

KINGDOM
through
COVENANT

• 2ND EDITION •

A BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL
UNDERSTANDING *of the* COVENANTS

PETER J. GENTRY
STEPHEN J. WELLUM



“Exegetically faithful, theologically profound, and grounded in the interpretive patterns of the biblical authors themselves, this rich, rigorous, and robust edition of *Kingdom through Covenant* clearly and helpfully charts a course between dispensational and covenant theologies. I know of no better study that clarifies how the biblical covenants progress, integrate, and climax in Christ. This volume is a gift to the evangelical church and academy, and I am confident that it will greatly ground and guide the next generation of pastor-theologians.”

Jason S. DeRouchie, Professor of Old Testament and Biblical Theology,
Bethlehem College & Seminary; Elder, Bethlehem Baptist Church,
Minneapolis, Minnesota

“Gentry and Wellum offer a third way, a *via media*, between covenant theology and dispensationalism, arguing that both of these theological systems are not informed sufficiently by biblical theology. Certainly, we cannot understand the Scriptures without comprehending ‘the whole counsel of God,’ and here we find incisive exegesis and biblical theology at their best. This book is a must read and will be part of the conversation for many years to come.”

Thomas R. Schreiner, James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament
Interpretation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“*Kingdom through Covenant* is hermeneutically sensitive, exegetically rigorous, and theologically rich—a first-rate biblical theology that addresses both the message and structure of the whole Bible from the ground up. Gentry and Wellum have produced what will become one of the standard texts in the field. For anyone who wishes to tread the path of biblical revelation, this text is a faithful guide.”

Miles V. Van Pelt, Alan Belcher Professor of Old Testament and Biblical
Languages and Academic Dean, Reformed Theological Seminary,
Jackson, Mississippi

“What do you get when you cross a world-class Bible scholar and a first-rate systematic theologian? You get nine hundred-plus pages of power-packed biblical goodness. You get the forest and quite a few of the trees. This is not the first volume that has attempted to mediate the dispensational–covenant theology divide, but it may be the culminating presentation of that discussion—just as Bach was not the first baroque composer but its highest moment. Gentry and Wellum’s proposal of *Kingdom through Covenant* should be read by all parties, but I won’t be surprised to learn in twenty years that this volume provided the foundation for how a generation of anyone who advocates regenerate church membership puts its Bible together.”

Jonathan Leeman, Editorial Director, 9Marks; author, *The Rule of Love*

“Gentry and Wellum have provided a welcome addition to the current number of books on biblical theology. What makes their contribution unique is the marriage of historical exegesis, biblical theology, and systematic theology. *Kingdom through Covenant* brims with exegetical insights, biblical theological drama, and sound systematic theological conclusions. Particularly important is the viable alternative they offer to the covenantal and dispensational hermeneutical frameworks. I enthusiastically recommend this book!”

Stephen G. Dempster, Professor of Religious Studies, Crandall University

“The relationship between the covenants of Scripture is rightly considered to be central to the interpretation of the Bible. That there is some degree of continuity is obvious for it is the same God—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as well as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ—who has revealed himself and his will in the covenants. That there is, however, also significant discontinuity also seems patent since Scripture itself talks about a new covenant and the old one passing away. What has changed, and what has not? Utterly vital questions to which this book by Gentry and Wellum give satisfying and sound answers. Because of the importance of this subject and the exegetical and theological skill of the authors, their answers deserve a wide hearing. Highly recommended!”

Michael A. G. Haykin, Professor of Church History and Biblical Spirituality,
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“*Kingdom through Covenant* has helped me better understand the Bible as a continuous narrative. This book reveals the structure that supports the revelation of God’s message throughout time. The study of the covenants provides a framework for understanding and applying the message of the Bible to life in the new covenant community. This book has helped put the Bible together for me and has been enriching to my ministry.”

Joseph Lumbrix, Pastor, Mount Olivet Baptist Church, Willisburg, Kentucky

“This impressive volume makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the nature of the biblical covenants. Meticulously researched, clearly written, and boldly argued, the *progressive covenantalism* thesis—a *via media* between dispensational and covenantal theology—combines exegetical depth with theological rigor in the service of covenant faithfulness. The result is penetrating reflections on Christology, the Christian life, ecclesiology, and eschatology. Even at points of disagreement, all who teach the Scriptures to others will find here a rich treasure trove of whole-Bible theological thinking and an invaluable resource to return to again and again.”

David Gibson, Minister, Trinity Church, Aberdeen, Scotland; coeditor,
From Heaven He Came and Sought Her

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STEPHEN J. WELLMUM

 **CROSSWAY**[®]
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Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants (Second Edition)

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A LEGACY
for
My Children
Stewart John,
Laura and Stephen,
Joseph Daniel, Emma Grace, and Sophie Rose
— Peter Gentry

• • •

He established a testimony in Jacob
and appointed a law in Israel,
which he commanded our fathers
to teach to their children,
that the next generation might know them,
the children yet unborn,
and arise and tell them to their children,
so that they should set their hope in God
and not forget the works of God,
but keep his commandments.
Psalm 78:5–7 ESV

WITH GRATITUDE TO OUR TRIUNE COVENANT LORD
for
My Parents
Colin and Joan Wellum
— Stephen Wellum

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

We are extremely grateful to Justin Taylor and the entire Crossway team for an opportunity to present a revised edition of *Kingdom through Covenant*. Although we are delighted in the reception that the first edition (2012) has received and are thankful for how it has stimulated discussion regarding how our triune God's eternal plan is disclosed to us through the Bible's covenantal unfolding, we wanted to update parts and clarify others in light of some of the reviews and helpful feedback we have received. In this new edition, we have attempted to read and critically reflect on all the reviews of the first edition of *Kingdom through Covenant* known to us. Since the book's publication, we have realized that some matters required correction and other matters clarification, given some of the reviewers' misunderstandings of our overall proposal. In addition, we have also grown in our understanding of Scripture and further wrestled with issues that did not appear to us when we began this journey. In what follows, we would like to explain what has been updated in each of our respective parts and also how close cooperation and work together have helped us to improve the other's part and the whole.

NOTE FROM PETER GENTRY

Serious reflection on all known reviews led me to reconsider my exegesis in a few areas. The one reviewer who noted genuine problems in the exegesis was Doug Moo. He highlighted that the explanation given of "affirm/uphold a covenant" (*hēqīm bērit*) in Ezekiel 16 was unsatisfactory. Nor did I explain properly why "cut a covenant" (*kārat bērit*) was used of Deuteronomy, since the covenant at Moab appears to be a reaffirmation of the covenant at Sinai. I am grateful for the opportunity to acknowledge my errors and am especially thankful for his review.

Several months of study on Ezekiel 16 led me to a different explanation, which I published in the abridgment of this volume, *God's Kingdom through God's Covenants* (Crossway, 2015). Further research on the literary structure of Deuteronomy, which covered chapters 1–33 and not just 1–28, led me to what I believe is a more satisfactory treatment of the relationship between the covenant at Sinai and the covenant at Moab and to not only why the expression *kārat b'ērīt* was necessary for the latter but also why the expression *hēqīm b'ērīt* was inappropriate there.

The chapter on Daniel 9 has been completely rewritten. The basic position taken is much the same, but many exegetical issues are reconsidered that make the presentation more satisfactory in dealing with unanswered questions.

Much of the material on the new covenant in the Prophets was reworked. In the first edition, the contribution of each prophet was analyzed within the plot structure of their individual works. At the time, this approach was an advance on previous books on the topic since they did not treat the covenants in this manner. However, what I did not adequately do was consider the chronological development in the Prophets as each prophet meditated on what earlier prophets had spoken and written, thus demonstrating better innerbiblical and intertextual relationships. Thus, Jeremiah clarifies the discussion in Isaiah, and Ezekiel further explains questions unanswered in Jeremiah. In addition, in my discussion of the Prophets' treatment of the new covenant, I incorporated more material from the New Testament to satisfy some of our critics who did not think we dealt adequately with how the Old Testament's teaching of kingdom through covenant is fulfilled in the New.

When the first edition of our book went to press, we did not have sufficient time to evaluate *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God's Saving Purposes* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), by Scott W. Hahn. The comment in the first edition that Hahn is not quite up to date on the ancient Near Eastern cultural setting necessary for the best exegesis remains true. Yet Hahn's book is full of helpful insights, and we would certainly agree that the covenant at Sinai, in particular, establishes kinship between Yahweh and Israel. The same is true of the Davidic and new covenants.

In 2015, *Covenant in the Persian Period: From Genesis to Chronicles* appeared, edited by Richard J. Bauckham and Gary N. Knoppers (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns). This is a collection of twenty-two essays by an international spec-

trum of scholars. The advertisement on the back cover claims that the “essays in this new and comprehensive study explore how notions of covenant, especially the Sinaitic covenant, flourished during the Neo-Babylonian, Persian, and early Hellenistic periods.” With no mention of our work and no mention of the three-volume work of over 1,600 pages by Kenneth Kitchen and Paul Lawrence dealing with every covenant, law treatise, and treaty in the ancient Near East from the third millennium to the Hasmonean period,¹ it is difficult to consider this work a disinterested and honest treatment of the subject. The title itself, *Covenant in the Persian Period*, reveals a major bias about the origin of the documents of the Old Testament, which we seek to counter in our volume. In the end, the treatment of the covenants presented is neither comprehensive nor new.

Finally, in 2017, *Biblical Theology: Covenants and the Kingdom of God in Redemption History*, by Jeong Koo Jeon, was published (Eugene: OR, Wipf & Stock). This is a work by a systematic theologian committed to classical covenant theology. Strangely, all the book does is explain and reaffirm the framework of the system and then cite passages of Scripture *within this framework* as though the evidence is obvious, without any sense that it is ultimately the overall metanarrative that is at debate. One can only show that one’s metanarrative is correct when it encompasses more data than other competing metanarratives and has better explanatory power in dealing with the details. The view of the whole must account for the parts, and the understanding of the parts must reshape the view of the whole. Overall, there is little exegesis in the book by Jeon, and when the author takes issue with our work in four or five places, he does not offer any exegetical evidence for his rejection of our positions. There is also a simple repeating of the analysis provided so many years ago by Meredith Kline for dealing with the biblical text. Ironically, contrary to the review by Jonathan Brack and Jared Oliphint, who questioned our appeal to the cultural setting in our interpretation of Scripture,² covenant theologians, as represented by Jeon and Kline, do that very thing.

