

## **A Critique of the Concept of One Unifying Covenant—the Covenant of Grace<sup>1</sup>**

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*Abstract:* Perhaps one of the most significant divisions among covenant theologians is on the issue of baptism. Baptist covenant theologians actually hold to a different view of the covenant of grace, making it essentially equal with the New covenant. On the other hand, the traditional Reformed paedobaptist believes the covenant of grace is fully present and powerful in both the Old and New covenants. This paper will be aiming at the latter group, analyzing the Reformed argument for a covenant of grace from the perspective of the paedobaptist and why it is essential to their argument for paedobaptism.

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Within the Reformed argument for paedobaptism, there is no more essential component than the covenant of grace. Reformed paedobaptists themselves are adamant about this point. One such paedobaptist, Robert Booth, writes, “There are also other evidences in the pages of Scripture that support the truth of infant baptism. Nevertheless, *the foundation of the argument consists of the unified covenant of grace evident in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.*”<sup>2</sup>

There are many reasons that the covenant of grace is essential to the Reformed position on paedobaptism. Primarily, it provides the theological connection between circumcision and baptism, so that “baptism and circumcision have essentially the same meaning.”<sup>3</sup> Additionally, it provides a theological framework for understanding a continuity in the people of God from Old to New Testament. Finally, understanding the framework of the covenant of grace in Old and New Testament also underlies the idea that God covenants with households, not just individuals. Clearly, this is an important concept to understand.

It should be noted that, historically, many Baptists have argued against paedobaptism while simultaneously embracing covenant theology and the covenant of grace.<sup>4</sup> So, I am not claiming

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is an edited and abridged version of a chapter in a forthcoming book I am writing on paedobaptism.

<sup>2</sup> Robert R. Booth, *Children of the Promise: The Biblical Case for Infant Baptism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1995), 10. Cf. Cornelis P. Venema, “Covenant Theology and Baptism,” in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, ed. Gregg Strawbridge (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2003), 202. Venema says, “This debate can be reduced to one principal question: Does the covenant of grace in its New Testament administration embrace the children of believing parents just as it did in its Old Testament administration? However complex and diverse the arguments, pro and con, on the subject of infant baptism may be, this remains the overriding issue.”

<sup>3</sup> Mark E. Ross, “Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals,” in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, ed. Gregg Strawbridge (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2003), 100.

<sup>4</sup> Examples of such defenses are in modern times, Richard C. Barcellos, ed., *Recovering a Covenantal Heritage: Essays in Baptist Covenant Theology* (Palmdale, CA: RBAP, 2014); Paul K. Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace: An Appraisal of the Argument That as Infants Were Once Circumcised, so They Should Now Be Baptised* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999). Older defenses include the fine work of Nehemiah Coxe,

that one must adopt infant baptism if he holds to a covenant of grace. However, the Reformed paedobaptist arguments would have no foundation without a distinct understanding of the covenant of grace. Since a unified covenant of grace is *the* primary argument for Reformed paedobaptism, in this paper we will spend significant time analyzing whether this is a valid theological category.

### The Covenant of Grace as One Covenant

As is well known, covenant theologians argue for the unity between Old and New Testament by appealing to one covenant—the covenant of grace—which appears in various manifestations. Zwingli was the architect for this kind of argumentation, developing it to counter the claims made by the Anabaptists. Zwingli claimed that there had always been just one covenant. In his words, “God therefore made no other covenant with the miserable race of man than that he had already conceived before man was formed. One and the same testament has always been in force.”<sup>5</sup>

But Zwingli’s assertion that there is only one covenant was open to challenge. After all, if there was only one covenant in both Old and New Testament, why did Scripture seem to speak of multiple covenants (e.g., Heb 8, 2 Cor 3; Gal 4–5)? To explain these passages, Zwingli states, “Two covenants are spoken of, not that they are two diverse covenants, for this would necessitate not only two diverse people, but also two gods.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, even though the Scriptures talk about multiple covenants, this is not the reality.

Again, Zwingli writes, “Paul speaks of two testaments, but the one he calls a testament by a misuse of language, when he wishes them to be understood who, although they were under that one eternal covenant and testament. . . . Paul therefore called the way of these a testament, not that it was a true testament, but by a copying or imitation of those who so named it.”<sup>7</sup> As we can see, the concept of a singular covenant is so important to Zwingli that he attributes a “misuse of language” to the Apostle Paul.

Few modern Reformed paedobaptists would be as bold as Zwingli in their assertions. Yet, modern Reformed paedobaptists also assume a singular covenant in texts which refer to plurality. For example, in response to Romans 9:4, “They are Israelites, and to them belong . . . the covenants [pl.],” Venema says, “However diverse and particular may be the various dispensations or administrations of the covenant of grace—so that we may even speak of ‘covenants’ in the plural (Rom 9:4)—they do not differ as to substance.”<sup>8</sup> In other words,

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*A Discourse of the Covenants That God Made with Men before the Law: Wherein, the Covenant of Circumcision Is More Largely Handled, and the Invalidity of the Plea for Paedobaptism Taken from Thence Discovered* (Printed by J.D. and are to be sold by Nathaniel Ponder at the Peacock in the Poultry; and Benjamin Alsop at the Angel and Bible in the Poultry, 1681). Many Reformed Baptists view the covenant of grace as identical with the new covenant, and not formally operational until Christ’s sacrifice on the cross.

<sup>5</sup> Ulrich Zwingli, *Selected Works of Huldreich Zwingli*, ed. Samuel Macauley, trans. Lawrence A. McClouth, Henry Preble, and George W. Gilmore (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania, 1901), 234.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 228–29.

<sup>8</sup> Venema, “Covenant Theology and Baptism,” 216.

Venema argues that there is one covenant of grace; and when Scripture refers to a plurality of covenants, it is really only referring to different manifestations of that one covenant.

There are at least two problems with this line of thinking. First, there is the problem of falsifiability. The standard that Zwingli and Venema use for their interpretation is not falsifiable nor testable. In other words, the conclusion is assumed preemptively. A covenant of grace is presupposed in the texts; and so when there is mention of multiple covenants, it is explained away as a reference to various administrations of the same covenant. Thus, there is no way to disprove the idea of a singular covenant. The very evidence which would prove multiple covenants is used as evidence for a singular covenant. Secondly, and more importantly, this presuppositional reading of these texts seems to ignore the more natural reading. Texts that make a distinction between the various covenants should be read as evidence of different covenants. Covenants exist separately with unique terms and obligations. In the words of Paul, “even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified” (Gal 3:15).

### **The Reformed Paedobaptist Defense of the Covenant of Grace**

The Reformed paedobaptist argument relies on the essential sameness of the covenant of grace. It is, in effect, one covenant that manifests differently through other covenants. However, Scripture regularly speaks of multiple covenants as being cooperative (Heb 8; 2 Cor 3; Gal 4–5; Rom 9:4; Eph 2:12, etc.). Thus, the burden of proof is on the Reformed paedobaptist to defend the idea that there is one overarching covenant of grace that is “essentially the same in all dispensations.”<sup>9</sup>

Cornelis Venema has taken up the challenge and has offered a defense of the covenant of grace.<sup>10</sup> His defense is beneficial because he provides objective criteria for examining the covenants of Scripture. His primary evidence for a covenant of grace can be grouped into four categories: the same promise of life and salvation, the same mediator, the same gospel, and the same obligations.

