor an alternate material reality but the redemption of this earth and heavens fit for an everlasting glorious manifestation of the presence of God.

In light of this, is it not important to ask about the territorial promises to Israel? The land and nation promises to Israel were repeatedly stated to be everlasting. In Isa 65:18, 25, the promise of the new earth is linked to the promise of a restored Jerusalem, the chief part of the land of promise. The blessings of the new earth parallel the promised blessings of the land of Israel in many texts so that the land becomes an example of what is intended for the whole earth.

Given these considerations, a key argument in *KTC* can be seen to be flawed. The argument is that the land promise is taken up in the biblical story in a type escalation from Eden to the Land of Israel to the New Earth, such that the land comes to be replaced by (fulfilled by) the new earth. The new earth, then, takes the place of the land promised to Israel in the consummation.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> "It must be emphasized that the final state is not heaven, but rather life in a new creation" (467, cf. 626, 629).

<sup>18</sup> This argument appears at crucial points in the book. See pp. 114 n.75, 607, but especially 703–13. Much of the language of the land being typological of the new creation would not be objectionable if it were not for this supersessionist, replacement aspect to the argument. Wellum, supposedly speaking for Gentry as well, states that "there is little evidence that the land promise finds its Christological fulfillment in terms of a specific piece of land given to national Israel. The story line of Scripture simply does not move back in this direction" (714). He seems unable to conceptualize the story line moving *forward* in that direction with a renewed land of Israel given to a renewed Israel as part of a renewed earth given to renewed nations all enjoying consummated blessing in Christ! Unable to see how a holistic consummation fits with the expressed promises covenanted by God, he postulates a consummation which changes the meanings of the promises contrary to their performative force, regardless of the theological problems that such a move introduces.

This argument suffers from a logical fallacy that often appears in Covenantal readings of the story of the Bible. The whole, the universal (in this case, the new creation) replaces the part, the particular (the land promised to Israel). Accordingly, our authors say that the biblical narrative moves from a particular land to the whole of the new earth. While it is certainly true that the narrative moves from an expressed plan for the entire creation to God's specific dealings with Israel in OT narrative and then to gospel proclamation to all nations with a culminating vision of a new creation (also predicted by the prophets of Israel), our authors draw the conclusion that the land of Israel somehow disappears and is replaced by the eschatological reality of the new earth. However, in this movement from the part to the whole, unless the so-called "whole" is a completely different reality (which our authors want to deny) the statement is nonsense. A whole logically includes all of its parts. If a part is removed from a whole, then it is a different "whole" from what it was before. Such a new whole does not replace *a part* in the old whole, rather, it replaces *the whole*. However, if the new whole is the old whole renewed, then all the parts of the old whole would be renewed as well. The particular part must be in the whole, renewed along with all the other parts, for the whole to be the whole that it is.

Since the new earth is the present earth renovated and renewed, the lands that constitute it must likewise be renovated and renewed. That includes the land promised to Israel along with all the other lands that make up the earth. It is the blessings promised for the land of Israel that are extended to the whole earth not the land itself that is extended.<sup>19</sup> The fact that the land serves as a type of blessing to be extended to the earth does not logically call for the elimination or annihilation of that land in the renewal process! The renewal of the land and the renewal of the whole earth go together in biblical thought!

But, if the renewed earth includes the renewed Promised Land together with all other lands likewise renewed and blessed to the level of the land promised to Israel, then a key argument of *KTC* against Progressive Dispensationalism fails.

The claim that there will be no future fulfillment of the territorial promise given to Israel is sometimes supported by the old refrain that the NT never mentions the land per se. *KTC* repeats this claim (112). But, this too is false. Paul's statement in Acts 13:19 is too often overlooked: "After destroying seven nations in the land of Canaan, he gave them [this people Israel—v.17] their land as an inheritance." The phrase *he gave them their land as an inheritance* is taken from covenant language in Deuteronomy (Deut 4:21, 38; 12:10; 15:4; 19:10, 14; 21:23; 24:4; 25:19). Deuteronomy 4 is a crucial text speaking of a future exile and restoration of Israel (parallel to Deuteronomy 30). It is instructive that the repeated reference of the gift of the land as an inheritance is supplemented by the phrase "the land that the Lord your God is giving you for all time" (Deut 4:40). Note how the gift of the land as an inheritance is linked to the everlasting covenant promise in Ps 105:7–11:

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<sup>19</sup> It is misleading to say that "the borders" of the land "are expanded to encompass the entire creation" (712). While Scripture is clear that the blessing is not confined to the land of Israel alone, the expansion of the blessing does not mean that the land in its territorial reality somehow in and of itself expands physically into a whole new world or that it no longer constitutes a "place" in the larger world.