NOTE FROM STEPHEN WELLUM

Given the opportunity to write a revised edition, I carefully edited and rewrote parts 1 and 3. I sought to update, clarify, and remove anything that

1. Kenneth A. Kitchen and Paul J. N. Lawrence, *Treaty, Law and Covenant in the Ancient Near East*, 3 vols. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2012).

2. 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, no. 1 (2014): 189–217.

was not necessary to our overall argument and biblical-theological proposal. Some of the reviews of the first edition illegitimately picked up on material in footnotes and then pitted those discussions against other sections of the book. Or other reviews jumped on a word or phrase—*replacement* or *via media*—and then attributed positions to us that we did not intend. In light of this, I was careful to remove material or restate it to achieve maximal clarity. It is our hope that readers will read our new edition by first seeking to do justice to our argument on its own terms before offering a critique of a view that we do not endorse. But as we learned in writing the first edition, no matter how carefully one states one's position—especially when it centers on key differences between theological systems—it is difficult to hear exactly what the other person is saying. It is our prayer that this revised edition will continue to foster discussion among Christians who agree on so much but still differ on important details, especially in terms of how the Bible's overall plotline works. For this reason, I have sought to clarify our view and state other theological positions in a more precise and accurate manner.

In part 1, I sought to describe with greater precision the nature of biblical and systematic theology, the theological systems of dispensational and covenant theology, and some of the hermeneutical differences between our proposal and the dominant theological systems within evangelical theology. My description and exposition of these matters did not change substantially, but I have updated the footnotes and, I believe, nuanced the discussion better.

In part 3, I thoroughly reworked chapter 16, which summarizes our overall viewpoint, trying to discuss with more clarity our proposal of progressive covenantalism. We added chapter 17, on the New Testament, with the aim of discussing how the progression of the biblical covenants reaches its fulfillment in Christ and his people, the church. One of the main criticisms of the first edition is that it did not adequately discuss the New Testament data. We sought to respond to this criticism by Peter adding more New Testament material in his exposition of the covenants and by me adding this new chapter. Obviously, the New Testament data could be discussed in a number of ways, but we thought it best to demonstrate how our Lord Jesus Christ brings to fulfillment the previous covenants in himself as the head and mediator of the new covenant and how the church, as God's new covenant community, is the recipient of all God's promises in Christ alone. Discussing it in this way allows us to see better how our Lord Jesus is the one who brings all God's promises to fulfillment *and* how the church is a transformed,

new community (contra covenant theology) yet a community that lasts as a covenant people forever and not merely a present-day illustration of what believing nations will be like in the future (contra dispensational theology).

Finally, in chapters 18–19, some of the theological entailments of our position are delineated with some previous material removed and new material added. The decision for what to include or omit was based on which material would contribute best to demonstrating key *differences* between the theological systems of dispensational and covenant theology and our proposal of progressive covenantalism. As we have repeatedly stated, although we as Christians agree on more than we disagree on, our focus in this book is on areas that still divide us. This needs to be kept in mind as the book is read so that readers do not think that Christians disagree on essential truths of the gospel. What we are trying to do is to wrestle with some of the differences among us to attain a greater unity as we sit under the truth of God’s Word.

One note about my dedication of the book to my parents, Dr. Colin and Joan Wellum. In the midst of finishing this work, on October 11, 2017, my dear father passed from this life into the presence of his Lord and Savior. I am so thankful for the legacy he left me and his entire family. As stated in the first edition, we all stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us—men and women who were faithful in their generation, who stood firm on God’s Word, and who passed it on to the next generation. This truth is more real to me now than it was before the passing of my father, and I am pleased to rededicate this second edition to the memory of him and the continued life and influence of my mother. I cannot imagine where I would be today without faithful, godly parents who loved me and my brothers so much to sacrifice their lives to train their children in the truths of God’s Word, to proclaim the glories of Christ Jesus, and to place their children under the faithful exposition of God’s Word by William E. Payne at Trinity Baptist Church, Burlington, Ontario, Canada. I thank our gracious God for the precious gift of my parents.

In addition to the people to whom the first edition was dedicated, the administration and trustees of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (where we have the privilege of teaching), and the colleagues we thanked in the first edition, we would like to thank those who have worked with us on making progressive covenantalism known and defended as a theological position. Specifically, we are thankful for the contributors to *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course between Dispensational and Covenant Theologies*

(Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), who are both colleagues and students and who played an important role in the revision of this new edition.

It is our prayer that this new edition will bring us back to Scripture to wrestle with all that God has revealed to us of his glorious plan centered on Christ Jesus. Moreover, it is our prayer that this work will promote further biblical and theological discussion in the church for her life and health and for God's glory.

Peter J. Gentry
Stephen J. Wellum

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

The design for *Kingdom through Covenant* is based on the conviction that biblical theology and systematic theology go hand in hand. To be specific, systematic theology must be based upon biblical theology, and biblical theology in turn must be founded upon exegesis that attends meticulously to the cultural-historical setting, linguistic data, literary devices/techniques, and especially the narrative plot structure, namely, the larger story that the text as a unitary whole entails and by which it is informed. The converse is also true: exegesis and biblical theology are not ends in themselves but are means to the larger end of doing systematic theology, which simply attempts to bring all our thought and life captive to Scripture and thus under the lordship of Christ.

In this work, the disciplines of biblical and systematic theology have joined forces to investigate anew the biblical covenants and the implications of such a study for conclusions in systematic theology. Such a work has demanded a book written by a biblical scholar and a systematic theologian.

Peter Gentry has served as the biblical scholar, who has expounded at length the biblical covenants across redemptive history in part 2, which comprises chapters 4–15. He has also written the appendix on “covenant” at the end of the book. In these chapters, a detailed exegesis is undertaken of the crucial covenantal texts *plus* those biblical passages that are essential for putting the biblical covenants into a larger story—a story that comes from the Bible and not from our own imagination or worldview, be they present or past. Care has been taken to let the Scripture speak for itself as the biblical covenants are progressively unfolded in God’s plan, reaching their culmination in the new covenant inaugurated by our Lord Jesus Christ.

Stephen Wellum has served as the systematic theologian, who has written part 1, comprising chapters 1–3, and part 3, comprising chapters 16–17.

In part 1, he provides the framework for the discussion of the biblical covenants in terms of covenantal discussion within systematic theology. Specifically, he sets the backdrop for Gentry's discussion over against the two dominant theological viewpoints today, namely, dispensationalism and covenant theology. After discussing how each biblical-theological system understands the biblical covenants, he lays out crucial hermeneutical issues that underlie the entire discussion and the way forward if arbitration between the two viewpoints is to be achieved. In part 3, he provides a "big picture" summary of our *via media* proposal of *Kingdom through Covenant* and begins to draw out some of the implications of the study for systematic theology, especially in the areas of theology proper, Christology, ecclesiology, and eschatology.

After the time of writing and before final publication, a number of major works have appeared on the same topic. Only comments of a limited nature are possible concerning these works. One is by Scott W. Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God's Saving Purposes* (Yale University Press, 2009). Although Hahn is now a confessing Roman Catholic, he was trained at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and was given a good background in biblical theology. His work is focused more on the New Testament, while our work is focused more on the Old Testament and how the New Testament is a direct line from Old Testament thought. Hahn's exegesis dealing with the covenants in the Old Testament follows the ancient Near Eastern categories of royal grant versus suzerain-vassal treaty more rigidly than exegesis of the text of Scripture permits.

Another is by James M. Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Crossway, 2010). Hamilton correctly emphasizes the unity of the biblical texts and claims a center for biblical theology, namely, that the idea or theme of "salvation through judgment" is *the* theme that unites the entirety of Scripture and that the parts or individual texts of Scripture cannot be understood without reference to it. We agree with the former, but we do not argue for the latter. We do not deny that "salvation through judgment" is *a* theme of Scripture, even a major one, but we will not defend the assertion that it is *the* theme to the neglect of other themes. In addition, Hamilton unfortunately does not give much attention to the biblical covenants, their unfolding, progressive nature, and how the biblical covenants provide the entire substructure to the plotline of Scripture. Yet it is our contention that apart from thinking through the relationships

between the biblical covenants, one does not fully grasp the Bible's own intrasystematic categories and thus how the parts are related to the whole in the overall plan of God. Before one argues for *the* overarching theme of Scripture, one must first wrestle with the unfolding nature of the biblical covenants and their fulfillment and consummation in Christ.

A third is that of Greg Nichols, *Covenant Theology: A Reformed and Baptist Perspective on God's Covenants* (Solid Ground Christian Books, 2011). This work assumes much of the standard exegesis found in classic covenant theology and seeks to modify it in a way that is consistent with Baptist theology. Yet research during the last fifty years provides information on culture, language, and literary structures that both makes possible and necessitates exegesis *de novo*.

A fourth is a guide to the Old Testament for laypeople by Sandra Richter entitled *The Epic of Eden: A Christian Entry into the Old Testament* (InterVarsity Press, 2008). She uses Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David as key figures both for covenants and for periods of history. Thus she argues, as we do, that the covenants are the key to the plot structure of the Old Testament. The scope of her work is more limited than ours, and differences in exegesis cannot be defended in her work as they are here.

