

Parker, Brent E., and Richard J. Lucas, eds. *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture*. Spectrum Multiview Book Series. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2022. 256pp. + 10pp. (back matter).

Books devoted to comparing major hermeneutical systems have a long and mixed history. John Feinberg's edited collection of essays (*Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship between the Old and New Testaments*, 1988) was the first major comparative collection of interactions between covenantal and dispensational theologians on an array of hermeneutical issues dividing the two systems. Robert Lightner (*The Last Days Handbook*, 1990, rev. 1997) and Renald Showers (*There Really is a Difference: A Comparison of Covenant and Dispensational Theology*, 1990) represent dispensational theologians who have offered comparative analyses. The complicating of the field by the emergence of recent "progressive" positions has necessitated a reevaluation of major views. Benjamin Merkle offered an informative but somewhat less-than-evenhanded comparison of the four primary hermeneutical thought streams in *Discontinuity to Continuity: A Survey of Dispensational & Covenantal Theologies* (2020; see my review in *JBTW* 1, no. 1 [Fall 2020]).

The best way to handle a comparison of multiple views and avoid the slippery slope of subjectivity that often bedevils a single-author analysis is to let a living representative of each perspective express his own view in his own words; then permit each representative the opportunity to respond to the views of their colleagues. That is what Parker and Lucas have done. The respective representatives are Michael Horton for covenant theology (CT), Stephen Wellum for progressive covenantalism (PC), Darrell Bock for progressive dispensationalism (PD), and Mark Snoeberger for dispensational theology (DT). These essays are followed by a response from each writer critiquing the alternatives.

In a thirty-three-page introduction Parker and Lucas, both PCs, overview all four positions and highlight points of contact and contrast between the views. The introduction provides a concise survey of each position and touches briefly on a handful of other views that lack sufficient following or definition to include as major contenders (Reformed Baptist covenant theology, new covenant theology, theonomy, and promise theology or epangelicalism). Regarding the origin of the PC label, they note, "While the name of this position may suggest that PC is a nuanced form of covenant theology in a manner similar to how *progressive* dispensationalism is to dispensationalism, this would be an incorrect inference." Rather, "*progressive* seeks to underscore the unfolding nature of God's revelation over time" they explain (24). It is true that PC has less in common with CT than PD does with DT; the modifier *progressive* in PD, however, does not signal a merely nuanced form of DT any more than it identifies PC as a nuanced form of CT. For clarity on this point, the editors need look no further than Bock's own essay in this volume: PD traces "how the covenants of promise have advanced or progressed in their fulfillment"; consequently, "the term *progressive* as [PD] uses it highlights this linked advance in continuity" (115).¹

¹ Bock's explanation dates back at least as far as the 1990s: "The term 'progressive' is solely intended to describe how this view highlights the progressive movement of God's plan from one dispensation to the next. The name says nothing about where or how other dispensational views stand." "Hermeneutics of Progressive Dispensationalism," in *Three Central*

Michael Horton strikes a traditional CT posture, seeing CT as “the architectural design or framework of Scripture itself” (36). “Prior to the fall . . . Adam was . . . on trial” under a covenant of works based on obedience to law—a trial which, of course, Adam ultimately failed (40–41). God confronted and remedied that failure by establishing “one unfolding covenant of grace stretching from Genesis 3:15 to Revelation 22:21” (35). All of the major covenants since the fall (Abrahamic, Sinaitic, Davidic, and New) are “different administration[s] of the one covenant of grace” (46). But “behind these covenants lies the eternal covenant of redemption” (35) as the theological ground for that covenant of grace. “The church does not supersede Israel” because “the church has always existed since Adam and Eve” (71). No surprises here. Horton spends a good deal of space anchoring various aspects of CT in the writings of historical theologians (from Irenaeus to Zwingli to the Westminster Confession to Witsius to Cocceius to Maastricht), explaining why the Sinaitic Covenant is not an extension of the covenant of works, and addressing modern Reformed aberrations along the way (Barth, the “Calvin vs. the Calvinists” thesis, Norman Shepherd and the Federal Vision view).