He is the Lord our God;  
 his judgments are in all the earth.  
 He remembers his covenant forever,  
 the word that he commanded,  
 for a thousand generations,  
 the covenant that he made with Abraham  
 his sworn promise to Isaac,  
 which he confirmed to Jacob as a statute,  
 to Israel as an everlasting covenant,  
 saying, "To you I will give the land of Canaan  
 as your portion for an inheritance.

Note that Paul who says that God *gave them their land as an inheritance* is the same Paul who says in Rom 11:29 that "the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable" (note: in addition to the phrase 'gave . . . as an inheritance,' the land is repeatedly spoken of in the OT simply as a gift of the Lord to Israel—the land which the Lord gave you). In this same context (Romans 11) Paul speaks of the restoration of Israel in accordance with Covenant promise. The NT does not dwell on the land promise because it was not a matter of dispute. Jews were living in the land. Jewish believers in Jesus and Jewish non-believers both agreed on the land promise to Israel. The matter of dispute in NT writings was whether Jesus was the Christ. That was the main point in Paul's synagogue speech in Acts 13 where he does mention *the gift of the land to Israel as an inheritance*.

#### 4. Christology

*KTC* does say that the narrative of Scripture converges on Jesus Christ. He is the central focus of the divine plan. All the covenant promises find their fulfillment in and through Him. Our authors particularly emphasize the fulfillment of promise "in Him." Actually, "in Him" is a thick concept in Scripture that includes "through Him." It includes multiple aspects of the relationship of Christ to the redeemed creation. However, *KTC* *tends* to read "in Him" in a reductive, mystical manner rather than in the thick, holistic political, material, and spiritual interconnectivity that Scripture ascribes to the kingdom of God, the inheritance of Christ. *KTC*, *at times*, reads the Person of Christ as Himself the mystical consummation of the whole narrative. He personally is the fulfillment of Israel, the land, the nation, the church, the creation. The result is a vague mysticism that looks somewhat like a variant of metaphysical Personalism.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> "In the New Testament, it is our contention that the land promise does not find its fulfillment in the future in terms of a specific piece of real estate given to the ethnic nation of Israel; rather it is fulfilled in Jesus, who is the true Israel and the last Adam, who by his triumphant work wins for us the new creation. That new creation has 'already' arrived in the dawning of the new covenant in individual Christians (2 Cor 5:17; Eph 2:8–10) and the church (Eph 2:11–21) and it will be consummated when Christ returns and ushers in the new creation in its fullness (Revelation 21–22)" (607). Likewise, Wellum writes, "we enter the 'land,' so to speak, but now enjoying what the land pointed forward to: participating in new creation realities now as the people of God . . . All of these themes [tabernacle, temple, new Jerusalem] are intimately associated with the land, and all of them are viewed as fulfilled typologically in Christ" (715).

While this may seem to exalt the Person of Christ, it actually diminishes Him, because it threatens the integrity of the communion of attributes that gives Him a distinguishable identity within and among His creatures while at the same time affirming His divine transcendence and immanence. It diminishes His Person because it deprives Him of the rich, thick inheritance that Scripture predicts for Him, an inheritance that retains the integrity of its created reality as the earth and the heavens, land and lands, people and peoples as individuals and as nations, including Israel and all the Gentiles, all worshipful of Him and in service to Him, not mystically dissolved into the reality of His person.

## 5. Ecclesiology

Progressive Covenantalism is, as the authors describe it, a variant of New Covenant Theology which is suspicious of the way traditional Covenant theology has been used to support paedobaptism and a “mixed assembly” view of the church. New Covenant theology has learned from Dispensationalism to read the OT covenants in relation to Israel not the church. But they differ from Dispensationalism in refusing to see any eschatological fulfillment of those covenant promises for a national Israel in the future. Instead, they see the New Covenant shifting the entire canonical narrative from Israel to the church, so that the meaning of the former is changed to be fulfilled in the higher reality of the latter. In this, they are more radical than traditional covenantalists who try to preserve a sense of unity in the Bible by projecting the church backwards into the OT. New Covenant Theology makes a distinction between Israel and the church which preserves the former in its integrity in the past but completely replaces and supersedes it in the present and the future. The unity of the Bible in this view appears to be in a hermeneutical “mechanism” which they believe is the New Covenant supposedly shifting the meaning of the entire covenantal promise structure so that the two Testaments connect only as type and antitype. By this means they dismiss traditional Covenantalism’s appeal to a “genealogical principle” to support what PC considers to be an ecclesiological error.