Finally, in November 2011, a magisterial volume entitled *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, by G. K. Beale, appeared (Baker, 2011). Comparison of Beale's work and ours would require more than we can do in this preface, but one difference between his approach and ours centers on how he unpacks the storyline of Scripture. Beale argues that the "thought" and "themes" of Genesis 1–3 and the later patterns based on them form the storyline of Scripture. His metanarrative turns out to be essentially creation, judgment, and new creation. He summarizes as follows:

The Old Testament is the story of God, who progressively reestablishes his new-creational kingdom out of chaos over a sinful people by his word and Spirit through promise, covenant, and redemption, resulting in worldwide commission to the faithful to advance this kingdom and judgment (defeat or exile) for the unfaithful, unto his glory.¹

We are the first to acknowledge that there is much that is good and right in Beale's work. It is filled with rich insights and is worth careful reflection.

1. G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 87.

Beale does rightly acknowledge a covenant in Genesis 1–3, and he speaks of the commission of Adam as inherited by Noah, Abraham, and Israel. Nonetheless, he does not provide a detailed unpacking of the biblical covenants. Instead, he treats creation and new creation as the main themes of Scripture, but in our view, creation and new creation only serve as the bookends of the plot structure and not the structure itself. Beale fails to use the covenants to develop adequately and properly the plot structure *between* creation and new creation. It is not the case that the canon merely provides a repetition of the patterns and themes in Genesis 1–3 as we progress through redemptive history. Instead, the covenants provide the structure and unfold the developing plotline of Scripture, and thus a detailed investigation of those covenants is necessary to understand God’s eternal plan of salvation centered on Christ. Each covenant must first be placed in its own historical-textual context and then viewed intertextually and canonically if we are truly going to grasp something of the whole counsel of God, especially the glory of the new covenant that our Lord has inaugurated. It is for this reason that we are convinced that Beale’s otherwise full treatment of subjects goes awry. When he comes to the end of his work, he does not provide a detailed treatment of the covenantal unfolding that reaches its climax in Christ and the new covenant. In our view, he wrongly identifies Sunday as a Christian Sabbath when the former is a sign of the new creation and the latter is a sign of the first creation and (now obsolete) old covenant. He also argues for infant baptism, thus confusing the sign of the new covenant with circumcision, which is the sign for the Abrahamic covenant. These are distinct and separate as covenants and covenant signs. Thus Sabbath and baptism are not sufficiently discussed in their covenantal contexts and fulfillment in Christ. In the end, Beale leaves us with a sophisticated treatment of covenant theology that we are convinced needs to be modified in light of the Bible’s own unfolding of the biblical covenants.

In a work of this magnitude we have received help from our colleagues, family, and students. We would like to thank our colleagues Daniel Block, Stephen Dempster, Stephen Kempf, Tom Schreiner, Charles Halton, Miles van Pelt, and Gregg Allison for their many helpful comments as the entire manuscript or parts of it were read and valuable feedback was given to us. In addition, various family members and students also helped in a variety of ways, and we want to thank specifically Barbara Gentry, Laura Musick, John Meade, Jason Parry, Brent Parker, Andrew Case, Brian Davidson, Jo-

seph Lumbrix, Chip Hardy, Richard Lucas, Oren Martin, Matt Dickie, Uche Anizor, and Andrew McClurg. We would also like to thank Paul Roberts and the library staff at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary for help in digging up materials necessary for our research.

One final note in regard to the dedication of this work. Peter dedicates this work to his children and grandchildren. His Göttingen edition of Ecclesiastes will be dedicated to his parents, Norm and Marg Gentry, who inspired a love for diligent study of the Word of God. In the passage from Psalm 78, “testimony” (*‘ēdūt*) and “law” (*tôrā*) are synonyms for “covenant” in the Old Testament. God has entrusted the transmission of covenant instruction to a covenant community: the family. We have a great heritage that must be passed on.

Stephen dedicates this work to his parents. We all stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us—men and women who were faithful in their generation and who stood firm on God’s Word and who passed it on to the next generation. In my case, I (Stephen) owe much to my parents, Colin and Joan Wellum, who did precisely this in their lives and ministry to their children. It is due to my parents’ faithfulness to the Lord, exhibited in their teaching their children to love God’s Word; to their sacrificial love in so many ways; to their conviction to place their children under the sound teaching of God’s Word in a local church committed to expounding “the whole counsel of God”; and to their living out in the home what they taught, that I stand where I stand today. I give our triune covenant God thanks for my parents as ongoing evidence of God’s grace in my life.

It is our prayer that this work will not only enable us to think through the biblical covenants better but will also lead us to know, love, and serve our great covenant God as his holy people—those who are completely devoted and faithful to him.

Peter J. Gentry

Stephen J. Wellum

Written on the cloud between Göttingen, Louisville, and Toronto

ABBREVIATIONS

- AB Anchor Bible
AIL Ancient Israel and Its Literature
AKM Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes
AnBib Analecta Biblica
AnOr Analecta Orientalia
AOAT Alter Orient und Altes Testament
ApOTC Apollos Old Testament Commentary
ASOR American Schools of Oriental Research
ASTI Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute
AuOr Aula Orientalis
BBR Bulletin for Biblical Research
BBRSup Bulletin for Biblical Research, Supplements
BECNT Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BibInt Biblical Interpretation Series
Bijdr Bijdragen: Tijdschrift voor filosofie en theologie
BJRL Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester
BN Biblische Notizen
BSac Bibliotheca Sacra
BST The Bible Speaks Today
BZ Biblische Zeitschrift
BZAW Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBQ Catholic Biblical Quarterly
CHANE Culture and History of the Ancient Near East
CM Cuneiform Monographs
ConBNT Coniectanea Neotestamentica (or Coniectanea Biblica: New Testament Series)
ConBOT Coniectanea Biblica: Old Testament Series
ConcC Concordia Commentary

- CTJ* *Calvin Theological Journal*
CTR *Criswell Theological Review*
 DJD Discoveries in the Judean Desert
 EGGNT Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament
ErIsr *Eretz-Israel*
 EV English version
 FAT Forschungen zum Alten Testament
 FRLANT Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
 GKC *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, ed. E. Kautzsch, rev. A. E. Cowley, 2nd English ed. (Oxford, 1910)
GTJ *Grace Theological Journal*
HALOT *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, et al., trans. M. E. J. Richardson, study edition, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2001)
 HdO Handbuch der Orientalistik (or Handbook of Oriental Studies)
HS *Hebrew Studies*
 HSM Harvard Semitic Monographs
 HSS Harvard Semitic Studies
 HThKAT Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament
HUCA *Hebrew Union College Annual*
 ITC International Theological Commentary
Int *Interpretation*
JAOS *Journal of the American Oriental Society*
JBL *Journal of Biblical Literature*
JESOT *Journal for the Evangelical Study of the Old Testament*
JETS *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
JHebS *The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*
JNES *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*
JNSL *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages*
JOTT *Journal of Translation and Textlinguistics*
JR *Journal of Religion*
 JSJSup Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism
JSOT *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
 JSOTSup Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
JSS *Journal of Semitic Studies*
JSSSEA *Journal of the Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities*
JTI *Journal of Theological Interpretation*

- JTISup Journal for Theological Interpretation, Supplements
 KAT Kommentar zum Alten Testament
 LCL Loeb Classical Library
 LHBOTS Library of Hebrew Bible / Old Testament Studies
MAJT *Mid-America Journal of Theology*
 MC Mesopotamian Civilizations
 MNTS McMaster New Testament Studies
 MRS Mission de Ras Shamra
MSJ *The Master's Seminary Journal*
 MT Masoretic Text
NABU *Nouvelles assyriologiques brèves et utilitaires*
 NAC New American Commentary
NDBT *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander, Brian S. Rosner, D. A. Carson, and Graeme Goldsworthy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000)
 NIBCOT New International Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament
 NICNT New International Commentary on the New Testament
 NICOT New International Commentary on the Old Testament
 NIGTC New International Greek Testament Commentary
 NIVAC New International Version Application Commentary
 NovTSup Supplements to Novum Testamentum
 NSBT New Studies in Biblical Theology
 OBO Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis
 OTS Old Testament Studies
 par. parallel
 PNTC Pillar New Testament Commentary
RB *Revue Biblique*
RevQ *Revue de Qumran*
RTR *Reformed Theological Review*
SBET *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*
SBJT *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*
 SBLDS Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
 SBT Studies in Biblical Theology
 SCS Septuagint and Cognate Studies
Sem *Semitica*
SJT *Scottish Journal of Theology*
 SJTOP Scottish Journal of Theology Occasional Papers

- SOTBT Studies in Old Testament Biblical Theology
SR Studies in Religion
- SSBT Short Studies in Biblical Theology
- StPohl Studia Pohl
STR Southeastern Theological Review
s.v. sub verbo (listed alphabetically under that word)
- TDOT Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, 15 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986–2015)
- ThSt Theologische Studien
TJ Trinity Journal
- TNTC Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
- TOTC Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
TS Theological Studies
- TynBul Tyndale Bulletin*
UF Ugarit-Forschungen
VT Vetus Testamentum
- VTSup Supplements to Vetus Testamentum
- WAW Writings from the Ancient World
- WBC Word Biblical Commentary
WTJ Westminster Theological Journal
- ZAW Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*

PART 1

PROLEGOMENA

THE IMPORTANCE OF COVENANTS IN BIBLICAL AND SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

The idea of covenant is fundamental to the Bible's story. At its most basic, covenant presents God's desire to enter into relationship with men and women created in his image. This is reflected in the repeated covenant refrain, "I will be your God and you will be my people" (Exodus 6:6–8; Leviticus 26:12 etc.). Covenant is all about relationship between the Creator and his creation. The idea may seem simple; however, the implications of covenant and covenant relationship between God and humankind are vast.¹

The purpose of this book is to demonstrate two claims. We want to establish, first, how central and foundational the concept of *covenant* is to the Bible's narrative plot structure and, second, how a number of crucial theological differences within Christian theology, and the resolution of those differences, are directly tied to one's understanding of how the biblical covenants unfold and relate to each other. Regarding the first claim, we are *not* asserting that the biblical covenants are the center of biblical theology or merely a unifying theme of Scripture. Instead, we assert that *the progression of the covenants* forms the backbone of Scripture's metanarrative, the relational reality that moves history forward according to God's design and final plan for humanity and all creation, and unless we "put together" the covenants correctly, we will not discern accurately "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27).²

1. Alistair I. Wilson and Jamie A. Grant, "Introduction," in *The God of Covenant: Biblical, Theological, and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Jamie A. Grant and Alistair I. Wilson (Leicester, UK: Apollos, 2005), 12.

