

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

ECCLESIOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Church

One Body, One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism, One God and Father of All

UNIT 2: THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

What the Church Is Before It Considers What the Church Does

Lesson 6

THE CHURCH IN THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS

Continuity and Discontinuity — A Progressive Covenantal Understanding of the People of God

The church is neither a parenthesis in God's plan nor a mere copy of Israel — she is the fulfillment toward which the whole covenant story was always moving.

“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 on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them.”

Jeremiah 31:33–34, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Jeremiah 31:31–34; Galatians 3:26–29; 6:16; Ephesians 2:11–22; 1 Peter 2:9–10; Hebrews 8:6–13

“I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.”

1 Timothy 3:15, NASB 1995

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Introduction

There is a question that lies beneath the surface of virtually every other question in the doctrine of the church, and it must be answered before many of those other questions can be addressed with clarity: what is the relationship between the church and Israel? Is the church simply a continuation of the covenant community that God established with Abraham, extended to include Gentile believers in the new covenant age? Or did the church begin at Pentecost as an entirely new entity, distinct in nature and purpose from Israel, with no organic connection to the old covenant people of God? Or is the truth more complex than either of these options, a genuine continuity in the one redemptive plan of God, combined with a genuine newness in the nature and constitution of the new covenant community? The answer to this question shapes everything: the doctrine of membership, the administration of the ordinances, the nature of the covenant community, the relationship of children to the church, and the very definition of what it means to be the people of God.

This lesson sets out the three major positions that have defined the debate across the history of Protestant ecclesiology, evaluates each against the testimony of Scripture, and defends the position that this series endorses: Progressive Covenantal Biblical Theology. This position holds that the church is neither a mere continuation of Israel without genuine newness, nor a wholly new entity disconnected from the old covenant story, but the eschatological fulfillment of the covenant promises that God made to Abraham, Moses, and David, a fulfillment that is both organically continuous with those promises and genuinely, qualitatively new in the nature of the community that fulfills them. The church is the new covenant people of God, constituted through the blood of Christ, indwelt by the promised Spirit, composed of believing Jews and Gentiles united in one body, and defined by the new covenant's defining characteristic: that all its members shall know the Lord from the least to the greatest.

The pastoral stakes of this debate are not merely academic. A congregation's position on the Israel-church question determines how it constitutes its membership: whether it includes children of believers as covenant members before personal faith, or whether it receives only those who personally profess saving faith. It determines how it administers baptism: whether baptism is given as the sign of covenant inclusion to the infants of believing parents, or whether it is given to those who personally confess faith as the sign of their personal new covenant relationship with God. It determines how it reads the Old Testament in preaching and teaching: whether the old covenant promises are read as directly applicable to the contemporary church in their original form, or whether they are read as fulfilled and transformed in Christ and therefore applicable to the church in a Christologically mediated way. The Israel-church question is one of the most consequential in all of systematic theology, and it deserves the careful, text-grounded attention this lesson attempts to give it.

The structure of the lesson follows a deliberate progression. We begin with the three positions as they have been historically formulated, examining each with clarity and charity. We then turn to the key biblical texts that anchor the Progressive Covenantal position: the new covenant promise of Jeremiah 31, the Pauline argument of Galatians 3–4, the great reconciliation passage of Ephesians 2, the doxological declaration of 1 Peter 2, and the definitive exposition of the new covenant's superiority in Hebrews 8. We close with the ecclesiological entailments of the Progressive Covenantal position, the implications for membership, baptism, and the church's self-understanding that follow necessarily from the conviction that the new covenant community is, by definition, a community of the genuinely regenerate. The governing text throughout is Jeremiah 31:34, the promise that defines the new covenant's most fundamental characteristic and therefore defines the nature of the community that lives under it.

I. THE THREE POSITIONS

Covenant Theology, Dispensationalism, and Progressive Covenantalism

A. *Covenant Theology: The Church as the New Covenant Expression of the One People of God*

Covenant Theology, as developed in the Reformed tradition from Calvin through the Westminster Confession to its contemporary representatives, holds that there is one people of God across both Testaments, constituted by the one covenant of grace, and that the church is the new covenant expression of that one people. On this reading, the covenant community that God established with Abraham, circumcising his household as the sign of covenant inclusion, including infants who could not yet personally profess faith, is substantially continuous with the new covenant community. The church is the new Israel, and the administration of the covenant community has changed (circumcision replaced by baptism, the Mosaic ceremonial law fulfilled in Christ) while the substance remains the same: one covenant of grace, one people of God, one community that includes both the personally believing and their infant children under the covenant sign.

