

# Editorial: Discussing Differences among Covenantal Views

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At the national meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in 2023, there was a session devoted to Baptist covenant theology. Harrison Perkins, as a Presbyterian, began the session as an “outsider” looking in, as he represented traditional Reformed covenant theology. Harrison offered his assessment of two Baptist covenantal views represented by progressive covenantalism (PC) and 1689 federalism respectively. His analysis was helpful in that it allowed Baptists to hear how non-Baptists view, understand, and evaluate Baptist covenantal viewpoints. In addition, Richard Lucas, who represented the PC view, offered a helpful analysis of the similarities and differences between 1689 federalism and the PC view. Daniel Scheiderer represented the 1689 federalist view, offering reflections on his view, his analysis of the PC view, and overall thoughts regarding Baptist covenant theology. After these three presentations, a panel discussion ensued with all three presenters

along with me, as a representative of the PC view, and Robert Howell, who also served as a representative of the 1689 federalist view.

Overall, the discussion was irenic, constructive, and helpful for all those involved. In this issue of *SBJT*, we have published the presentations of Harrison Perkins and Richard Lucas, along with two articles by Zach Maxcey, who writes from another Baptist view, namely New Covenant Theology (NCT). Zach's articles were presentations given at a conference in Franklin, Tennessee in 2023, where Zach sought to discuss the similarities and differences between NCT and PC. We have published Zach's articles here in order to further the conversation between various Baptist covenant theologies, seeking to show a range of viewpoints among Baptists. Alongside these articles, I have included a fine article by Everett Berry on the temple theme across the canon that is crucial in thinking of the continuity and discontinuity of the covenants. In addition, Ranald Macaulay has written an important article on creation, Genesis, and biblical hermeneutics, and Ben Cotrell has offered some important reflections on the problem of evil. Lastly, we have included an updated article by David Howard on his assessment of various Joshua commentaries, including his own, which is forthcoming from Holman Reference in 2026. My prayer is that all of these articles will help us think deeply about Scripture as we seek to bring all of our thought captive to Christ and his word. There is nothing more important than rightly reading and applying Scripture to our lives and to our churches. What we desperately need today is faithful biblical and theological exposition of the whole counsel of God. My prayer is that in some small this issue of *SBJT* will lead to this important end.

In the remainder of this editorial, I will offer a few reflections on the articles regarding the biblical covenants, especially from a PC view—a view that I and others have sought to develop in various articles and books. Specifically, I want to comment on Harrison's article articulating and evaluating the state of Baptist covenant theology, and Zach's articles comparing and contrasting NCT and PC. Let me start with Zach's articles.

When Peter Gentry and I wrote *Kingdom through Covenant* in 2012, I said that PC was a species of NCT. Primarily, I did so because some of my theological teachers were advocates of NCT, and I did not want to dismiss them since I learned much from them. Yet, I quickly discerned that this statement was not helpful, and as such, I corrected it in the second edition

in 2018, thus clearly distinguishing PC from NCT. Why? For the simple reason that NCT is not a monolithic view, and that some within the view hold to views that are antithetical to PC. For example, as Zach makes clear, some within NCT reject a creation covenant or a covenant of works, the imputed righteousness of Christ, i.e., Christ's active obedience, and the use and application of the Mosaic law for Christians today, etc. No doubt, not everyone within NCT rejects these points, but the fact that some do, requires that we distinguish PC from NCT. Zach does an excellent job describing both the similarities and differences between NCT and PC, and in his second article, he asks whether there can be brotherly disagreement on these issues. I agree that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ. However, for myself, the rejection of a creation covenant or covenant of works, the active obedience of Christ imputed to us, tied to the larger law-gospel contrast, and the proper application of the Mosaic law-covenant to the church, are non-negotiables. For this reason, I can no longer identify PC as a species of NCT. For NCT advocates who affirm a creation covenant, the active obedience of Christ, and the application of all of Scripture to our lives, I would strongly encourage you to distinguish yourselves from other NCT advocates who reject these crucial biblical and theological points.