#### *The Same Promise of Life and Salvation*

Venema begins his defense of the covenant of grace as a valid theological category by arguing that each successive covenant contains the same promise of life and salvation. Venema writes,

First, the covenant promise of life and salvation is described in the same way throughout the Scriptures. When God first entered into an everlasting covenant with Abraham, he promised to be God to him and to his seed after him (Gen 17:7). This language is used of the covenant made at Sinai under Moses (Exod 19:5; 20:1), of the covenant made on the plains of Moab (Deut 29:13), of the covenant with David (2 Sam 7:14), and of the new covenant in Christ (Jer 31:33; Heb 8:10).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1938), 279.

<sup>10</sup> Venema, “Covenant Theology and Baptism,” 201–29.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

In a very similar way to Venema, Berkhof writes,

The summary expression of the covenant is the same throughout, both in the Old and New Testament: “I will be thy God.” It is the expression of the essential content of the covenant with Abraham, Gen. 17:7, of the Sinaitic covenant, Ex. 19:5; 20:1, of the covenant of the Plains of Moab, Deut. 29:13, of the Davidic covenant, 2 Sam. 7:14, and of the new covenant, Jer. 31:33; Heb. 8:10.<sup>12</sup>

The point for both Venema and Berkhof is that God describes His relationship with his people the same way in each manifestation of the covenant. This is viewed as proof that the various covenants are manifestations of one unified covenant.

There are three substantial responses to this argument. First, a comparison of the language of the covenants actually indicates some significant dissimilarities. Both Venema and Berkhof imply that the covenant texts include “I will be your God” language. But, if we compare the actual passages they cite, we see meaningful differences.

Gen 17:7	And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, <b>to be God to you and to your offspring after you.</b>
Exod 19:5	Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be <b>my treasured possession</b> among all peoples, for all the earth is mine.
Exod 20:1	I am the Lord <b>your God</b> , who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.
Deut 29:13	that he may establish you today as <b>his people</b> , and that <b>he may be your God</b> , as he promised you, and as he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.
2 Sam 7:14	<b>I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son.</b> When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men
Jer 31:33; Heb 8:10	For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. <b>And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.</b>

Although there are certainly some possible connections within these passages, it is far too simplistic to assume that the language “I will be your God” is equivalent with phrases like, “my treasured possession” or “I will be to him a father.” These phrases likely carry their own significant meanings. For example, kings in the ancient world were often referred to as “sons” of their respective deities.<sup>13</sup> This well-known sonship description emphasized representative rule by the king on behalf of his deity. Thus, it is not accurate to say all of these passages talk about the

<sup>12</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 279.

<sup>13</sup> Adela Yarbro Collins and John J. Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God: Divine, Human, and Angelic Messianic Figures* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 1–9. For example, see Ivan Engnell, *Studies in Divine Kingship in the Ancient Near East*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1967), 58. Engnell points out that that the Hittite king is often referred to as the son of the weather-god.

same covenant promise. There are some unique differences in the wording of the various covenants that should be considered.

The second point of response is the lack of attention to the priestly covenant in Numbers 25:10–13. In this passage the Lord grants Phinehas a covenant for his faithful service to Yahweh. This priestly covenant uses some of the same language as other, more well-known covenants. For example, God promises the covenant will be “to him [Phinehas] and to his descendants” (v. 13a). It is also called a “perpetual” (עוֹלָם) covenant, which is the same terminology used of the Noahic covenant (9:16), Abrahamic covenant (17:13, 19), and the new covenant (Jer 32:40). The label “covenant of peace” (25:12b) is also used in the priestly covenant, which is the same phraseology used of the new covenant (cf. Ezekiel 37:26a). So, according to the understanding of Venema and other covenant theologians, the priestly covenant should also be a manifestation of the covenant of grace. Yet very few covenant theologians would be willing to assert that.

Finally, some of these phrases of relationship language seem to be used more broadly than as an indication of a particular covenant of grace. For example, in Isaiah 19:25, Egypt is called “my people,” and Assyria, “the work of my hands.” These descriptions are given alongside God calling Israel “my inheritance.” Although Isaiah 19 envisions a future time, these phrases indicate that it was God’s intent to form a relationship with other nations besides Israel, even though only Israel was the covenant recipient at that time.

The idea of God having a relationship with other nations outside of a specialized covenant is present in many places. For example, Amos 9:7 describes God’s intentional and unique relationship with the Philistines and Syrians, leading them through similar Exodus-like experiences. Similarly, other texts talk about God having a special promise for other nations who are outside the covenant. For example, after promising judgment against the nations, God promises to specifically restore the fortunes of the Moabites (Jer 48:47), the Ammonites (Jer 49:6), and Elam (Jer 49:39). This promise to restore the fortunes of these pagan nations is similar to God’s promise to restore Israel. God had promised Israel that after their exile and judgment He would restore them and reestablish Israel in the land (Jer 29:14; 30:3; 31:23; 33:7). This is not to deny a special covenantal relationship between Israel and God; however, we observe that relationship language is used elsewhere about those with whom God did not have a covenant. So just because we see similar relational language does not necessitate the same covenant is operative.

### *The Same Mediator*

The second evidence for the covenant of grace is that, according to Venema, the covenant mediator is the same across every administration. Venema writes, “Second, the Mediator of the covenant is the same in every dispensation or administration of the covenant of grace. Jesus Christ, according to the writer of Hebrews, is “the same yesterday and today and forever” (13:8).”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Venema, “Covenant Theology and Baptism,” 216.

In addition to the above quote, Venema also points 1 Timothy 2:5 to argue that there is only one mediator between God and man.<sup>15</sup> But the argument that Jesus is the same mediator in every administration of the covenant of grace is weak. In trying to argue for one unified covenant of grace Venema wipes out the mediatorial distinctions between the covenants. Although Venema attempts to proof-text by referring to Hebrew 13:8, that Jesus Christ is “the same yesterday and today and forever,” he does not cite Hebrews 3:1–6 or 8:5–6. Both of these passages teach Jesus’s new covenant mediatorial role is superior to that of Moses.

In the overall argument of Hebrews, Moses and Jesus are compared as covenant mediators. Christ is viewed as comparatively better than Moses (Heb 3:1–6), who is viewed as the mediator of the old covenant (e.g., Heb 9:19). So too, in Hebrews 8:6, the author of Hebrews writes, “But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, it is central to the theology of Hebrews that Jesus is the better new covenant mediator, and this description is paralleled with Moses, who was the mediator of the old covenant.<sup>17</sup>

Other Scriptures also draw a comparison between the mediatorial roles of Moses and Jesus. For example, John 1:17, “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” Similarly, 2 Corinthians 3:7–18 insinuates a significant difference between the ministry of Moses and that of Jesus.