The strengths of the Covenant Theology position are genuine and must be honestly acknowledged. It takes seriously the organic unity of Scripture's redemptive narrative, insisting that Abraham's faith and the Christian's faith are responses to the same promise and the same God. It honors the continuity of the covenant family, recognizing that the children of believers stand in a privileged relationship to the covenant community that the children of unbelievers do not share. It produces a rich biblical theology in which the Old Testament's promises and types are read as genuinely prophetic of the New Testament's realities, and in which the continuity of God's redemptive purposes is a constant theme. These strengths are real, and the Progressive Covenantalist who engages Covenant Theology honestly will acknowledge that it has produced some of the most careful, doctrinally rigorous, and pastorally serious theology in the history of Protestantism.

The weakness of Covenant Theology, from the Progressive Covenantal perspective, lies in its handling of the newness of the new covenant. By insisting on such strong continuity between the old and new covenant communities that the new covenant community can be constituted on the same mixed basis as the old, including the children of believers before any personal profession of faith, Covenant Theology effectively denies the most distinctive feature of the new covenant as Jeremiah 31:34 defines it: that all its members shall know the Lord. The Covenant Theology position requires reading Jeremiah's promise as eschatological hyperbole, a description of the new covenant's ideal rather than a defining characteristic that distinguishes its membership from the old covenant's. But this reading is difficult to sustain exegetically, as we will demonstrate in Section III, and it has direct and consequential implications for the constitution of the church.

B. *Dispensationalism: Israel and the Church as Two Distinct Peoples*

Classical Dispensationalism, developed in the nineteenth century through the work of John Nelson Darby and popularized through the Scofield Reference Bible and the ministry of Dallas Theological Seminary, holds that Israel and the church are two distinct peoples of God with two distinct programs, two distinct destinies, and no organic ecclesiological continuity. On this reading, the church is a parenthesis in God's redemptive program, an intercalation between the suspension of God's purposes for Israel at the rejection of Christ and their resumption in the millennial kingdom after the Rapture. The promises made to Israel in the Old Testament are not fulfilled in

the church; they are reserved for a future, ethnically defined national Israel that will be restored to its land and its covenant status in the eschatological age.

The Dispensationalist position correctly perceives that there is genuine newness in the new covenant community, that the church is not simply a rebranded version of old covenant Israel, and it correctly insists that the Old Testament prophecies addressed to national Israel cannot be wholesale spiritualized and applied to the church without careful attention to their original referent. These are genuine insights, and the Progressive Covenantalist must engage them seriously rather than dismissing them as the property of a theologically unsophisticated tradition. Dispensationalism has also produced serious scholarship in biblical theology and hermeneutics, and its popular instinct to take the Old Testament's prophetic promises at face value, rather than immediately allegorizing them, reflects a legitimate concern for literal-grammatical-historical interpretation.

The weaknesses of the Dispensationalist position, however, are fundamental. Most critically, it cannot adequately account for the New Testament's own reading of the Old Testament, in which the apostles consistently apply Israel's covenant identity to the church: the church is the seed of Abraham (Galatians 3:29), the royal priesthood and holy nation (1 Peter 2:9, applying Exodus 19:6 to the predominantly Gentile church), the circumcision (Philippians 3:3), the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16). The New Testament writers do not treat these identifications as metaphors or analogies; they treat them as the fulfillment of what the old covenant promises were always pointing toward. Furthermore, the Dispensationalist's sharp discontinuity between Israel and the church produces an ecclesiology in which the church is, by definition, a temporary arrangement, a parenthesis, not a telos, and this is directly at odds with the New Testament's presentation of the church as the eschatological fulfillment of God's eternal redemptive purpose (Ephesians 3:10–11), not a deviation from it.