Regarding Harrison's helpful article, much could be said. Let me offer three reflections.

First, in developing the view of PC, we never intended to create a "new" system in complete contrast to historic, Protestant, and Reformed theology. Instead, our intent was simply to modify or nuance some points, especially regarding the relationship between the biblical covenants and how they reach their fulfillment in the new covenant. Harrison is correct that PC is closer aligned with historic Reformed theology than even some aspects of 1689 federalism, yet our focus was not on the similarities but the differences between Reformed paedobaptist covenant theology and Reformed, Baptist covenant theology. This is why our discussion often focused on ecclesiology, including the ordinances, since this is where most of our differences lie. Yet, our differences in ecclesiology also reflect larger hermeneutical differences on how we understand the relationship and progression of the biblical covenants culminating and in Christ and the new covenant.

Second, Harrison is correct to note that PC's view of the creation covenant is basically the same as the best treatment of the covenant of works within

Reformed theology. But he also fails to acknowledge that there are debates within traditional Reformed theology regarding the precise nature of the covenant of works, hence our initial hesitation with the terminology. Yet, what Harrison affirms in terms of the covenant of works is what PC affirms. However, we also want to make the point that although Adam and all humans cannot gain eschatological life by obedience to that covenant, many features of creation, tied to the covenant, such as our image-bearing role, marriage, the creation mandate, etc. continue throughout the biblical covenants reaching their fulfillment in the new covenant. Also, Harrison is correct that PC affirms the law-gospel contrast as theologically foundational, but we are more hesitant to identify specific covenants solely in terms of this distinction. No doubt, the creation covenant is conditional, yet in all post-fall covenants God continues to demand perfect obedience from us (which we cannot provide), and he also acts in grace to provide salvation through type and shadow that ultimately culminates in the only perfectly obedient covenant-keeper—our Lord Jesus Christ. What I appreciate about Harrison’s article is the care he has taken to actually understand the PC view, in contrast to some within his tribe who continue to make statements that are false regarding our view.

Third, Harrison rightly wants to press the substance-administration understanding of the covenants, which in theory, PC does not reject. Furthermore, Harrison’s comments about 1689 federalism on this point, along with his observation that 1689 federalism makes too strong a separation between creation and covenant, are very astute. I will let 1689 federalists respond to them, but for myself, I agree with his comments and critique. In contrast, PC does not reject the substance-administration distinction, but our point is that one has to account for this distinction consistent with the specific biblical covenants in question. This is why PC has argued that God’s one plan of redemption, grounded in God’s eternal covenant of redemption, is the new covenant progressively revealed through the biblical covenants. In this sense, the substance of Christ is in the OT through the covenants and their various promises, types, and shadows. Yet, the debate is over how to understand each covenant in its own redemptive-historical context and how each covenant progressively reveals, anticipates, and is fulfilled in Christ. This is why we cannot argue that circumcision under the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants signify exactly the same realities as

baptism does under the new covenant. Circumcision is a covenant sign but under the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants it not only externally distinguishes Israel from the nations, but it also reveals the need for a new heart, which only some in those covenants had, but it was not true of the entire covenant community. However, as we walk through the OT, the Prophets anticipate a day when Christ will ratify a new covenant that brings to fulfillment all of God's promises, specific types, etc. in a specific way that is not exactly the same as under the OT covenants. No doubt, Christ is the substance given in God's covenant promises, types, and shadows, but the OT itself anticipates that fulfillment will result in some changes in the new covenant that, in my view, traditional Reformed covenant theology does not account for. This is where the debate lies, and I am thankful for Harrison furthering this debate.

As noted above, my prayer is that this issue of *SBJT* will encourage us to examine our views in light of Scripture. Our understanding of the covenants must be true to how Scripture presents them, not merely our theological system, hence why we must return again to God's word for correction, instruction, and proper application to our lives and the life of the church.