Stephen Wellum reminds his readers that when it comes to the issues being debated in this book, “we agree on more than we disagree.” Nevertheless, “significant disagreements remain that require resolution” (75). The biblical “covenants are the backbone to Scripture’s entire storyline.” While PC “does not deny the theological concept of ‘the covenant of grace’ if one merely means ‘the one plan of God,’” Wellum critiques CT’s consolidation of “the biblical covenants under the larger category of the ‘covenant of grace’” in a way that fails to differentiate “significant covenantal differences” (75, 82). Moreover, PC differs from CT by insisting that “Jesus’ new covenant people are different from Israel”; that’s why, according to Wellum, “circumcision and baptism do not signify the same realities” (76). Wellum rightly underscores the essentially presuppositional nature of all theological systems (77). Interestingly, however, I suspect that few of any of the opposing viewpoints would dispute his four hermeneutical presuppositions as he has stated them (77–81); Bock, at least, acknowledges as much (124). The disagreements arise from the details of how those hermeneutical principles are applied on the basis of even deeper presuppositional assumptions. One of Wellum’s recurring emphases is that all the covenants “culminate in Christ” or are “fulfilled in Christ” or “reach their *telos*” in Christ (78, 79, 86, 87, 90). Few if any would argue with that assertion as it stands, but it requires further definition: does that mean all the covenantal provisions are realized and fulfilled as of Christ’s *first* coming? Yes, according to Wellum (104, 109). Wellum holds to a future conversion of ethnic Israel but no restoration (110), and he vigorously denies that he employs “typological interpretation” or either excludes or replaces Israel (215–16).

Darrell Bock also opens his essay with the reminder that “this is an in-house, family discussion within evangelicalism” and that “what we hold in common is in many ways far more important” than what divides us in this debate (112). One of the key distinctives of PD can be expressed in an important conjunction of conjunctions: *both/and*. Whereas “some questions previously had been treated in an either-or manner by [CT and DT], progressives saw some cases to be a both/and proposition” (114).

Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views, ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 99.

The kingdom, for instance is not a “now or not yet” proposition but “now and not yet . . . inaugurated but not yet consummated” (114). A key distinction between PD and PC “is whether ethnic Israel as a nation had a future role in God’s program. Here is where [PCs and PDs] part company.” PD “argues for fulfillment in Christ and equality among the nations in blessing without removing the role for national territorial Israel in the consummation so emphasized in the OT. . . . Gentile blessing does not mean *national, territorial Israelite exclusion*” (115). Why, PD asks, must it be either one *or* the other, when a both/and approach allows the fullest, most natural, most literal fulfillment of all the promises as uttered by God and understood and expected by Israel? “What [PD] contends is not that this global dimension is to be denied or rejected but that, in the ‘expansion,’ what is gained does not shed what was originally promised” (118). Similarly, all the covenant promises coalesce and find their fulfillment in Christ, but why only and entirely in conjunction with his first coming?

Snoeberger opens his chapter with a seven-page historical justification of DT (“born as an ecclesiological movement deeply committed to (1) a careful reading and harmonization of the whole Scriptures, and (2) the doctrine of the spirituality of the church,” 151–52), followed by eleven pages on “originalist interpretation” (“an originalist interpretation is axiomatic to the successful use of language,” 154), and sixteen pages on the kingdom as the governing center of the Bible’s storyline. He rejects “typological interpretation” (159), denies that the Abrahamic Covenant has been fulfilled or (contra PD) even “partially” fulfilled (170), and holds that the New Covenant has no relationship to the Church though he acknowledges DT represents a variety of views on that issue (176).

In the response sections, Horton sees the DT penchant for literal fulfillment as a form of question-begging (184), opposes identifying a “unifying theological center” of Scripture (186), and thinks that “the real center of dispensationalism is the nation of Israel rather than Jesus Christ, the true Israel” (189). He is more appreciative of aspects of Bock’s PD but focuses his critique specifically on the issue of Israel’s restoration. Horton (unlike Wellum) at least engages with some of the key Lukan passages Bock raises as NT evidence that Israel’s restoration is still on the covenantal table (Acts 1:6–7, Luke 13:34–35), though neither Horton nor Wellum respond to Bock’s argument from Luke 21:20–24 or Acts 3:18–21. Regarding PC, Horton suggests that its strength (continuity) is also its key weakness in that it tends to “run the covenants together” (196).