II. THE PROGRESSIVE COVENANTAL POSITION

Fulfillment Without Mere Repetition, Newness Without Disconnection

A. The Framework Defined

Progressive Covenantal Biblical Theology, as this series has consistently affirmed and as it is articulated by scholars such as Peter Gentry, Stephen Wellum, Tom Schreiner, and Jason Meyer, holds that Scripture tells one unified story of redemption, moving through a progressive series of covenants, Adamic, Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, each of which advances and develops the redemptive promise until all the promises reach their appointed fulfillment in the new covenant established through the blood of Jesus Christ. The church is the new covenant community, the people of God in their eschatological form, constituted by the finished work of Christ, indwelt by the promised Spirit, composed of believing Jews and Gentiles united in one body, and defined by the new covenant's distinctive characteristics as Jeremiah 31 describes them.

The Progressive Covenantal position is distinguished from Covenant Theology by its insistence on the genuine newness of the new covenant community. The new covenant is not simply the old covenant renewed or extended to include Gentiles; it is the covenant that the old covenant was always pointing toward, the covenant that fulfills what the old covenant could only foreshadow, and the covenant whose membership is defined by a characteristic that the old covenant community never fully embodied: universal, personal, Spirit-wrought knowledge of God. The new covenant community is not constituted by birth into a covenant family or by the administration of a covenant

sign to those who have not yet personally believed; it is constituted by genuine regeneration and personal faith, sealed by the new covenant sign of baptism administered to those who personally confess the Lord.

The Progressive Covenantal position is distinguished from Dispensationalism by its insistence on the genuine continuity between the old and new covenant communities. The church is not a parenthesis in God's redemptive program; she is its appointed telos. The promises made to Abraham, that in his seed all the families of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:3), find their fulfillment not in a future restoration of national Israel to the land but in the gathering of believers from every nation into the one new humanity constituted by the second Adam, Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:16, 29; Ephesians 2:15). The promises made to David, that his son would reign on his throne forever (2 Samuel 7:12–16), find their fulfillment not in a future millennial kingdom in Jerusalem but in the present reign of the risen and ascended Christ at the right hand of the Father (Acts 2:30–36; Hebrews 1:5–13). The Progressive Covenantal reading allows the Old Testament to mean what it says while insisting that it means what it says in a Christological and eschatological register that the original authors could only partially see.

B. Christ as the Fulfillment of Every Covenant

The hermeneutical key that unlocks the Progressive Covenantal reading of the Israel-church relationship is the identification of Jesus Christ as the true and final fulfillment of every covenant promise made to Israel. Paul's argument in Galatians 3:16 is decisive: "Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, 'And to seeds,' as referring to many, but rather to one, 'And to your seed,' that is, Christ." The seed of Abraham in whom all the nations would be blessed is not ethnic Israel collectively, nor the church corporately, but Jesus Christ singularly, and it is only by union with Christ that anyone, Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free, participates in the Abrahamic promise. "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise" (Galatians 3:29).

This Christological concentration of the covenant promises does not abolish the promises made to Israel; it fulfills them in a way that is both more glorious and more universal than any reading limited to the ethnic and national horizon of the original audience could have anticipated. The promise of a land is fulfilled in the inheritance of the whole earth (Romans 4:13; Matthew 5:5), which the people of God will possess in the new creation. The promise of a kingdom is fulfilled in the reign of the Son of David at the right hand of the Father, whose kingdom has no end. The promise of a temple is fulfilled in the body of Christ and the church as the dwelling of the Spirit (John 2:19–21; Ephesians 2:20–22). The promise of a people, "I will be their God and they shall be My people", is fulfilled in the new covenant community drawn from every nation, tribe, people, and tongue (Revelation 7:9). These fulfillments are not diminishments of the original promises; they are the expansions and elevations that the prophets themselves glimpsed and longed to see (1 Peter 1:10–12).

The identification of Christ as the true seed of Abraham, the true Israel of God, the true temple, and the true King of David's line means that the church's relationship to the old covenant is mediated through Christ. The church is not Israel; she is the body of Christ who is the fulfillment of Israel. This distinction is subtle but crucial: it prevents both the over-identification that makes the church simply the new Israel (Covenant Theology's tendency) and the complete disconnection that makes the church unrelated to Israel (Dispensationalism's error). The church participates in all the covenant promises because she is united to the one in whom all those promises find their Yes and Amen (2 Corinthians 1:20); and she participates in them in the eschatological form, the new covenant form, that Christ's death and resurrection have inaugurated.