Clearly the Bible labels Jesus as the mediator of the new covenant, and Moses is recognized as the mediator of the old covenant. So how do Reformed paedobaptists synthesize this apparent contradiction? Early covenant theologian Zacharias Ursinus writes, “[Moses] was a Mediator only as a type of Christ, who was even then already Mediator, but is now the only Mediator without any type.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, Christ was the real mediator because Moses was only a type. However, this explanation seems to suffer from a lack of texts which describe Christ being the mediator of the old covenant. Also, this viewpoint seems to disregard the straightforward statements of Moses being the mediator of the old covenant to defend the idea of one unifying covenant of grace.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 217. Cf. Randy Booth, “Covenant Transition,” in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, ed. Gregg Strawbridge (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2003), 195. Commenting on 1 Tim 2:5, Booth notes, “This means that Jesus Christ is the Mediator of the covenant in both the Old and New Testaments.”

<sup>16</sup> William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary 47a (Thomas Nelson, 1991), 208. “The measure of that superiority is expressed with a comparison based on Jesus’ entrance into the heavenly sanctuary as the mediator of a superior covenant. In Hebrews the theologically significant word μεσίτης, “mediator,” is always associated with the new covenant (8:6; 9:15; 12:24; cf. 7:22). The new covenant required a new mediator. By his life of perfect obedience and his death, Jesus inaugurated the new covenant of Jer 31:31–34. His entrance into the heavenly sanctuary guarantees God’s acceptance of his sacrifice and the actualization of the provisions of the superior covenant he mediated.”

<sup>17</sup> Peter Gräbe, “The New Covenant and Christian Identity in Hebrews,” in *A Cloud of Witnesses: The Theology of Hebrews in Its Ancient Contexts*, ed. Richard Bauckham et al. (New York: T & T Clark, 2008), 123. “This characterization of ‘covenant mediator’ (διαθήκης μεσίτης) is of great significance for covenant Christology (cf. 8:6; 9:15; 12:24). Jesus establishes a new relationship between God and his people in that his atoning death makes possible new soteriological provisions from God. In this, Christ parallels Moses as the ‘mediator of the first covenant’.”

<sup>18</sup> Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. G. W. Willard (n.p., Forgotten Books, n.d., but the original Latin book was first published in 1564), 290.

### *The Same Gospel*

Venema's third argument for a unified covenant of grace is that the same gospel and means of salvation is present in both Old and New Testament. He writes, "Third, the gospel preached in the old covenant is the same as the gospel preached in the new covenant."<sup>19</sup>

Venema is completely correct that the gospel never changes. It has been the same throughout history. The same grace of God saved each individual who expressed faith, whether Adam, David, Paul, or any one of us. However, the fact that salvation is always by grace through faith doesn't actually do anything to prove whether or not there is a covenant of grace.

Reformed paedobaptists will usually argue that the gospel was the same in both old and new covenants, and this is to show the covenants are a manifestation of the covenant of grace. But the reality is that God's way of salvation (grace through faith) was operative from the time of Adam to Noah and beyond. Even those outside the stipulations of the old covenant were saved. For example, Job and Melchizedek were presumably saved by faith, though they were outside the Abrahamic covenant. So, to argue that the same gospel existed in the old and new covenants does not prove they are manifestations of the covenant of grace. It is simply a correct observation that the way God saves people is the same in every age.

### *The Same Obligations*

The final claim made by Venema is the most helpful because it is most concrete and testable. He writes, "Fourth, the obligation of the covenant of grace is essentially the same throughout the course of its various and successive administrations."<sup>20</sup>

It is difficult to understand what Venema means by this statement. Clearly the obligations of the Mosaic covenant, "You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the Lord" (Lev 18:5), differ drastically from the obligations of the new covenant, "For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Gal 5:14). The dietary obligations of the Mosaic covenant are no longer applicable to those under the new covenant (Deut 14; cf. Mark 7:18–19; Acts 10:9–16; Rom 14:1–4). Similarly, the Mosaic Sabbath restrictions are also done away with in the new covenant (Exod 20:8–11; cf. Rom 14:5–7; Col 2:16–17). It is impossible to seriously argue that the obligations between Mosaic and new covenants are the same. The covenant obligations differ drastically.

This is evident even beyond the comparison of the Mosaic and new covenants. For example, those living under the Noahic covenant had fewer obligations than the Mosaic covenant (e.g., no dietary restrictions, etc.). Venema cannot be saying there are no differences in obligations between the covenants, because that would be nonsense.

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<sup>19</sup> Venema, "Covenant Theology and Baptism," 217.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

In context, what Venema seems to be arguing is similar to his third point—the obligations of faith in God for salvation are the same across history. Venema writes, “The gracious promise of the covenant precedes the giving of the law, thereby teaching us that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone, and not on account of the righteousness of works.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, salvation always comes through faith, never by works. Although this is undoubtedly true, it is not an argument for the universality of the covenant of grace. It is simply a restatement of Venema’s third argument: that God saves by grace through faith. Furthermore, the way Venema states his case ignores the real issue. There are genuine differences between the covenant obligations. These differences demonstrate a multifaceted plan of God that has purposes that extend beyond salvation.

Although I agree with Venema that God’s plan of salvation is the same throughout all time, I am unconvinced by his arguments that, “the covenant of grace, throughout its successive and diverse administrations, is essentially one and the same covenant.”<sup>22</sup> I believe Venema and other Reformed paedobaptists force the covenant of grace construct onto the biblical covenants. Just because salvation is the same in every age does not mean the covenants are manifestations of one covenant of grace. Furthermore, I believe the scriptural evidence describes a variety of unique, specialized covenants rather than one covenant of grace that spans both testaments.<sup>23</sup>

### **A Positive Argument for the Uniqueness of the Covenants**

One of the most persuasive arguments against the covenant of grace is an analysis of how Scripture describes the various covenants as unique and distinct. If we can demonstrate that the Bible speaks of multiple covenants that operate coextensively, then it would be difficult to argue that the biblical covenants are manifestations of one covenant of grace. In this section we will look at the positive arguments for unique and separate covenants.

#### *Scripture Speaks of Covenants as a Plurality*

This may seem like an obvious starting place, but I believe it sets a strong foundation for expectation. In contrast to many of the statements that are made by Reformed paedobaptists, the New Testament speaks of a diversity of covenants. For example, as already referred to, Romans 9:4 says, “They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> On this point, see Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *Biblical Theology: The Common Grace Covenants*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014), 224–25. Niehaus writes, “More recently, some scholars have seen all God’s covenants as one, but can only accomplish their goal by blurring over the distinctions that make the covenants different. Such an approach, although it has found favor recently in some quarters, is truly a form of idealism that can succeed only by abstracting a few things common to all covenants (e.g., that God has provided for his vassals in the past, that he requires certain things of them in the present, and that he promises to provide for them in the future) and declaring all the covenants to be one because they share those elements. Although a full discussion of the issues would require more space than is appropriate here, the failure of this approach is most easily illustrated when we consider the basic differences between the Common Grace covenants and the Special Grace covenants. The two sets of covenants are different in their provisions and in their promises. The Noahic covenant, for example, does not offer a way of eternal salvation for anyone—although all people live under it.”

giving of the law, the worship, and the promises.” Of importance to our argument is the fact that covenants (αἱ διαθήκαι) and promises (αἱ ἐπαγγελίαι) are both in the plural. Moo points out that Paul’s reference to covenants (plural) is most naturally a reference to the covenants mentioned in the Old Testament (e.g., Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic). Other non-biblical Jewish sources also use the plural to refer to the different covenants that Israel had received (cf. Sir. 44:12, 18; Wis. 18:22; 2 Macc 8:15).<sup>24</sup> Paul’s point is that Israel was given unique privileges through a variety of covenants and promises.