2. We will not discuss the thorny issue of the center of biblical theology. Many proposals have been given, and they all tend toward reductionism. For example, see the discussion in Gerhard F. Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991); and the proposals of G. K. Beale, "The Eschatological Conception of New Testament Theology," in "*The Reader Must Understand*": *Eschatology in Bible and Theology*, ed. K. E. Brower and M. W. Elliott (Leicester, UK: Apollos, 1997), 11–52; cf. G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 1–25; and James M. Hamilton Jr.,

Michael Horton nicely captures the significance of “covenant” to Scripture and theology when he writes that the biblical covenants are

the architectural structure that we believe the Scriptures themselves to yield. . . . It is not simply the concept of the covenant, but the concrete existence of God’s covenantal dealings in our history that provides the context within which we recognize the unity of Scripture amid its remarkable variety.³

If this is so, and we contend that it is, then apart from properly understanding the nature of the biblical covenants and how they relate to each other, one will not correctly discern the message of the Bible and hence God’s self-disclosure, which centers on and culminates in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Our claim is not a new insight, especially for those in the Reformed tradition who have written at length about the importance of covenants and have structured their theology around the concept of *covenant*.⁴ In fact, most varieties of Christian theology readily admit that the biblical covenants establish a central framework that holds the storyline of Scripture together. From the time of Christ’s coming and the ongoing theological debates in the early church to our present time, Christians have wrestled with the relationships between the covenants, particularly the old and new covenants. It is almost impossible to discern many of the early church’s struggles apart from viewing them as covenantal debates. For example, think of how important the Jew-Gentile relationship is in the New Testament (Matt. 22:1–14 par.; Acts 10–11; Romans 9–11; Eph. 2:11–22; 3:1–13), and consider the claim of the Judaizers, which centers on covenantal disputes (Galatians 2–3); the reason why the Jerusalem Council was called (Acts 15); the wrestling with the strong and weak within the church (Romans 14–15); and the implications for the church on how to live vis-à-vis the law-covenant now that Christ has come (Matthew 5–7; 15:1–20 par.; Acts 7; Romans 4; Hebrews 7–10). In truth, all these issues and struggles within the church are simply God’s

God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010). Our claim is more modest: the biblical covenants form the backbone of the Bible’s metanarrative, and apart from understanding each covenant in its immediate context *and* then in relation to its fulfillment in Christ, we will potentially misunderstand the Bible’s overall message and misapply Scripture to our lives.

3. Michael S. Horton, *God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006), 13.

4. As we will discuss in more detail in chap. 2, Reformed theology, or “covenant theology,” has rightly argued that *covenant* is central to the organization of Scripture and thus of all theologizing. In fact, Horton argues, “Reformed theology is synonymous with *covenant theology*.” *God of Promise*, 11. However, Reformed theology is not the only view to argue this point. Most streams of Christian theology would say that the covenants are important to how the Scriptures unfold God’s plan centered on our Lord Jesus Christ, yet specific disagreements remain regarding the conclusions to draw.

people wrestling with the nature of fulfillment that has occurred in the covenantal shifts from the old to the new due to the coming of Christ, his work, and the inauguration of the new creation.

Throughout church history, Christians have differed on their understanding of the relationship between the biblical covenants—hence one of the reasons why different theological systems have developed. Today, this is best illustrated by ongoing debates between dispensational and covenant theology, although it is certainly not limited to these two theological systems. Adherents of these views agree on the main issues central to “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3), and it is important not to exaggerate our differences at the expense of our unified gospel convictions.⁵ Yet significant disagreements remain that require resolution, and if the systems are probed deeply, many of these differences center on disputes in our understanding of the biblical covenants and how the covenants are fulfilled in Christ. Thus, while we share basic agreement that the Bible’s storyline moves from Adam to Abraham to Sinai, which ultimately issues in a promise of a new covenant, whose advent is tied to Jesus’s cross work (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:23–26), beyond this there are larger disagreements on how to “put together” the biblical covenants. These disagreements inevitably spill over to other issues, such as debates on the *newness* of what our Lord has achieved; how the law in its moral demands applies today, as reflected in debates regarding the Decalogue and the Sabbath / Lord’s Day observance; and how previous Old Testament promises are now fulfilled in Christ and the church, which is tied to the larger relationship of Israel and the church and the role of national Israel in God’s plan. When these differences surface, we discover that despite our agreement on aspects of mere Protestant theology, there are still significant disagreements among us that demand resolution.⁶

5. On our common Protestant unity centered on the Reformation *solas*, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2016); cf. Kevin J. Vanhoozer and Daniel J. Treier, *Theology and the Mirror of Scripture: A Mere Evangelical Account* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 19–127.

6. Differences of viewpoint regarding the relation of the covenants not only distinguish various Christian theological systems but also distinguish how Christians and Jews in the first century differed from one another, especially in how they viewed the relationship between the Mosaic covenant and the coming of Christ. For first-century Judaism, the law was imperishable, immutable, eternal (e.g., Wis. 18:4; *Ag. Ap.* 2.277; *Mos.* 2.14; Jub. 1:27; 3:31; 6:17). But Paul, for example, interprets the law-covenant differently than a Jew: he relativizes the importance of the law-covenant by arguing from the law’s placement in the plotline of the Pentateuch (cf. Gal. 3:15–4:7). The promise to Abraham that in his seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed *antedates* Moses and the giving of the law by centuries, and that promise cannot be annulled by the giving of the law (Gal. 3:17), regardless of how much space is given over to the law in the text or how large a role it played in Israel’s history. What, then, was the purpose of the law?

For this reason, putting together the biblical covenants is central to the doing of biblical *and* systematic theology and to the theological conclusions we draw from Scripture in many doctrinal areas. If we are going to make progress in resolving disagreements within evangelical theology, especially between covenant theology and dispensationalism, we must face head-on how we understand the nature of the covenants, their interrelationships, and their fulfillment in Christ and must *not* simply assume this or leave it unargued. It is our conviction that the present ways of viewing the covenants and their fulfillment in Christ, as represented by the two dominant theological systems (and their varieties), are not quite right. That is why we are offering a slightly different reading, which seeks to rethink and mediate these two theological traditions in such a way that we learn from both of them but which also constitutes an alternative proposal, a kind of *via media*.⁷ We are convinced that there is a more accurate way to understand the relationship of the covenants, which better accounts for the overall presentation of Scripture and which, in the end, will help us resolve some of our theological differences. If, as church history warns, our goal is too ambitious, minimally our aim is to help us become more epistemologically self-conscious in how we put together Scripture. Our hope in presenting our view is to foster more discussion regarding where precisely we differ, with the goal of arriving at a greater unity in truth and doctrine, centered on Christ Jesus.

Kingdom through covenant is our overall proposal for what is central to the Bible's narrative plot structure. Central to our proposal is that God's *saving* kingdom comes to this world *through* the covenants in a twofold way. First, it comes *through* the covenant relationship God establishes with his image bearers, that is, his priest-kings. Through this relationship, God's rule is extended in his people *and* to the creation, and we learn what it means to love our triune God and our neighbor. Yet, sadly, humans have failed in their calling due to sin. Second, God's *saving* rule and reign—his kingdom—comes *through* biblical covenants *over time*. Following the loss of Eden, redemption is linked to a promised human (Gen. 3:15) and is given greater

Ultimately, the entire New Testament argues, its function was to lead us to Christ (cf. Rom. 3:21). This Christian interpretation of the law-covenant is obviously different from a Jewish one. On this point see D. A. Carson, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," in *NDBT*, 89–104; Carson, "Mystery and Fulfillment: Toward a More Comprehensive Paradigm of Paul's Understanding of the Old and the New," in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, vol. 2, *The Paradoxes of Paul*, ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 393–436.

7. The phrase *via media* is being used *only* in the sense of offering a different proposal of the progression of the biblical covenants than the dominant theological systems of dispensational and covenant theology. Nothing more is meant by the term, and nothing more should be implied.

clarity and definition *through* Noah, Abraham, Israel, and the Davidic kings. Through the progression of the covenants, our triune God, step-by-step, reveals how his image bearers ought to live *and* how *he* will establish his saving reign / kingdom and restore creation through a promised, obedient Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

If a label is to be applied to our view, especially over against the labels of dispensational and covenant theology, our view is best captured by the term *progressive covenantalism*.⁸ Previously, we identified our view as a species of “*new covenant*” theology, yet given significant differences within *new covenant theology*, *progressive covenantalism* better describes our overall viewpoint.⁹ Let us briefly outline our view before we develop it at length in subsequent chapters.

Progressive covenantalism argues that the Bible presents a *plurality* of covenants that *progressively* reveal our triune God’s *one* redemptive plan for his *one* people, which reaches its fulfillment and terminus in Christ and the new covenant. Each biblical covenant, then, contributes to God’s unified plan, and to comprehend “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27), we must understand each covenant in its own context by locating that covenant in relation to what precedes *and* follows it. *Through the progression of the covenants*, we come to know God’s glorious plan, how *all* God’s promises are fulfilled in Christ *and* applied to the church as God’s new covenant and

8. *Progressive covenantalism* was first suggested to us by Richard Lucas. Later we discovered that it was used previously by Dan Lioy, “Progressive Covenantalism As an Integrating Motif of Scripture,” *Conspectus* 1 (2006): 81–107. Our view is not dependent on Lioy, and minimally, in two areas, we differ from him: (1) we do not affirm a covenant of works vs. grace distinction, and (2) we do not maintain that God’s promise for national Israel of a future land is still unfulfilled. Instead, our use of *progressive* stresses the unfolding of God’s revelation from old to new, similar to how the term functions in *progressive dispensationalism*. *Covenantalism* emphasizes at least two points: first, that *covenants* are theologically significant and the means by which God relates to his creatures and creation and establishes his kingdom, and, second, that God’s plan is unfolded *through the covenants*, which are all brought to their fulfillment in Christ. For a development of progressive covenantalism beyond this volume, see Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E. Parker, eds., *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course between Dispensational and Covenant Theologies* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016).