III. THE NEW COVENANT PROMISE

Jeremiah 31 and the Defining Characteristic of the New Community

A. *Jeremiah 31:31–34, The Charter of the New Covenant*

The passage that does more than any other single text to define the nature of the new covenant community, and therefore the nature of the church, is Jeremiah 31:31–34, the most extensive statement of new covenant theology in the Old Testament and the passage most extensively quoted in the New Testament letter to the Hebrews. “Behold, days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them, declares the LORD. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, declares the LORD, for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”

Four defining characteristics of the new covenant emerge from this passage, each of which distinguishes the new covenant from the Mosaic covenant it replaces and each of which has direct implications for the nature of the new covenant community. First, the law is internalized: it is written not on tablets of stone but on the heart, suggesting a community whose covenant obedience is not primarily external and legal compliance but the expression of a transformed inner life, what Ezekiel 36:26–27 calls the new heart and the new spirit given by the Spirit of God. Second, the covenant relationship is personally established: “I will be their God, and they shall be My people”, the ancient covenant formula, but now realized in its fullness through the Spirit’s direct and personal work in each member of the community. Third, and most decisive for the ecclesiological question, all the members of the new covenant community shall know the Lord personally: “They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them.” Fourth, the basis of the covenant relationship is the full and final forgiveness of sin: “I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”

The third characteristic, the universal, personal knowledge of God among all the new covenant’s members, is the hermeneutical hinge on which the ecclesiological debate turns. Jeremiah’s contrast is between the old covenant community, in which the knowledge of God had to be communicated from person to person through instruction and teaching because many within the visible covenant community did not personally know the Lord, and the new covenant community, in which this distinction no longer obtains because all its members know the Lord directly, personally, and without the mediation of a human instructor telling them to “know the LORD.” This is the promise whose fulfillment the author of Hebrews cites as the ground for the obsolescence of the old covenant (Hebrews 8:6–13): the new covenant is better precisely because its members all know God personally, as the old covenant’s mixed membership of genuine and nominal believers never could.

B. *The Exegetical Significance for Church Constitution*

The exegetical stakes of Jeremiah 31:34 for the question of church membership are as high as they could be. If the new covenant's defining characteristic is that all its members know the Lord personally, not merely that they have received the covenant sign, not merely that they have been born into a covenant family, but that they genuinely, personally, Spirit-wroughtly know the living God, then the community constituted by the new covenant should consist, as far as human discernment allows, of those who demonstrate exactly that personal knowledge. The Baptist practice of regenerate church membership is not an arbitrary ecclesiastical preference or a culturally conditioned innovation; it is the ecclesiological entailment of a faithful reading of the new covenant's charter. A church that constitutes its membership on the same basis as the old covenant, by birth into a covenant family, by the administration of a covenant sign to those who have not yet personally believed, is implicitly denying the newness that Jeremiah's promise declares.

The Covenant Theology response to this argument is to read Jeremiah 31:34 as a description of the new covenant's ideal or eschatological fullness rather than a definition of its present membership. On this reading, the promise that "all shall know Me" is the eschatological horizon toward which the new covenant is moving, not a requirement that all present members of the new covenant community must personally know the Lord right now. There is a measure of truth in this reading, the new covenant's fullness will indeed be realized only at the consummation, but it purchases the concession at too high a price. The author of Hebrews reads Jeremiah 31's promise as already being realized in the present age through Christ's high-priestly ministry (Hebrews 8:10–12; 10:16–17): the law is already being written on hearts, the sins are already being forgiven, the knowledge of God is already being given by the Spirit to all who are in the new covenant. The new covenant is a present reality, not merely a future hope; and its present members are those who already know the Lord, not merely those who might one day come to know Him.