Similarly, Ephesians 2:12 reads, “Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.” F.F. Bruce notes that covenants (plural) here refer to the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenants.<sup>25</sup> The point in Ephesians 2:12, similar to Romans 9:4, is that the nation of Israel had been given special privileges through covenants that the Gentiles had not been given.

This seems to be a strong argument against the idea of a covenant of grace. The point is that Gentiles could be saved in the Old Testament through faith, yet the focus of Romans 9:4 and Ephesians 2:12 is to highlight the special privilege Israel had through covenantal relationships with God. There were multiple covenants in operation for a variety of purposes.

#### *The Priestly Covenant is Treated as a Distinct Covenant*

The priestly covenant (Num 25:10–13) is an oft-ignored but essential component to consider in this debate. The context of Numbers 25 is that Israel had “yoked himself to Baal of Peor,” engaging in vile idolatry (v. 3). The Lord brought a plague upon the people of Israel to punish them, until Phinehas, Aaron’s grandson, stopped the plague by killing a man of Israel and his seductress (vv. 7–8). In light of Phinehas’ actions, the text notes God’s promise:

And the Lord said to Moses, “Phinehas the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the people of Israel, in that he was jealous with my jealousy among them, so that I did not consume the people of Israel in my jealousy. Therefore say, ‘Behold, I give to him my covenant of peace, and it shall be to him and to his descendants after him the covenant of a perpetual priesthood, because he was jealous for his God and made atonement for the people of Israel’” (Num 25:10–13).

Reading this text we see that this covenant uses language often given as evidence for the covenant of grace. First, this covenant promises a “perpetual priesthood,” which uses the same term elsewhere translated “everlasting” (עוֹלָם). This is the same kind of language used in the Noahic covenant (Gen 9:12, 16), the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 17:7–8), and the Davidic covenant (2 Sam 7:13, 16). Second, this priestly covenant was given not just to Phinehas, but to his descendants (Num 25:13). This promise follows the same structure as the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants (Gen 17:7; 2 Sam 7:12). Finally, the priestly covenant is also called a

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<sup>24</sup> Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2nd ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 583–84.

<sup>25</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 293.

“covenant of peace” (25:12b), which is the same phraseology used of the new covenant (Ezek 37:26a). The priestly covenant is hardly mentioned by covenant theologians, but it contains the very same elements found in the other biblically-significant covenants.

Although some might wish to connect the priestly covenant fundamentally with the Mosaic covenant, the priestly covenant is to be viewed as distinct from the Mosaic covenant. The prophets reveal that the priestly covenant continues in operation parallel with the new covenant. For example, priests from Zadock’s line, who are descendants of Phinehas (1 Chron 6:50–53), serve in the future Ezekielian Temple (Ezek 44:15; 48:11).<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Jeremiah 33:17–18 talks about the perpetuity of the Davidic covenant and Levitical covenant side by side. This point is even more concretely made in Jeremiah 33:20–21 where God says that neither “my covenant with David,” nor “my covenant with the Levitical priests my ministers,” can be broken.

The point is that although the priestly covenant is ignored by proponents of covenant theology, it is clearly represented in Israel’s theology. So much so that the priestly covenant finds continuity along with the Davidic and new covenants. However, given the character and quality of the priestly covenant, it is difficult to describe it as a manifestation of the covenant of grace.

#### *The Covenants Found in Scripture Operate Coextensively*

Another important argument for the uniqueness of the covenants is that they are described as operating coextensively. This means that each covenant cannot simply be viewed as a manifestation of one covenant of grace, but that each covenant uniquely contributes something to the biblical storyline. In many biblical passages there are multiple covenants in operation, functioning simultaneously and in conjunction with each other. This is apparent in many passages.

For example, Isaiah 24:4–5 says of all the earth has broken the “everlasting covenant.” This reference to a generic covenant with the world seems to fit best with the Noahic covenant,<sup>27</sup> although it could be a reference to the obligatory relationship between creature and Creator.<sup>28</sup> Of course Isaiah is writing from within the framework of the Mosaic covenant—the Mosaic covenant forms the basis of Isaiah’s covenant lawsuit in Isaiah 1.<sup>29</sup> Thus, Isaiah is demonstrating awareness of multiple covenants operating simultaneously.

Another example is the psalms. As Craigie has observed, “the psalmists are covenant writers,” and their “knowledge of God is rooted in covenant.”<sup>30</sup> However, this covenant reflection is not tied to a covenant of grace but to the revealed biblical covenants. For example, in Psalm 105:8–11 there is a clear reference to the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In Psalm 106:45 we

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<sup>26</sup> Irvin A. Busenitz, “Introduction to the Biblical Covenants: The Noahic Covenant and the Priestly Covenant,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 10, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 188.

<sup>27</sup> John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, Rev., WBC 24 (Thomas Nelson, 2005), 378.

<sup>28</sup> Michael J. Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever: A Biblical Theology of the Kingdom of God* (Silverton, OR: Lampion Press, 2017), 165.

<sup>29</sup> Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, 23.

<sup>30</sup> Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 2nd ed., Word Biblical Commentary 19 (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 40.

also likely have a reference to the Abrahamic covenant. David quotes both of these psalms in 1 Chronicles 16:8–36 showing that, even if he was not the author of the psalms themselves, he knew about and applied them. David is also the author of Psalm 103:17–18, a reference to the Mosaic covenant. We can also add Psalm 2 and Psalm 110 to David’s writings, which are reflections on the Davidic covenant. Therefore, we see that David writes about and meditates on at least three covenants: the Abrahamic covenant (Ps 105; 106), the Mosaic (Ps 103), and the Davidic (Ps 2; 110). As such, the psalms demonstrate awareness of multiple covenants in operation at the same time.

The coextensive nature of the biblical covenants is perhaps nowhere better seen than Jeremiah 33:20–21, which I alluded to before, but will now quote in full.

Thus says the Lord: If you can break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, so that day and night will not come at their appointed time, then also my covenant with David my servant may be broken, so that he shall not have a son to reign on his throne, and my covenant with the Levitical priests my ministers.