Progressive Covenantalism argues that traditional Covenantalism fails to see how the genealogical structure of the Covenant has been fulfilled in the heightened reality of Christ, not only in the consummation of the kingdom but in the inaugurated reality of the kingdom which is the church today. It has been superseded by a heightened typological fulfillment just as *KTC* claims that the territorial structure and land promise of the old covenantal arrangement has likewise been superseded in the heightened reality of Christ and the church.

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Wellum cites as “helpful discussions of ‘land’ in biblical and systematic theology” a number of works which mostly take as their point of reference the seminal study (also cited by Wellum) of W. D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land: Early Christianity and Jewish Territorial Doctrine* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1974). Davies argued that in the NT, the land promises were “Christified,” meaning that their fulfillment takes place in the Person of Christ. Gentry and Wellum do not use the term *christification* but the way in which land fulfillment is described as presently taking place in Christ suggests this kind of conceptuality. *Personalism* is the term used of a philosophy that construes ultimate reality as essentially *personal*. In American philosophy, it was advocated by the so-called Boston School of which Borden Parker Bowne was a foremost representative.

Interestingly, *KTC* acknowledges that Dispensationalism already offers a critique of Covenantalism's use of the genealogical principle (eg. 64–65, 70, 683–84). That principle, in the OT wording of the covenants, refers to Israel, not the church. The church is a different reality in the NT not to be confused with the nation of Israel in the OT.<sup>21</sup> So far, so good. But, PC insists on making the New Covenant dissolve and mystically transform the meaning of the entire string of covenant promises in order to move the entire canonical narrative from OT to NT. *What an incredible loss to the richness of the biblical story, the complexity of the plot line, and the thick dimensions of created and redeemed reality just to carry out an ecclesiological agenda, especially when the theological concerns have already been addressed without this incredible loss!*

This is not the place to set forth an alternative doctrine of the believers' church and credo- as opposed to paedobaptism. However, a more satisfying biblical theology would be one which positions the church in its distinctiveness (distinctive in its constitution and its ordinances) within a holistic redemption in which all the promises find their fulfillment in integrity, one in which the rich texture of the work(s) of God come together in a stable, harmonious pattern, an eschatological reality which constitutes the wealth of Christ's inheritance.

### Conclusion

*KTC* offers a wealth of exegetical studies on OT covenant texts. It is also the key text for understanding the variant of New Covenant Theology which is presenting itself as Progressive Covenantalism. However, it offers a thin reading of the overall canonical plot structure. It ignores, overlooks, or leaves out key features of the biblical story (both OT and NT) such as God's plan for nations, including explicitly Israel, and the place of land, including explicitly the land given to Israel, as a feature of the earth that He redeems. It misses the performative force of covenant promises to Israel which fit coherently with the national and territorial features of the narrative and fails to see the coherence of those promises with the restoration theme which also runs through the entire canon, from OT to NT. It fails to set the church distinctly within the narrative without subverting or reducing the complexity of the biblical

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<sup>21</sup> In spite of its reference to various forms of Dispensationalism (40–56), *KTC* does not consider the ecclesiological difference between Progressive Dispensationalism and earlier varieties of Dispensationalism. Consequently, Wellum makes the summary statement that in Dispensationalism, "Israel is ontologically different than the church and thus still has privileges distinct from Christ and the church" (685). In Progressive Dispensationalism, the church is the inaugural kingdom reality now being manifest among the nations. It reaches its consummation and fulfillment when the kingdom is consummated. In the consummation, contrary to earlier forms of Dispensationalism, there is no "church" separate from the redeemed Jews and Gentiles who also constitute the eschatological nations. The redeemed of all the nations and as all the nations (Israel and Gentile), is the fulfillment of the entire plan and work of God with Israel and Gentiles in the OT economy and with those same nations and peoples in forming the church today. Consequently, while *church* is historically new and distinct in the outworking of the plan of God, and while it is categorically distinct from the tribal, national, ethnic categories of *Israel* and *Gentile Nations* and *Jew* and *Gentile*, it is not ontologically distinct as a different class of created beings. See Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, eds. *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 383–84; and Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1993), 49–51.



story. Overall, it fails to present the convergence of the canonical narrative on Christ in a manner which relates all these things to Him in the integrity of their realty and in the integrity of His Person so that they come together to form the rich, thick eschatological inheritance of the Son of God. These features call for a “thicker,” “more biblical,” in fact, a more holistic reading of the canon of Scripture than that given in *KTC*.