9. There is much diversity among those under the label *new covenant theology*. However, within new covenant theology, some deny a creation covenant, others deny Christ’s active obedience, and others are unnuanced in their understanding of God’s moral law in relation to the Decalogue. Since we affirm the first two points and nuance the third differently, we have chosen to employ the label of *progressive covenantalism*, despite critics labeling and dismissing us as new covenant theology. For resources on new covenant theology, see Heather A. Kendall, *One Greater than Moses: A History of New Covenant Theology* (Orange, CA: Quoir, 2016); Gary D. Long, *New Covenant Theology: Time for a More Accurate Way* (n.p.: CreateSpace, 2013); A. Blake White, *What Is New Covenant Theology? An Introduction* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2012); White, *The Newness of the New Covenant* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2007); Tom Wells and Fred Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology: Description, Definition, Defense* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2002); Jason C. Meyer, *The End of the Law: Mosaic Covenant in Pauline Theology* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009); John G. Reisinger, *Abraham’s Four Seeds* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 1998); Steven Lehrer, ed., *Journal of New Covenant Theology*.

new creation people (Heb. 1:1–3; cf. Eph. 1:9–10, 22–23; 3:10–11) and how we are to live as God’s people today.

To reiterate, in accentuating kingdom through *covenant*, we view the covenants as *theologically* significant and as the backbone to Scripture’s entire storyline, similar to covenant theology. However, unlike most advocates of covenant theology, the biblical covenants are not divided into two categories: the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. Rather, God’s *one, eternal plan* unfolds in history through a *plurality* of interrelated covenants, starting with Adam and creation and culminating in Christ and the new covenant. The creation covenant serves as the foundation that continues in *all* the covenants, and it, along with all the covenants, is fulfilled in Christ and his obedient work. As God’s eternal plan is enacted on the stage of human history, it moves from creation in Adam to consummation in Christ.

Concerning the Israel-church relationship, we argue two important points. First, God has *one* people, yet there is an Israel-church distinction due to their respective covenants. The church is *new* in a redemptive-historical sense precisely because she is the community of the *new* covenant. Second, we must think of the Israel-church relationship *Christologically*. The church is not *directly* the “new Israel” or her replacement. Rather, in Christ Jesus, the church is God’s new creation, composed 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 way of viewing the Israel-Christ-church relationship differs from dispensational and covenant theology in at least two areas. First, against dispensationalism, Jesus is the antitypical fulfillment of Israel and Adam, and in him, *all* God’s promises are fulfilled for his people, the church, including the land promise fully realized and consummated in the new creation (Rom. 4:13; Eph. 6:3; Heb. 11:10, 16; cf. Matt. 5:5). Second, against covenant theology, Jesus’s *new* covenant people are different from Israel under the old covenant. Under the old covenant, Israel, in its nature and structure, was a *mixed* community of believers and unbelievers (Rom. 9:6). Yet the church is constituted by people who are united to Christ by faith and partakers now of the blessings of the new covenant, which minimally includes the forgiveness of sin, the gift of the Spirit, and heart circumcision. Thus, in contrast to Israel, the church—as God’s new covenant—new

creation people—is constituted now as a believing, regenerate people, although we await the fullness of what Christ inaugurated at his glorious return. For this reason, baptism, the sign of the new covenant, is applied only to those who profess faith and give credible evidence that they are no longer in Adam but in Christ, and circumcision and baptism do *not* signify the same realities, due to their respective covenantal differences. In fact, to think that circumcision and baptism signify the same truths is a covenantal-category mistake.

In a nutshell, this is our basic proposal, and what follows is our exposition and defense of this third way of understanding the nature of the biblical covenants and their relationship to the new covenant in Christ. How will we proceed? We will begin by establishing the importance of covenants for biblical and systematic theology. We could demonstrate this point in numerous ways but will do so by setting our discussion of the covenants in the context of the two dominant theological systems within evangelical theology. Dispensationalism and covenant theology (along with their varieties) largely frame how evangelicals “put together” their Bibles. Each view attempts to serve as an interpretive grid for how to understand the metanarrative of Scripture. In this way, both systems function as examples of biblical theologies, or “whole-Bible theologies,” which then lead to various systematic-theological conclusions. Yet it is well known that each system draws different conclusions on significant theological matters (if not so much on primary gospel issues). Specifically, unique theological differences surface in ecclesiology and eschatology, but it is not limited to these areas, as we will demonstrate. Thus, it is helpful to establish the importance of covenants by doing so through the lens of these two theological systems, discerning where they differ from each other especially in their understanding of the biblical covenants. In this way, our proposal is viewed against the backdrop of current theological discussion within evangelical theology.

Before we turn to that task, we will conclude this chapter by discussing how we conceive of the nature of biblical theology and its relation to systematic theology. Since we are viewing dispensational and covenant theology as examples of biblical *and* systematic theologies, it is important to describe our use of these terms, given that scholars do not unanimously agree on their definition and use.

Chapter 2 will describe the basic tenets of dispensational and covenant

theology, noting variations and debates within each system. As one would expect, neither view is monolithic; however, in describing these biblical-systematic theologies, we attend particularly to their respective understandings of the biblical covenants and to how each approach differs, given the way they relate the biblical covenants to each other.

Building on this description of the two theological systems, chapter 3 will conclude the prolegomena, or introductory, section of part 1 in two ways. First, we will describe some basic hermeneutical assumptions we employ in our reading of Scripture and thus disclose something of our theological method. Second, we will resume our discussion of dispensational and covenant theology by outlining both some of the hermeneutical similarities between them and some of the hermeneutical differences that require resolution, with the goal of adjudicating these two systems and thus arguing for a *via media* as a better option.

Part 2, chapters 4–15, will serve as the exposition of the Old Testament covenants as they are unfolded and point forward to Christ. As the covenants are expounded, so our proposal of *kingdom through covenant* is described in detail; each biblical covenant is treated in its own redemptive-historical context and then in its relationship to the dawning of the new covenant.

Part 3 will begin by summarizing the results of part 2 in an overall presentation of *kingdom through covenant* in the Old Testament in chapter 16 before we turn to how the New Testament announces that *all* that the Old Testament anticipated and predicted is now coming to fulfillment in Christ Jesus. As we turn to the New Testament, in chapter 17, we will think about the *fulfillment* of God's covenant promises in three steps: first, in how Christ fulfills the previous covenants in himself; second, in the nature of new covenant fulfillment in terms of inaugurated eschatology; and third, in how the church is *new* and receives *all* God's covenant promises *in and through Christ*. After this, in chapters 18–19, we will draw some systematic-theological entailments of our proposal in sample areas, including Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology.

Let us now turn to a brief discussion of our understanding of the nature of biblical theology and its relation to systematic theology. This will allow us to describe how we are using these terms and to explain why we view dispensational and covenant theology as examples of biblical *and* systematic theologies, even though we disagree with various aspects of each view.

THE NATURE OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

The task of exegeting and expounding the progression of the biblical covenants across the canon and then thinking through how each covenant is fulfilled in Christ is an exercise in *biblical theology*. It is also the first step in drawing legitimate theological conclusions from Scripture and thus applying *all* of Scripture to our lives, which is broadly the task of *systematic theology*. But given the fact that people mean different things by *biblical* and *systematic* theology, let us explain how we are using these terms and how we conceive of the relationship between them.

At a popular level, when most Christians hear the term *biblical theology*, it is heard as expressing the desire to be “biblical” or “faithful to Scripture” in our teaching and theology. To be “biblical” in this sense is what all Christians ought to desire and strive for, but this is *not* how we are using the term. In fact, throughout church history, *biblical theology* has been understood in a number of ways.¹⁰

Generally speaking, before the last two or three centuries, biblical theology was often identified with systematic theology, although many in church history practiced what we currently call “biblical theology,” that is, an attempt to unpack the redemptive-historical unfolding of Scripture and to put together the entire canon.¹¹ One can think of many examples, such as Irenaeus (ca. 115–ca. 202), John Calvin (1509–1564), and Johannes Cocceius (1603–1669). In this sense, then, biblical theology is *not* entirely new, since the church has always wrestled with how to put together the whole canon, especially in light of the coming of Christ. Any view, then, that seeks to think through the unity of God’s plan as unfolded across the canon is doing “biblical theology” in some sense. Granting this point, it is still important to note that, in the past, there was a tendency to treat Scripture in more logical and atemporal categories rather than to think carefully through the

10. For a helpful overview of the history of biblical theology, see C. H. H. Scobie, “History of Biblical Theology,” in *NDBT*, 11–20. See also Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 867–88; Robert W. Yarbrough, *The Salvation Historical Fallacy? Reassessing the History of New Testament Theology* (Leiden: Deo, 2004); H. G. Reventlow, “Theology (Biblical), History of,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1992), 6:483–505; G. E. Ladd, “Biblical Theology, History of,” and “Biblical Theology, Nature of,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 1:498–509. For two helpful discussions of diverse approaches to biblical theology, see Edward W. Klink III and Darian R. Lockett, *Understanding Biblical Theology: A Comparison of Theory and Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012); and Graeme Goldsworthy, *Christ-Centered Biblical Theology: Hermeneutical Foundations and Principles* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012).

11. For a fine example of this approach to biblical theology, see Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

Bible's developing storyline as it was forged across time. Even in the post-Reformation era, when there was a renewed emphasis on doing a "whole-Bible theology," biblical theology was usually identified with systematic theology, and systematic theology was identified more with "dogmatic" concerns.¹²

With the rise of the Enlightenment, biblical theology began to emerge as a distinct discipline. Some have argued that this is tied to the Enlightenment's "historical consciousness."¹³ However, one must carefully distinguish the emergence of biblical theology in the Enlightenment era along two different paths: one path serving as an illustration of an illegitimate approach to biblical theology tied to the Enlightenment's *Zeitgeist*, and the other path a legitimate one seeking to develop previous insights in church history but now in a more precise, detailed, and historically conscious manner, dependent upon the Bible's own internal presentation. Let us first think about the illegitimate development of biblical theology associated with the Enlightenment and classic liberal theology before we discuss what we believe is the legitimate view of biblical theology consistent with historic Christian theology.