Note that we have a reference here to three coextensive and cooperative covenants.<sup>31</sup> There is the Noahic covenant (“my covenant with the day ... and night”), the Davidic covenant (“my covenant with David”), and the priestly covenant (“my covenant with the Levitical priests”). In fact, God’s message in this text assumes the coextensive nature of these covenants. The people of Israel can be assured on the basis of the continuity of the Noahic covenant that the Davidic and priestly covenants will also continue. This also demonstrates that the priestly covenant is unique and set apart from the Mosaic covenant, since it is designed to function alongside the Davidic and new covenants in perpetuity.

### *The New Covenant Replaces the Mosaic Covenant, not the Abrahamic*

In order to understand the significance of this point, we need to note that for Reformed paedobaptists, the new covenant is an extension of the old covenant. In the words of Booth, “they are essentially one covenant of grace.”<sup>32</sup> The old covenant sign was circumcision, under the Abrahamic administration. Under the new covenant, the covenant sign is baptism. Thus, the new covenant is not new in the sense of something that has not been seen before, but rather a renewed version of the covenant.

For most Reformed paedobaptists, the old covenant is essentially synonymous with the Abrahamic covenant. For example, when Booth talks about the old covenant, he talks about the blessings and promises made to Abraham.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, the appeal to circumcision as the old covenant sign assumes the Abrahamic covenant is in view. The connection between the old

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<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, within Jeremiah 30–33 there are at least 4 unconditional covenants (perhaps 5) mentioned. Vlach notes the following: new covenant (31:31–34); Davidic covenant (33:14–17); Priestly covenant (33:18); Noahic covenant (33:19–22); and perhaps the Abrahamic covenant (30:22). See Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever*, 188–191.

<sup>32</sup> Booth, “Covenant Transition,” 199.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 178–79, 182.

covenant as Abrahamic and the new covenant is perhaps nowhere more clear than in Berkhof's explanation.

The covenant made with Abraham was primarily a *spiritual* covenant, though it also had a national aspect, and of this spiritual covenant circumcision was a sign and seal.... This covenant is still in force and is essentially identical with the "new covenant" of the present dispensation. The unity and continuity of the covenant in both dispensations follows from the fact that the Mediator is the same; the condition is the same, namely, faith; and the blessings are the same, namely, justification, regeneration, spiritual gifts, and eternal life.<sup>34</sup>

It is important to the Reformed paedobaptist to view the old covenant as primarily equivalent with the Abrahamic covenant because circumcision (the Abrahamic sign) has been replaced by baptism (the renewed sign of the covenant). However, when looking at the passages which talk about the replacement of the old covenant, it is clear that the Mosaic covenant is in view.

For example, Hebrews 8:13 says, "In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away." Which first covenant is obsolete? The context of Hebrews 9 makes it clear, "Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly place of holiness" (v. 1). Which covenant had "regulations for worship and an early place of holiness?" That would have been the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai, commonly known as the Mosaic covenant. Thus, for the author of Hebrews, the new covenant has replaced the Mosaic covenant, not the Abrahamic.

Similarly, Paul compares the new covenant glories with the glory of the Mosaic covenant in 2 Corinthians 3:7–11. Paul's comparison is between the "ministry of death, carved in letters on stone" (v. 7), which is a clear reference to the Mosaic covenant. Paul goes on to point out that the ministry of the Spirit (i.e., the new covenant) is far superior. As Schreiner observes, "The new covenant is superior to the old, for the glory of Christ outshines the glory of Moses (2 Cor 3:10–11)."<sup>35</sup>

The above texts are samples of how the New Testament speaks of the new covenant replacing and *far exceeding* the Mosaic covenant. Hypothetically, it could be argued that the Mosaic covenant is simply a restatement of the Abrahamic covenant in and of itself. But Galatians 3:15–17 argues strongly against that idea. Paul states clearly that the giving of the Law, "does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God" (v. 17). In context, Paul means that the Mosaic covenant did not nullify the Abrahamic.<sup>36</sup> They exist simultaneously.

Although many Reformed paedobaptists want to argue that the new covenant is a renewal or extension of the Abrahamic covenant, the New Testament describes the new covenant as a replacement of the Mosaic covenant. Israel had broken the Mosaic covenant (Jer 31:32), a new

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<sup>34</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 632–33.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ* (Westmont, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 26.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Galatians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 230.

covenant was necessary. This led to the glories of the new covenant that Jeremiah expounds (cf. Jer 31:31–34).

### *Two Completely New Aspects of the New Covenant*

As noted above, Reformed paedobaptists view the new covenant as an extension of the old covenant, not as its replacement.<sup>37</sup> In the words of Booth, “The transition from the old covenant to the new covenant is a smooth unfolding of God’s redemptive plan, because the two covenants are organically connected—they are essentially one covenant of grace.”<sup>38</sup> Thus, the new covenant is not brand new but a renewal of something already in existence. Any newness of the new covenant is usually described to refer to *external* aspects only. For example, Jeffrey Niell notes, “The newness of the new covenant pertains to the external aspects, the outward administration, of the covenant of grace. The new covenant is not new in its nature of membership.”<sup>39</sup>

Is there any actual newness in the new covenant? Examining the texts concerning the new covenant, I will argue that there are significant differences between the old and new covenants.<sup>40</sup> Although there could be a variety of these qualitative differences pointed out, I will focus on two. First, the regenerative capacity of the new covenant is different than under the old covenant. Second, the indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit is revolutionized under the new covenant.

#### *1. The Complete Regenerative Capacity of the New Covenant*

In Jeremiah 31:31–34 we have the clearest Old Testament annunciation of the new covenant. This passage is all the more critical because Hebrews quotes it in 8:8–12 as evidence that the old covenant was inferior and has been replaced by the new covenant. Jeremiah 31:31–34 reads as follows:

Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

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<sup>37</sup> Booth, “Covenant Transition,” 175.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>39</sup> Jeffrey D. Niell, “The Newness of the New Covenant,” in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, ed. Gregg Strawbridge (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2003), 155.

<sup>40</sup> It should be noted here that this is perhaps the primary argument by Reformed Baptists who hold to a covenant of grace. They will argue that the qualitative change between old and new covenants is so drastic that the current manifestation of the covenant of grace does not include baptism of children.

We should note, first of all, that the Lord says the new covenant will be “not like the covenant I made with their fathers.” The implication is that we should expect dissimilarity between the Mosaic and the new covenant.

As part of this new covenant, God promises that “no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord” (Jer 31:34a). The phrase, “they shall all know me” has been interpreted in a variety of ways.

Niell interprets the phrase, “they shall all know me,” in Jeremiah 31:34 (cf. Heb 8:11) as referring to the cessation of the Levitical priesthood.<sup>41</sup> He writes, “The conclusion that the Levitical priesthood and its attendant duties are in view is based on the immediate context and an understanding of the place and function of the priests in the old covenant administration of the covenant of grace.”<sup>42</sup> He argues for this viewpoint because the priests typically had a special relationship before the Lord, which involved teaching and instructing others about the Lord. In the old covenant, those who were laypeople were unable to approach God in the same way as the priests. Thus, the distinction of the new covenant, according to Niell, is that everyone (“from the least to the greatest of them”) will now know God in the same way the Levitical priests did.