Wellum acknowledges much that PC and CT agree on; his criticism of CT is twofold: (1) CT superimposes its own theological grid atop the biblical covenants, in many respects conflating them and altering their specificity and intent; and (2) CT fails to account for the church’s *newness* as a regenerate people in contrast to Israel” (203, emphasis original). Wellum spends half his space developing that critique of CT; the other half treats PD and DT combined. His most cutting critiques are leveled at Snoeberger who, he says, evidences little understanding of the alternative positions, is guilty of numerous “reductionisms and distortions,” gives “the impression that few in church history have understood Scripture except dispensationalists,” implies that “we needed dispensationalism to ‘save’ the day so that the church could finally read the Scripture properly!” (210–11), and complains, “I do not recognize my view in Snoeberger’s description, and Bock is not much better” (215). Wellum seems to be unaware, however, that he comes across just as imperious and condescending as he accuses Snoeberger of being. His dispensational interlocutors “fail to grasp how God’s unified plan

unfolds through the covenants” (211); and in response to Bock’s view he inveighs authoritatively that “this is *not* how the covenants progress and are fulfilled in Scripture, how inaugurated eschatology works, and especially what the church is as God’s new creation people” (213, emphasis original). He complains about one of Bock’s critiques by saying, “What he really means is that I disagree with his view of national Israel!” (216). Yet Wellum’s own critique that “the dispensational covenantal plotline is out of sync with the Bible’s” because it “does not consistently start in creation and culminate in Christ and his church” (213) amounts to the same thing—what he really means is that they simply disagree with Wellum’s view of the Bible’s covenantal storyline. Wellum seems to misunderstand PD as much as he claims to be misunderstood by it—a point Bock addresses (231–32).

Bock notes a major sticking point with both CT and PC: their insistence on an Adamic Covenant, and freighting it as crucial to any right reading of the Bible’s storyline (223, 226). To Wellum’s defense of typology and explanation of NT priority (once we get to the NT, “we now know what the OT was predicting,” 202), Bock counters, “If I have to wait until later revelation truly to understand former revelation, then the original context and meaning become largely irrelevant” (228). It would have been helpful if Bock had directly addressed Horton’s denial of supersessionism (71), rather than simply maintaining the criticism (221, 225).

Snoeberger rejects as improbable Wellum’s “christological/typological method unprecedented in any other known human literature” but acknowledges that PCs “do not spiritualize OT prophecies or replace their original referents with new ones” (243–44). Nevertheless, PC’s “transformation of the OT into a vast complex of foreshadowings, pictures, types, and other semi-predictive devices, the original intentions of which fall away as they are fulfilled in Christ is . . . hermeneutically peculiar” (244). Likewise (though less extreme), PD’s “complementary hermeneutic” in which “the promises and covenants of the OT obtain progressively more robust referents” is also problematic; while “Bock does not neglect original meaning,” he nevertheless permits those original intentions “to expand beyond the conscious intention of the original authors” (247). Formal covenants simply do not admit the addition of new referents (248). Finally, DT opposes “the penetration of Christ’s eschatological kingdom and even the new covenant into the present age” (248–49).

Parker and Lucas wrap up the exchange of views by identifying three core issues at stake in the discussion: (1) hermeneutics (including the Bible’s framework and Testamental priority), (2) the covenants (including their identity, nature, and fulfillment) and, as a consequence of these differences, (3) conclusions regarding ecclesiology and eschatology. The differences in each of these three areas are helpfully and concisely summarized in three successive comparative charts.

Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies is the best overview of the eschatological-ecclesiological positions currently available, precisely because the editors permit representatives of the theological positions to speak for themselves. It is unfortunate that the tone is not a tad more elevated in places, but the debate is a vigorous one with far-reaching hermeneutical implications on the level of both individual texts and biblical metanarrative. Let the conversation continue.

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