During the period of the Enlightenment, there was a growing tendency to approach Scripture *critically* and thus uncoupled from historic Christian theology.¹⁴ This resulted in approaching the Bible "as any other book,"¹⁵ rooted in history but, unfortunately, also open to historical-critical methods. This meant that the Bible was not approached *on its own terms*, that is, as God's Word written. Instead, the idea that Scripture is God-breathed through human authors—a text that authoritatively and accurately unfolds God's redemptive plan centered on Christ—was rejected as the starting point of biblical theology (and systematic theology).

The person first associated with this path of biblical theology was Johann

12. Carson makes this point in "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," 89–104. He notes that the first occurrence of the term *biblical theology* dates to 1607, when W. J. Christmann used it to refer to a compilation of proof texts supporting Protestant systematic theology (90).

13. See Carson, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," 89–94.

14. For a description of the Enlightenment era, see W. Andrew Hoffercker, ed., *Revolutions in World-view: Understanding the Flow of Western Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 240–80; cf. Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996); D. A. Carson, *The Gaggling of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 13–137. This history, with its effects on the doing of Christology, is told in Stephen J. Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate: The Doctrine of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 35–77.

15. This is Benjamin Jowett's expression. For a discussion of the Enlightenment's reading of the Bible, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998); cf. Vanhoozer, "Exegesis and Hermeneutics," in *NDBT*, 52–64.

Philipp Gabler, often viewed as “the father of biblical theology.” In his inaugural lecture at the University of Altdorf on March 30, 1787—“An Oration on the Proper Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Specific Objectives of Each”—he defined biblical theology as an inductive, historical, and descriptive discipline, in contrast to systematic theology, which he viewed as a deductive, ahistorical, and normative discipline. It is crucial to note that Gabler used the term “historical” more in a historical-*critical* sense. He did *not* use the term in the sense that we ought to read Scripture as God’s authoritative, trustworthy Word, rooted in history, nor that we ought to read it along its redemptive-historical axis. In its *critical* use, he meant that we ought to read Scripture in light of Enlightenment rationalist presuppositions, which minimally assumed the following points: (1) in doing biblical theology we do *not* need to assume the Scripture’s inspiration; (2) biblical theology involves the work of carefully collecting the ideas and concepts of individual biblical writers, and this task is accomplished by means of historical, literary, and philosophical criticism (tied to an Enlightenment rationalist epistemology); and (3) as a historical discipline, biblical theology must distinguish between the several periods of the old and new religion, which, for Gabler, is basically following the “history of religions” approach to Scripture, thus assuming from the outset that Scripture is *not* authoritatively and accurately given in its totality. In Gabler’s understanding of “biblical theology,” then, his overall goal was to uncouple the study of Scripture from dogmatic or doctrinal aims and to study Scripture according to historical *criticism* to distinguish what was legitimately true from what was not. In so doing, he continued the drift of a rejection of a high view of Scripture that resulted in an increasingly atomistic reading of Scripture, given the fact that he did not believe that Scripture was ultimately God given and unified.¹⁶

As this path of biblical theology developed in the late eighteenth and

16. For a more detailed treatment of Gabler’s significance, along with his approach to biblical theology, see Carson, “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” 89–90; Vanhoozer, “Exegesis and Hermeneutics,” 53; J. V. Fesko, “On the Antiquity of Biblical Theology,” in *Resurrection and Eschatology: Theology in Service of the Church*, ed. Lane G. Tipton and Jeffrey C. Waddington (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 443–77. Fesko nicely summarizes Gabler’s approach to Scripture: (1) He viewed Scripture as “inspired” but held that we must still decide what is truly divine versus what is not. All Scripture is not God given. (2) How do we decide what is God given? We ask whether the portion of Scripture we are reading is consistent with “eternal universal religion” or whether it merely reflects the opinion, time, and culture of the biblical author. (3) He denied that Scripture was a unified, organic, historically unfolding divine revelation that in its totality gives us God’s authoritative revelation. “On the Antiquity of Biblical Theology,” 447–48. For a contrary yet unconvincing view of Gabler, see Michael F. Bird, “Biblical Theology: An Endangered Species in Need of Defence,” *Euangelion* (blog), January 18, 2008, <http://euangelizomai.blogspot.com/2008/01/biblical-theology-endangered-species-in.html>.

early nineteenth centuries, practitioners increasingly made use of the historical-critical method, which for the most part assumed a *methodological* naturalism.¹⁷ Over time, the end result of such an approach was the fragmentation of Scripture, and biblical theology as a discipline became merely a “descriptive” discipline, governed by *critical* methodologies and worldview assumptions foreign to historic Christian theology. As a result, this approach to biblical theology emphasized more diversity than unity in Scripture, and ultimately, as a discipline that sought to unpack the unified plan of God, it came to an end.¹⁸ In the twentieth century, there were some attempts to overcome the Enlightenment straightjacket on Scripture. In theology, the work of Karl Barth is notable. He is often seen as the forerunner of narrative theology and the postliberal school, a school that broadly attempts to read Scripture as a unified canon but that, when all is said and done, does not operate with a traditional view of the authority and accuracy of Scripture and thus renders the theological task problematic. In biblical studies there was also the “biblical theology movement.”¹⁹ Its goal was to overcome the more negative results of the historical-critical method and allow the biblical text to speak to the contemporary church, although, sadly, it did not return to the assumptions of historic, orthodox Christianity.²⁰ In Old Testament theology, for example, Walther Eichrodt, who was part of this movement, wrote an Old Testament biblical theology centered on the notion of the covenant. Others in the movement wrote biblical theologies centered on different corpora or themes. None of these, however, wrote or attempted to write a “whole-Bible theology” because, given their view of Scripture and their theological commitments, very few of them believed that there was a unified message in the whole canon.²¹ As a result, just as Geerhardus Vos, the evangelical pioneer

17. *Methodological naturalism* is the view that approaches our study of history (including our study of the Bible) and science without considering God’s involvement in the world or divine action as represented by divine revelation and miracles.

18. See Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980). In the nineteenth century, biblical theology was eventually identified with classic liberalism, as represented by various schools of thought associated with such people as F. C. Baur, J. Wellhausen, the history of religions school, and so on. On these people and movements, see Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *20th Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992).

19. For a survey of this movement, see Gerhard F. Hasel, “The Nature of Biblical Theology: Recent Trends and Issues,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 32, no. 3 (1994): 211–14; and James Barr, “Biblical Theology,” in *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible: Supplementary Volume*, ed. Keith R. Crim (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 104–6.

20. On this point, see Langdon B. Gilkey, “Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language,” *JR* 41, no. 3 (1961): 194–205.

21. For this assessment, see Carson, “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” 90. Carson writes, “With more and more emphasis on close study of individual texts, and with less and less emphasis on

of a legitimate approach to biblical theology, had predicted at the beginning of the twentieth century, the biblical theology movement failed. Vos had warned that “biblical theology” on the grand scale cannot be done if one denies the full authority of Scripture and dismisses the historic Christian theology that grounds it.²²

Today in nonevangelical theology there are a variety of options that attempt to read Scripture as a unified whole, but most of them are weak on Scripture and do not operate under consistent Christian presuppositions.²³ This is why for most nonevangelicals biblical theology, in the sense of doing a “whole-Bible theology,” is viewed as impossible. Given their rejection of the unity of Scripture as a divine revelation and the naturalistic assumptions of the historical-critical method, which questions the integrity of the narrative of biblical history, Scripture is viewed, more often than not, simply as an anthology of religious writings put together by the religious communities of Israel and the church.²⁴

serious reflection on the relationship of these findings to historic Christian faith, the tendency was toward atomization. . . . [T]he tendency was away from whole-Bible biblical theology, and toward Old Testament theology and New Testament theology. By the 20th century, these works most commonly divided up their subject matter into smaller corpora (Pauline theology; Matthean theology; Q-theology; theology of the major prophets; *etc.*) or into organizing structures (the covenant for Walther Eichrodt; a specialized understanding of salvation history for Gerhard von Rad; a form of existentialism for Rudolf Bultmann; *etc.*)” But what they did not produce were whole-Bible theologies that sought to unpack the unity of God’s plan amid its diversity.

22. For a more detailed discussion of these movements, see the articles by Scobie, “History of Biblical Theology,” 11–20; Vanhoozer, “Exegesis and Hermeneutics,” 52–64; Carson, “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” 89–104. Also see David L. Baker, *Two Testaments, One Bible: The Theological Relationship between the Old and New Testaments*, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 42–165. On the contribution of Geerhardus Vos, see Fesko, “On the Antiquity of Biblical Theology,” 449–53.

23. One thinks of the recent movement of the theological interpretation of Scripture (TIS). This movement is fairly diverse and encompasses evangelicals and nonevangelicals alike. For the nonevangelicals, generally speaking, their commitment to the Bible’s unity is due not to Scripture’s self-attestation as God’s Word written but to the church’s decision to choose these texts as Scripture. For example, in his canonical approach, Brevard Childs chooses to read texts in their final form and canonical shape. However, as Paul Noble has astutely argued, unless Childs grounds his preference for final form and canonical shape in the doctrine of inspiration and divine authorship, it is a view hanging in midair. *The Canonical Approach: A Critical Reconstruction of the Hermeneutics of Brevard S. Childs* (Leiden: Brill Academic, 1995). Vanhoozer makes this same point in “Exegesis and Hermeneutics,” 60–61. See also a more detailed critique of postliberalism and its view and use of Scripture in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005). For a helpful introduction to TIS, see Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008). As helpful as TIS is in its attempt to recapture the voice of Scripture for the church, given that it is composed of such a diverse number of people with such divergent views of Scripture, one wonders how long it can be sustained without a return to orthodox theological convictions. On this point, see D. A. Carson, “Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Yes, But . . .,” in *Theological Commentary: Evangelical Perspectives*, ed. R. Michael Allen (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 187–207; Stanley E. Porter, “What Is Theological Interpretation of Scripture, and Is It Hermeneutically Robust Enough for the Task to Which It Has Been Appointed?,” in *Horizons in Hermeneutics: A Festschrift in Honor of Anthony C. Thiselton*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Matthew R. Malcolm (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 234–67.