Although not the majority position among Reformed paedobaptists, it is worth making some comments on Niell’s view.<sup>43</sup> First of all, the phraseology of knowing someone often has relational implications in both Old Testament (e.g., Gen 4:1; Ps 88:9 [8]; Amos 3:2, etc.) and New Testament (e.g., Matt 11:27; Luke 2:44; John 17:3; 1 Cor 1:21, etc.). Typically when a person is the object of a verb of knowledge, a relationship seems to be in view. Thus, for Niell to argue that a special Levitical knowledge is in view here is not the most natural interpretation of this phrase.

Furthermore, the context of the new covenant passages forbids such an interpretation. Most scholars agree that Jeremiah 30–33 forms one unit in Jeremiah. This section is often called, “The Book of Consolation,” due to the hope and encouragement found therein.<sup>44</sup> Within this section, while discussing the surety of Israel’s future, twice God promises that there will not be a lack of a Levitical priest (Jer 33:18, 22). It seems unnatural to see Jeremiah 33:34 as promising the Levitical priesthood will end, while in the same section Jeremiah promises that the priesthood will continue alongside the Davidic covenant.

A second, and much more popular, view among Reformed paedobaptists is represented by Richard Pratt. Referring to the same phrase, “they shall all know me,” Pratt writes, “In a word, to know God as Jeremiah spoke of it would be to receive eternal salvation. In the covenant of which

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<sup>41</sup> Niell, “The Newness of the New Covenant,” 147–53.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>43</sup> For a full response to Niell’s discussion on the newness of the new covenant, see James R. White, “The Newness of the New Covenant (Part 2),” in *Recovering a Covenantal Heritage: Essays in Baptist Covenant Theology*, ed. Richard C. Barcellos (Palmdale, CA: RBAP, 2014), 360–74.

<sup>44</sup> Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Walking the Ancient Paths: A Commentary on Jeremiah* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019), 336.

Jeremiah spoke, salvation would come to each participant. *There would be no exceptions.*<sup>45</sup> So for Pratt, and the majority of Reformed paedobaptists, there is agreement with non-paedobaptists that the knowledge spoken of here in Jeremiah 31:34 is salvific knowledge.

However, this is potentially problematic for the Reformed paedobaptist. If the new covenant promises each covenant member will be regenerate (“they shall all know me”), how can infants be viewed as covenant members? Pratt alerts his readers to the issue when he says, “How can we believe in infant baptism when God himself said that the new covenant would be inviolable, internalized, and include only those who know the Lord?”<sup>46</sup>

The crux of Pratt’s argument is that, although Jeremiah 31:34 refers to an entirely regenerate covenant community, that promise will only find complete fulfillment at the return of Christ. In Pratt’s words, “Once Christ returns, it will not be possible to break the new covenant and thereby to enter into another exile. Before that time, however, participants in the new covenant can break the new covenant.”<sup>47</sup> In other words, new covenant participants in today’s church can (and often do) break the covenant by apostatizing into unbelief. However, after Christ comes, the fullness of the new covenant will be present, and there will be no more covenant breakers.<sup>48</sup> Thus, the new covenant, like the old covenant, will be a mixed community until the return of Christ.

Pratt argues for this position by pointing to a threefold fulfillment pattern in the new covenant. He argues that the new covenant includes three aspects:<sup>49</sup>

- Future planting of God’s people in the land (vv. 27–30)
- Future new covenant with God’s people (vv. 31–37)
- Future rebuilding and permanence of the holy city (vv. 38–40)

Pratt explains,

Because the New Testament does not explicitly apply this threefold fulfillment pattern to Jeremiah’s prophecy of the new covenant, the fulfillment of that particular prophecy is often misunderstood. Often interpreters approach this text as if the new covenant was realized in its fullness when Christ first came to earth, but this is a serious error. Christ has not yet completed the restoration, and thus we have not yet obtained the promised blessings in full. The new covenant was inaugurated in Christ’s first coming; it progresses in part during the continuation of Christ’s kingdom; but it will reach complete fulfillment only when Christ returns in the consummation of all things. We must approach Jeremiah 31:31–34 just as we approach all prophecies regarding the restoration after exile: with the understanding that the restoration of the kingdom and the renewal of the covenant will not be complete until Jesus returns.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Richard L. Pratt Jr., “Infant Baptism in the New Covenant,” in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, ed. Gregg Strawbridge (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2003), 161. Emphasis added.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 173. “Until the consummation, the new covenant will continue to be a mixture of true believers and sanctified unbelievers.”

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 168–69.

I agree with Pratt that the new covenant has not been completely fulfilled at this point in history.<sup>51</sup> The restoration of the land to Israel has not taken place yet (Jer 33:11b; cf. Ezek 36:24). Furthermore, the nation of Israel is not “one nation in the land” with “one king over them all” (Ezek 37:22). Even in the New Testament, well after the death of Christ, Paul viewed the restoration of Israel at a future time as per the promise of the new covenant (Rom 11:25–26). So, there are certainly aspects of the new covenant that await future fulfillment.

However, the major problem with Pratt’s view is not in seeing a difference between the inauguration of the new covenant and its ultimate consummation; but rather that Pratt’s view of the new covenant sees no distinctly new elements in operation now. In Pratt’s view, *every* element of the new covenant awaits the consummation. Commenting on this view, Waymeyer notes,

The underlying problem with this view is that although the New Testament does indeed teach that there are both present (inaugural) and future (consummate) aspects of the New Covenant, Pratt seems to want to reserve all of its distinctively new elements for the consummate state and deny them all to the inaugural state. The end result is that life under the New Covenant is just like life under the Old Covenant because nothing changes, at least not during the present age.<sup>52</sup>

Similarly, Waldron writes, “As with the Old Covenant, so with the New Covenant: some break the covenant, some don’t; some have their sins forgiven, some don’t. Pratt’s argument seems to strip the New Covenant of any newness whatsoever.”<sup>53</sup>

It seems justifiable to ask what is the point of the new covenant? If the new covenant is essentially identical to the old covenant, why is there even a new covenant to begin with? Again, the words of Waymeyer are helpful.

[D]o paedobaptists really believe that, prior to the announcement of the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31:31–34, the Jews thought that God’s covenant people would continue to be a mixed community of believers and unbelievers even in the age to come? If not, what (if anything) new did this prophecy actually communicate to the nation of Israel when it was first delivered? There was always a spiritual Israel within physical Israel (Rom 9:6b), and there was always going to be a time when only true believers would be resurrected unto everlasting life (Dan 12:2). Where, then, is the newness of the New Covenant in Pratt’s paradigm, and what tangible impact does it have in the present age?<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Contra White, “The Newness of the New Covenant (Part 2),” 380. White argues, “We suggest that any concept of partiality stands in direct opposition to the apologetic thrust of the writer himself. If we take the inspired interpretation of the New Testament as our norm, we must reject the partial fulfillment theory based upon the usage of the text itself.”

<sup>52</sup> Matt Waymeyer, *A Biblical Critique of Infant Baptism* (The Woodlands, TX: Kress Christian Publications, 2008), 115–16.

<sup>53</sup> Samuel E. Waldron, “A Brief Response to Richard L. Pratt’s ‘Infant Baptism in the New Covenant,’” *Reformed Baptist Theological Review* 2 (2005): 110.

<sup>54</sup> Waymeyer, *A Biblical Critique of Infant Baptism*, 116.

Exegetically, we are obligated to distinguish the new covenant from the old. Jeremiah 31:32 describes the new covenant as dissimilar to the old. Jeremiah 31:33–34 goes on to describe the following differences that pertain to the new covenant. First, “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.”<sup>55</sup> This statement speaks of the regenerate heart God will give his people (cf. Ezek 36:26).<sup>56</sup> No longer will the life be governed from laws written on stone tablets. Rather, the internal compulsion of a renewed heart will mark each covenant member (cf. 2 Cor 3:3; Gal 5:18).<sup>57</sup> Second, God promises that “they shall all know me,” speaking of the relationship formed with God through faith which all covenant members will experience.<sup>58</sup> Third, “I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” This promise of forgiveness is integral to the new covenant and provides the author of Hebrews with a foundational part of the argument for new covenant superiority (cf. Heb 10:4, 11, 12–14, 18).

Within Jeremiah 31:31–34 these three descriptions form the backbone of the spiritual blessings of the new covenant. These three components are far different (and far *better*) than life experienced under the Mosaic covenant. In contrast to Israel’s Old Testament existence, Jeremiah promised a new covenant experience that is marked by forgiveness of sins and a fully regenerate membership. Furthermore, every member would be guided by the inner compulsion of the Spirit of God. The stone tablets would give way to the Law being written on the heart of the individual. Thus, this better covenant would not be possible to breach.<sup>59</sup>

## 2. *The Individual Indwelling Presence of the Holy Spirit*

Another well-known new covenant passage is Ezekiel 36:25–27. Although Ezekiel contains some parallels to Jeremiah 31, it also draws attention to an additional difference between the old and new covenants. Ezekiel 36:25–27 reads as follows:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

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<sup>55</sup> On this point Pratt holds to a partial fulfillment as well when he writes, “while the internalization of the law of God has begun within believers, it has not yet been completed.” Pratt Jr., “Infant Baptism in the New Covenant,” 171. In response to this point, Pratt seems quite inconsistent to say the writing of the law upon the heart of an individual is only partial, while forgiveness is fully realized. There is no exegetical warrant to make such distinctions. It certainly seems much more exegetically justified to read the entirety of the spiritual blessings of the new covenant as fully operational.

<sup>56</sup> Stephen J. Wellum, “Baptism and the Relationship between the Covenants,” in *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright, NAC Studies in Bible & Theology (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2006), 144.

<sup>57</sup> Leslie C. Allen, *Jeremiah: A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 356.

<sup>58</sup> F.B. Huey, Jr., *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, New American Commentary 16 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 285.

<sup>59</sup> Wellum, “Baptism and the Relationship between the Covenants,” 145.

Ezekiel prophesies that, in contrast to the old covenant experience, where many of the individuals did not obey the Lord, God will “cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules” (v. 27b). The key component for why this will happen in the future is the indwelling ministry of the Spirit for each covenant member.

In the Old Testament, the presence of God dwelled with His people in the Tabernacle and Temple. However, in the New Testament God gave His Spirit to each covenant member.<sup>60</sup> This of course does not mean the Holy Spirit was not active in the Old Testament.<sup>61</sup> Rather, Scripture recognizes a distinct difference in the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament compared to the New Testament.<sup>62</sup>

A survey of the Old Testament literature indicates a variety of differences between the new covenant age and the ministry of the Holy Spirit experienced by those in the Old Testament.<sup>63</sup> First, the coming of the Spirit upon individuals in the Old Testament was apparently unrelated to the individual’s spiritual qualities.<sup>64</sup> For example, the Spirit empowered Saul in 1 Samuel 10:10 and 11:6, even though Saul’s character was highly questionable at that point. Second, when the Spirit’s operative power is in view, it is viewed as a unique empowerment of a political leader or prophet.<sup>65</sup> It was certainly not the typical experience for old covenant members to have access to the Spirit, and as Hamilton notes, “each time the Old Testament describes someone as having the Spirit, it does so precisely to mark that person out from other old covenant believers.”<sup>66</sup> Third, the empowering ministry of the Holy Spirit was often temporary in the Old Testament.<sup>67</sup> For example, the Holy Spirit leaves Saul (1 Sam 16:14), and David asks God not to remove the Holy Spirit from him (Ps 51:11).

The transition of the Holy Spirit’s old covenant ministry to new covenant ministry is highlighted by John 7:39. After a somewhat enigmatic statement in verse 38, John explains the implications in verse 39, “Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.”

John 7:39 states rather clearly that the Spirit had not yet been given, because Jesus had not yet ascended to heaven. Minimally, this means that there is some unique aspect of the Spirit’s ministry which awaited the conclusion of Jesus’ earthly ministry. This seems confirmed by John 14:16-17, where on the night of His betrayal, Jesus promised, “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with

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<sup>60</sup> For a full defense of this position, see James M. Hamilton Jr., *God’s Indwelling Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Old & New Testaments*, New American Commentary Studies in Bible and Theology (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2006). Hamilton argues that the personal indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit is a new covenant phenomenon.

<sup>61</sup> For example, see John F. Walvoord, “The Work of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 97, no. 388 (October 1940): 410–34.

<sup>62</sup> Larry Pettegrew, *The New Covenant Ministry of the Holy Spirit* (The Woodlands, TX: Kress Biblical Resources, 2013).

<sup>63</sup> Hamilton Jr., *God’s Indwelling Presence*, 25–56; John F. Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1958), 72–73.

<sup>64</sup> Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit*, 72.

<sup>65</sup> Hamilton Jr., *God’s Indwelling Presence*, 27–34; Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit*, 72.

<sup>66</sup> Hamilton Jr., *God’s Indwelling Presence*, 26.

<sup>67</sup> Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit*, 72.

you and will be in you.” Note that Jesus promises the Spirit’s ministry will shift (future tense – ἔσται) from being “with you” (παρ’ ὑμῖν) to being “in you” (ἐν ὑμῖν). In other words, after the glorification of Jesus, the ministry of the Holy Spirit will be an indwelling ministry for each individual in the new covenant.

After Pentecost, the New Testament knows nothing of a new covenant member who is not indwelt by the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 11:17; Rom 5:5; 8:9, 11; 1 Cor 2:12; Gal 3:2; 4:6; 1 John 3:24, etc.).<sup>68</sup> Writing to the assembly in Corinth, Paul identifies each church member as God’s temple, in whom dwells the Spirit (1 Cor 3:16–17). This identity as the temple of the Holy Spirit is used by Paul to motivate those in the church at Corinth to keep themselves from sexual sin (1 Cor 6:19–20). Not only does Scripture assume that new covenant members have the Holy Spirit, but their initiation into the Spirit is said to be through baptism (1 Cor 12:13; Eph 4:4–6).<sup>69</sup> So, to summarize, the Old Testament testifies that a key component of the new covenant will be the Spirit indwelling each individual covenant member. The New Testament describes this process in detail and links the Spirit’s indwelling with the practice of baptism.