24. For example, think of the work of James Barr, who does “biblical theology” within the limits of historical criticism. See Klink and Lockett, *Understanding Biblical Theology*, 43–56.

We contend that this is *not* the proper way to *view*, let alone to *do*, biblical theology. Already this approach to biblical theology stands in antithesis to historic Christian theological convictions, especially in regard to theology proper, the entire God-world relation, and the doctrine of Scripture. In the history of the church, and particularly in the post-Reformation and post-Enlightenment eras, another path was taken that provides a legitimate way to view and do biblical theology. This path also emphasized a renewed attempt to root the Bible in history by stressing the “literal sense” (*sensus literalis*), tied to the intention(s) of the divine and human author(s), and by seeking to discern how God had disclosed himself through the biblical authors across redemptive history, grounded in a larger Christian theology and worldview. We have already mentioned Johannes Cocceius, who sought to read Scripture with a focus on “covenant” throughout redemptive history and who operated self-consciously within Christian theological presuppositions. This was also true of John Calvin before him and of the post-Reformation Reformed Protestant scholastics after him.²⁵

Probably the best-known twentieth-century pioneer of biblical theology who sought to follow the path distinct from that of the Enlightenment was Geerhardus Vos, who developed biblical theology at Princeton Seminary.²⁶ Vos, who was birthed out of the Dutch Calvinistic tradition, along with such figures as Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck, sought to do biblical theology with a firm commitment to the authority of Scripture.²⁷ Vos defined biblical theology as “that branch of Exegetical Theology which deals with the process of the self-revelation of God deposited in the Bible.”²⁸ In contrast to Gabler, Vos argued that biblical theology, as an exegetical discipline, must not only begin with the biblical text but must also view Scripture as God’s own self-attesting Word, fully authoritative and reliable. Furthermore, as one exegetes Scripture, Vos argued, biblical theology seeks to trace out the Bible’s unity and multiformity and find its consummation in Christ’s com-

25. For a detailed treatment of the post-Reformation Protestant scholastics, see Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003). See also how some scholars apply the insights of the Protestant scholastics for biblical and systematic theology in Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002); and Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993).

26. See Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (1948; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2004); Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1979); Richard B. Gaffin Jr., ed., *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001).

27. See Richard B. Gaffin Jr., “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” *WTJ* 38, no. 3 (1976): 281–99, esp. 286–88 for his discussion of Kuyper, Bavinck, and Vos.

28. Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 5.

ing and the inauguration of the new covenant era. Biblical theology must follow a method that reads the Bible on its own terms, following the Bible's own internal contours and shape, in order to discover God's unified plan as it is disclosed to us over time. The path that Vos blazed was foundational for much of the resurgence of biblical theology within evangelicalism, in the twentieth and now the twenty-first century.²⁹

We reject the former view despite its label of "biblical theology" and adopt the latter view. Accordingly, in light of this history, we define *biblical theology* by employing Brian Rosner's helpful definition: "Biblical theology" is "theological interpretation of Scripture in and for the church. It proceeds with historical and literary sensitivity and seeks to analyze and synthesize the Bible's teaching about God and his relations to the world on its own terms, maintaining sight of the Bible's overarching narrative and Christocentric focus."³⁰ In this definition, Rosner emphasizes some important points crucial to the nature and task of biblical theology. Biblical theology is concerned with the overall message of *the whole Bible*. It seeks to understand *the parts in relation to the whole*. As an exegetical method, it is sensitive to literary, historical, and theological dimensions of various corpora, as well as to the interrelationships *between earlier and later texts in Scripture*. Furthermore, biblical theology is interested not merely in words and word studies but also in concepts and themes, as it traces out the Bible's own storyline *on the Bible's own terms*, following the plotline to its culmination in Christ. In a similar way, D. A. Carson speaks of biblical theology as an inductive, exegetical discipline that works from biblical texts, in all their literary diversity, to the entire canon—hence the notion of *intertextual*, or better, *innerbiblical*. In making connections between texts, biblical theology also attempts to let the biblical text set the agenda. This is what we mean by saying that we are to read Scripture *on its own terms*, that is, *intratextually*. Scripture is to be interpreted in light of its own categories and presentation since Scripture comes to us as divinely given, coherent, and unified.³¹ In other words, all theologizing starts with the Bible's own

29. Vos's influence is directly seen at Westminster Theological Seminary in the work of John Murray, Richard Gaffin Jr., Sinclair Ferguson, Vern Poythress, and so on. But it was also felt in the larger evangelical world in Graeme Goldsworthy, G. K. Beale, D. A. Carson, Thomas R. Schreiner, and so on.

30. Brian Rosner, "Biblical Theology," in *NDBT*, 10 (italics removed from original). Similar to Rosner, Jeremy R. Treat offers the following definition of biblical theology: "*Biblical theology is faith seeking understanding of the redemptive-historical and literary unity of the Bible in its own terms, concepts, and contexts.*" *The Crucified King: Atonement and Kingdom in Biblical and Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 35.

31. For these points, see Carson, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," 89–104.

presentation of itself as we seek to live under its authority and teaching and not over it.³²

With these basic ideas in mind, let us now summarize what we believe biblical theology to be. Simply stated, it is the discipline that seeks to do justice to what Scripture claims to be and to what it actually is. In terms of its claim, Scripture is *God's Word* written, and as such, it is a unified revelation of his gracious plan of redemption. In terms of what Scripture actually is, it is a *progressive* unfolding of God's plan, rooted in history, and unfolded along a specific redemptive-historical plotline demarcated by the biblical covenants. Biblical theology as a discipline attempts to exegete texts in their own context and then, in light of the entire canon, to examine the unfolding nature of God's plan and carefully think through the relationship between *before* and *after* in that plan, which culminates in Christ.³³ As such, biblical theology provides the basis for understanding how texts in one part of the Bible relate to all other texts, so that they will be read correctly, according to God's intention, which is discovered through the individual human authors *and fully* at the canonical level. In the end, biblical theology is the attempt to understand "the whole counsel of God" and "to think God's thoughts after him," and it provides the basis and underpinning for our theological conclusions since it allows us to see what the entire canon of Scripture

32. To read the Bible *on its own terms* is central to biblical theology; however, even within evangelical biblical theology, this point is not always followed. For example, some argue that biblical theology is the approach by which redemptive history is divided into various historical epochs, and then the development between those epochs is traced. Or others view biblical theology as merely thinking through the large themes of Scripture. Still others approach the discipline by working through the Bible book by book. All these approaches have their place, but in our view, they fall short. Their fundamental problem is that they do not follow the Bible's own presentation of itself, or, in other words, they do not carefully trace out the Bible's own literary plot structure. If we are going to read the Bible *on its own terms*, we have to ask, how has God given Scripture to us? What are the Bible's own internal structures? And how ought those structures to shape our doing of biblical theology? We are convinced that working through the covenants *is* tracing out the Bible's own internal structure and enabling us to read Scripture as God intended.

33. Two words that describe how biblical theology seeks to interpret texts first in their immediate and then in their canonical context are *synchronic* and *diachronic*. *Synchronic* refers to viewing events occurring at a given time (sometimes referred to as a "crosscut" approach to interpretation). Hence, reading texts synchronically refers to reading them in their immediate context. As we exegete texts, we place them in their immediate context, we interpret them according to the grammatical-historical method, and we inquire about the theology of a particular prophet, book, or corpus. This is called a "crosscut" approach because it involves us cutting across the progressive revelation and taking a look at what is going on at any given point in time. Biblical exegesis begins at this level as it involves an analytical examination of the "parts." But our interpretation of Scripture does not end here. The unity of Scripture drives us to introduce the idea of diachronic. *Diachronic* refers to viewing events over time (sometimes referred to as the "long-cut" approach to interpretation). Texts must be read not only in terms of their immediate context but also in terms of the "whole." Scripture is unified *and* progressive. Thus biblical theology is concerned to read the "parts" in terms of the "whole" and to trace out how God's plan develops *over time*, leading us to its fulfillment in Christ and ultimately to the consummation. On this point, see Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics: Foundations and Principles of Evangelical Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 268–72; and Lints, *Fabric of Theology*, 293–310.

teaches. Yet biblical theology is *not* presuppositionless since it approaches Scripture according to its own claim and presupposes the central truths of historic Christian theology, hence its intertwined relationship with systematic theology.³⁴ With this understanding of biblical theology in place, let us now briefly reflect on what systematic theology is before we think through the relationship between the two disciplines.

THE NATURE OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

As with *biblical theology*, there are various understandings of what *systematic theology* is. In this book, it is not necessary to delve into all these diverse views; rather, we simply want to state how we conceive of the discipline of systematic theology.³⁵ As with biblical theology, one's construal of systematic theology is tied to one's larger theological, worldview commitments, and any differences between various definitions can be traced back to this. For our purposes, we will enlist as our basic definition the one given by John Frame: systematic theology is "the application of God's Word by persons to all areas of life."³⁶ No doubt many points could be developed from this definition, but we will develop it by emphasizing two concepts in order to describe the nature and task of systematic theology as a discipline.

Systematic theology involves an intertwined twofold task. First, in order to *apply* Scripture properly, we must interpret Scripture correctly. This requires the doing of biblical theology, namely, as related above, unpacking the biblical storyline and letting the Bible, on its own terms, describe for us how God's plan unfolds, centered on Christ. This is why biblical theology provides the basis for all theologizing and doctrine, since we are not drawing proper theological conclusions unless we first correctly understand *all* that the Bible teaches *in the way the Bible presents it*. Yet our reading of Scripture presupposes theological commitments consistent with Scripture and orthodox

34. On this point, see Vern S. Poythress, "Kinds of Biblical Theology," *WTJ* 70, no. 1 (2008): 133–34; cf. Andrew David Naselli, "D. A. Carson's Theological Method," *SBET* 29, no. 2 (2011): 258–68.