At this juncture, it is also worth noting that the New Testament describes each member of the church as having the Spirit. But further, the Spirit’s absence is indicative of not having a relationship with Christ. One of the clearest examples of this is Romans 8:9, “Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.”

This clear message of Romans 8:9—that those who do not have the Spirit do not belong to Christ—demonstrates an inconsistency in the Reformed paedobaptist position. For a Reformed paedobaptist, baptized infants are viewed as belonging to Christ, although they are not saved and do not have the Spirit. We find an example of this view in the words that paedobaptist Daniel Doriani encourages parents to speak to their baptized children.

We baptized you when you were little, too. We promised to raise you to trust Jesus. The pastor put water on your head. We use water for washing, and when we baptized you, we asked God to wash away your sins. The pastor said “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” for you, too. That means that he asked God to be your God. Now you belong to him.<sup>70</sup>

Although Reformed paedobaptists may claim that an infant’s baptism brings that child into a relationship with Christ, Scripture seems to speak against that. For the New Testament writers, the Spirit’s presence is essential for new covenant members, as per the prophetic voice of the Old Testament (cf. Isa 32:15; Ezek 36:27; 39:29; Joel 2:28–29). Conversely, the Spirit’s absence indicates someone does not belong to Christ (cf. Rom 8:9; Jude 19).

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<sup>68</sup> See Paul R. Thorsell, “The Spirit in the Present Age: Preliminary Fulfillment of the Predicted New Covenant According to Paul,” *JETS* 41, no. 3 (September 1998): 397–413. Thorsell argues that the clear work and operation of the Spirit in the New Testament demonstrates the new covenant is in operation.

<sup>69</sup> Of interest also is the fact that Galatians clearly links the reception of the Spirit by faith (Eph 1:13; Gal 3:2, 5), and with being a son of God (Gal 4:6).

<sup>70</sup> Daniel M. Doriani, “Matthew 28:18-20 and the Institution of Baptism,” in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, ed. Gregg Strawbridge (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2003), 42.

The implication of the Holy Spirit's explicit link with the new covenant is twofold. First, there is a significant difference between the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the new covenant and the lack of that permanent indwelling in the old covenant. Therefore, it is incorrect to view the old and new covenants as essentially the same, with only external differences. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit is, by definition, an internal and qualitative difference. Second, the New Testament describes each new covenant member as having the indwelling presence of the Spirit. Thus, unregenerate infants, who do not have the indwelling Spirit, cannot be viewed as members of the new covenant.

Given the above argument, it should come as no surprise that many Reformed paedobaptists would assert that the ministry of the Holy Spirit is the same in both Old and New Testaments.<sup>71</sup> For example, B.B. Warfield states, "The Spirit of God of the Old Testament performs all the functions which are ascribed to the Holy Ghost of the New Testament, and bears all the same characteristics. They are conceived alike both in their nature and in their operations."<sup>72</sup> Similarly, John Owen, writes, "The indwelling of the Spirit is the great and solemn promise of the covenant of grace."<sup>73</sup> Owen goes on to point to David as an example that the Spirit "doth so dwell in and remain with the saints."<sup>74</sup> Similar to Warfield and Owen, Sinclair Ferguson notes that the difference between old covenant believers being indwelt by the Spirit and new covenant believers is, "not in the manner of his dwelling so much as in the capacity in which he indwells."<sup>75</sup>

However, not every Reformed paedobaptist would argue that the Holy Spirit's ministry is essentially the same in Old and New Testaments. Although not common, a few exceptions exist (notably Michael Horton<sup>76</sup> and R.C. Sproul<sup>77</sup>). However, if it is acknowledged that the Spirit's role in the new covenant is different than the old covenant experience, then it is difficult to argue for the continuity between the old and new covenants. The qualitative and significant differences in the covenant experience preclude viewing these covenants as the same covenant of grace. Furthermore, if Spirit-indwelling is the expectation for every member of the new covenant in the church, then this is a strong argument against the inclusion of children in the covenant through paedobaptism. Infants cannot be considered full covenant members since infants are not recipients of the Spirit until they exercise faith.

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<sup>71</sup> It is important to say that there are non-paedobaptist interpreters who would see the Spirit's indwelling ministry the same in both Testaments. For example, Walter C. Kaiser Jr., "The Indwelling Presence of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament," *Evangelical Quarterly* 82, no. 4 (2010): 308–15; Robert V. McCabe, "Were Old Testament Believers Indwelt by the Spirit?," *Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary Journal* 9 (2004): 215–64.

<sup>72</sup> Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, "The Spirit of God in the Old Testament," in *Biblical and Theological Studies* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1952), 8.

<sup>73</sup> John Owen, *The Doctrine of the Saints Perseverance Explained and Confirmed* [1654], vol. 11 of *The Works of John Owen*, ed. W. G. Gould (London: Johnstone & Hunter, 1850–53; reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 330.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 331.

<sup>75</sup> Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 68.

<sup>76</sup> Michael Horton, "'The Lord and Giver of Life': The Holy Spirit in Redemptive History," *JETS* 62, no. 1 (2019): 53.

<sup>77</sup> R. C. Sproul, *Who Is the Holy Spirit*, The Crucial Questions Series 13 (Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust, 2012), 58.

## Conclusion

Reformed paedobaptists argue that the various covenants in Scripture should be viewed as manifestations of one covenant of grace. I have argued in this paper against the idea of one unified covenant of grace. Although God’s plan of salvation is the same between Old and New Testament, there is no evidence that the covenants of Scripture should be viewed as various manifestations of a singular covenant of grace.<sup>78</sup> If the covenant of grace is not a valid category, this theological conclusion carries with it important consequences.

First, because the old and new covenants are distinct covenants, this puts the burden of proof on the Reformed paedobaptist to prove infants are to be granted full membership under the new covenant. Because of the covenant dissimilarities one cannot use the argument that is often used: “as in the old covenant, so in the new—since they are manifestations of the same covenant.” The new covenant carries with it some significant qualitative differences that are not merely external.

Second, if the covenant of grace is not a valid category, the idea that circumcision has replaced baptism is already quite dubious.<sup>79</sup> The connection between infant circumcision and baptism is often viewed as the strongest argument for infant baptism. However, one of the primary reasons the connection is viewed so strongly is because of the presupposed unity of one covenant of grace.

Since Zwingli, Reformed paedobaptists have used the one covenant of grace argument as their primary support for infant baptism. In this paper, I have shown that the idea of one unifying covenant of grace (consisting of various manifestations) does not fit with the biblical evidence. It is far more consistent with the biblical evidence to see multiple biblical covenants instituted by God for multiple purposes—all of which facilitate His plan to save a people for Himself and glorify His name.

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<sup>78</sup> See Jeffrey J. Niehaus, “An Argument Against Theologically Constructed Covenants,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50, no. 2 (June 2007): 259–273.

<sup>79</sup> I have explored this issue in another chapter of my forthcoming book on baptism.