35. On the nature of systematic theology and its relation to biblical theology, see Gaffin, "Systematic and Biblical Theology," 281–99; cf. Gerhard F. Hasel, "The Relationship between Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology," *TJ* 5, no. 2 (1984): 113–27. For a current discussion of systematic theology, see John Webster, "Principles of Systematic Theology," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11, no. 1 (2009): 56–71; Webster, "Systematic Theology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1–18; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Systematic Theology," in *New Dictionary of Theology: Historical and Systematic*, ed. Martin Davie, Tim Grass, and Stephen R. Holmes, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 885–86; M. B. Yarnell III, "Systematic Theology, History of," in Davie, Grass, and Holmes, *New Dictionary of Theology*, 886–89.

36. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1987), 76.

theology. Second, systematic theology is more than just the mere repeating of Scripture or the doing of biblical theology since it involves the *application* of Scripture to *all areas of life*. Systematic theology inevitably entails theological construction and doctrinal formulation, which is grounded in biblical theology and done in light of historical theology but which also includes interacting with all areas of life—history, science, psychology, ethics, and so on.³⁷ Systematic theology, then, leads to worldview formation as we seek to set the biblical-theological framework of Scripture over against all other worldviews and learn “to think God’s thoughts after him,” even in areas that the Bible does not directly address. In this important way, systematic theology presents a well-thought-out worldview, over against all its competitors, as it seeks to apply biblical truth to every domain of our existence.

Systematic theology, then, is based on the conclusions of biblical theology, but it goes further. As an exercise in “faith seeking understanding,” it seeks to account for all that Scripture teaches in the way the Bible teaches it, in a coherent way, and in light of the church’s tradition and contemporary questions.³⁸ It seeks to make sense of the ontological presuppositions of the Bible’s storyline and to draw out theological judgments for today, consistent with the Bible’s worldview and teaching across the entire canon. In this way, systematic theology applies Scripture to new contexts, sometimes using different terms and concepts, while always remaining true to the Bible’s own “biblical-canonical judgments.”³⁹ So, for example, in Christology, the church, in responding to Arianism, employed the extrabiblical language of *homoousios*, “of the same substance,” to express “the same judgment about the relationship of Father and Son as Paul’s ‘equality with God’ (*isa theō*) in Philippians 2:6.”⁴⁰ The church did so in order to proclaim the Jesus of the Bible correctly in a new context and to defend the biblical teaching against the Arian heresy. The nature of systematic theology is to move from canon

37. Kevin Vanhoozer describes systematic theology as moving from “canon to concept.” See “From Canon to Concept: ‘Same’ and ‘Other’ in the Relation between Biblical and Systematic Theology,” *SBET* 12, no. 2 (1994): 96–124.

38. See Treat, *The Crucified King*, 35.

39. This expression is from Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel*, 126, and this paragraph is indebted to how he has described what systematic theology is.

40. Ibid. For a further discussion of this point, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Is the Theology of the New Testament One or Many? Between (the Rock of) Systematic Theology and (the Hard Place of) Historical Occasionalism,” in *Reconsidering the Relationship between Biblical and Systematic Theology in the New Testament: Essays by Theologians and New Testament Scholars*, ed. Benjamin E. Reynolds, Brian Lugioyo, and Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 17–38. On the idea of theological judgments, see David S. Yeago, “The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis,” in *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Stephen E. Fowl (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 87–102.

(biblical theology) to concept (theological construction) so that God's people will know rightly how to handle the Word of truth and apply it faithfully to their lives.

Furthermore, as a discipline, systematic theology is also *critical* in seeking to evaluate ideas within and outside the church. Outside the church, systematic theology takes on an *apologetic* function as it first sets forth the faith to be believed and defended and then critiques and evaluates views that reject the truth of God's Word. In this sense, apologetics is rightly viewed as a subset of systematic theology. *Within* the church, theology is *critical* by analyzing theological proposals, first, in terms of their fit with Scripture and, second, in terms of the implications of these proposals for other doctrines. In these ways, systematic theology is the discipline that attempts "to bring our entire thought captive to Christ" (see 2 Cor. 10:1–5) for our good, for the good of the church, and ultimately for God's glory.

With this basic understanding in mind, what is the best way to think of the relationship between biblical and systematic theology? As presented here, we view them as intimately interrelated and central to the *theological* task of conforming our thinking and lives to God's Word. It is simply impossible to think of one discipline apart from the other. Yet with that said, we think it best to view biblical theology as the discipline that seeks to grasp the entirety of Scripture *on its own terms* and according to its own presentation, tied to the progression of God's plan through the unfolding of the biblical covenants.⁴¹ Biblical theology allows us to make sure that the parts are fitting with the whole. This is why our theological judgments must first be true to the exegetical conclusions of biblical theology. Systematic theology builds on the results of biblical theology, but it goes further by making sense of the ontological presuppositions of the Bible's story, by constructing coherently how the pieces fit with the whole, and by rendering judgments from Scripture for

41. In a similar way, Carson calls biblical theology a "bridge" discipline since it is the bridge "between the texts of Scripture and the larger synthesis of systematic theology," what he calls the culminating discipline. "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," 95. This is a helpful way of thinking of the relation between the two disciplines. However, Carson also tends to think of biblical theology as a discipline that works primarily within a temporal framework, i.e., the redemptive-historical unfolding of Scripture, while systematic theology primarily asks of biblical texts more atemporal and logical questions, "thereby eliciting atemporal answers." "New Testament Theology," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 808. We do not completely agree with this way of stating the relationship between the two disciplines. It is better to think of biblical theology as the discipline that allows us to draw *biblical* conclusions for systematic theology and that systematic theology, as the *application* of Scripture, must stay true to the Bible's own framework, structure, and categories as she draws theological conclusions and constructs a Christian worldview. In this way, biblical theology is not only foundational to systematic theology but is also a subset of it, and systematic theology does not necessarily have to organize itself in atemporal categories.

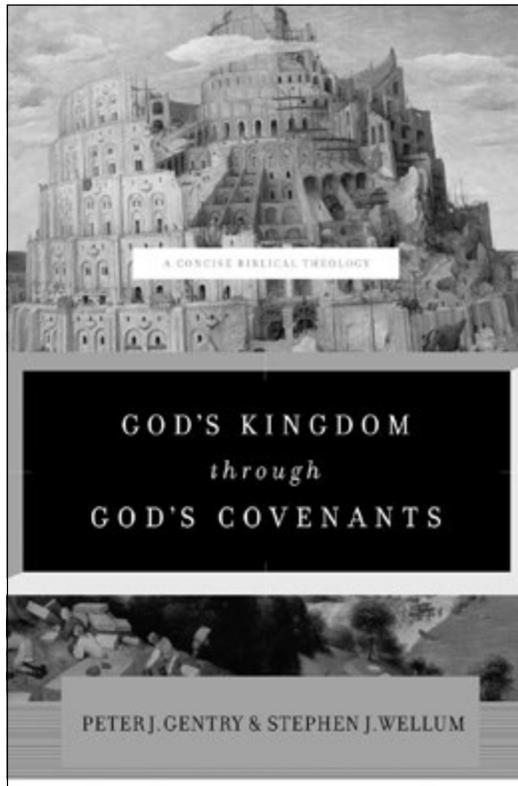
today's issues and questions. Alongside this task, systematic theology also critiques other theological proposals within the church and false ideas of other worldviews outside the church. By doing all this, systematic theology enables God's people to live under the lordship of Christ and to live faithfully as the church as we await Christ's return and the consummation.⁴²

How does all this discussion apply to what we are doing in this book? Basically, we are setting forth a *theological* proposal for a better way of discerning the nature of the biblical covenants and how the covenants relate to each other. By doing so, we are doing systematic theology and warranting our conclusions in biblical theology. We are first seeking to grasp how God's plan unfolds across redemptive history by the progression of the covenants—to trace out the Bible's own "biblical-canonical judgments"—and on the basis of these judgments, to draw the theological conclusions and judgments that we think follow from the Bible's own presentation. Our argument is that the traditional ways of putting together the biblical covenants are not quite right—or better, they do not fully do justice to the Bible's own "biblical-canonical judgments" regarding the covenants. To make our case, we will describe how others have put the covenants together, discerning the key points of difference between the views, which will then allow us to set our alternative view over against those views. We will argue that to correct the places where other theological conclusions have gone awry in "putting together" the covenants, we must return anew to Scripture and make sure our understanding of the covenants is true to how Scripture unpacks those covenantal relations.

Let us now turn to this task by first setting the context for our proposal. In chapter 2, we will describe the two dominant biblical-theological systems within evangelical theology in order to understand the nature of the biblical covenants and their relations to each other, which will be the subject matter of chapter 3.

42. Goldsworthy says something very similar as he speaks of the interrelationship and interdependence between biblical and systematic theology. He argues that we should not view the direction from text to theological formulation in a straight line, i.e., exegesis → biblical theology → systematic theology. Instead, he views the relationship more in terms of a "hermeneutical spiral." He writes, "From one point of view, biblical theology is what makes dogmatics [systematic theology] necessary. If it were not for the progressive nature of revelation, then all texts would stand in the same general relationship to the believer. Dogmatics is the discipline of saying what the total redemptive and revealing activity of God means for us now. It recognizes that all texts do not stand in the same relationship to us now, but that in view of the unity of revelation they do stand in some identifiable relationship to all other texts and therefore to us. Biblical theology examines the diversity within the unity. . . . The dogmatic basis of biblical theology lies in the fact that no empirical datum of exegesis has independent meaning, and no datum of theology or interpretation has independent meaning." *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics*, 258–72; quotation from 270–71.

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