The decisive confirmation of the Progressive Covenantal reading comes from the author of Hebrews' own application of Jeremiah 31 in Hebrews 8:6–13. The argument is that the Levitical priesthood and the Mosaic covenant are obsolete because they have been superseded by the new covenant mediated by Christ. The evidence for this supersession is precisely the new covenant's superiority in the matters Jeremiah describes: better promises, including the promise of universal personal knowledge of God. If the new covenant has been established, and Hebrews argues that it has, through the death of Christ as the mediator of the new covenant (Hebrews 9:15–17), then its characteristics as Jeremiah describes them are the characteristics of the community that lives under it now. The church lives under the new covenant; therefore the church is a community of those who know the Lord; therefore the church should be constituted of those who personally know the Lord.

IV. THE SEED OF ABRAHAM AND THE ONE NEW HUMANITY

Galatians 3 and Ephesians 2 as Ecclesiological Arguments

A. Galatians 3:26–29, All One in Christ Jesus

Paul's argument in Galatians 3–4 is the most sustained New Testament exposition of the church's relationship to the Abrahamic covenant, and it is indispensable for the Progressive Covenantal ecclesiology. The letter to the Galatians was written to counter the Judaizing teaching that Gentile believers must be circumcised and observe

the Mosaic law to be fully included in the covenant community. Paul's response is not merely a defense of Gentile inclusion; it is a comprehensive argument about the nature of the covenant and the identity of the covenant people. The argument climaxes in Galatians 3:26–29: "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise."

The logic of Galatians 3:26–29 is precisely the Progressive Covenantal logic. Abraham's seed in whom all the nations are blessed is Christ (Galatians 3:16). Those who belong to Christ, who are united to Him by faith, sealed in that union by baptism, are therefore Abraham's descendants and heirs of the promise. The basis of inclusion in the covenant community is union with Christ through faith, not ethnic descent or physical circumcision. And the community constituted by this union is one in a radical sense that the old covenant community never was: "neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female", a community in which the social and ethnic distinctions that defined the old covenant's structure of privilege and exclusion are abolished in Christ. This is the new humanity that the new covenant creates: a community defined not by what its members were born as but by the one into whom they have been baptized.

The reference to baptism in Galatians 3:27 is significant for the ecclesiological argument. The seal that marks the new covenant community's membership is not circumcision, the covenant sign of the old community administered to those born into the covenant family, regardless of personal faith. It is baptism, administered to those who have "clothed themselves with Christ," who have been united to Him by the faith that Paul has been arguing is the defining characteristic of Abraham's true descendants throughout the chapter. The new covenant sign is given to those who have personally received what the sign signifies. This is not a peripheral point; it is the direct ecclesiological corollary of Paul's entire argument: the new covenant community is constituted by personal faith in Christ, and the ordinance of entry into that community is therefore properly administered to those who have personally exercised that faith.

B. Ephesians 2:11–22, One New Humanity in Christ

Ephesians 2:11–22 is the New Testament's most concentrated description of what Christ's death has accomplished for the constitution of the new covenant community. Paul addresses Gentile believers who were "separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Ephesians 2:12), the most desolate description of the Gentile's pre-Christian condition in the New Testament. But now, in Christ Jesus, "you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (Ephesians 2:13). And what Christ has created by His death is not a Gentile congregation added to an existing Jewish community; it is "one new man out of the two" (Ephesians 2:15), a new humanity that is neither the old Gentile world nor the old Jewish community, but the eschatological community in which the dividing wall of the Mosaic law's ordinances has been abolished.

The phrase "lone new man" (*kainon anthrōpon*, "one new humanity") is the Progressive Covenantalist's most important text for the church's relationship to Israel. The church is not Israel; she is not the continuation of Israel. She is the new humanity, the eschatological community that Christ's death has created by reconciling Jew and Gentile to God and to each other in one body through the cross. The Gentiles' inclusion in this new humanity is not their incorporation into Israel; it is their creation, together with believing Israel, into something new, something that could not have existed before the cross, because it depends on the cross' abolition of the law's dividing wall.

This new humanity is the church: the community of all who have been reconciled to God through Christ and who have access to the Father in one Spirit (Ephesians 2:18).

Paul's architectural metaphor at the close of Ephesians 2 reinforces this newness. The church is described as a building "having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord" (Ephesians 2:20–21). This temple is not the continuation of the old covenant's tabernacle and temple; it is a new temple, built on a new foundation (the apostolic witness to Christ), with a new cornerstone (Christ Himself, the fulfillment of the temple's entire sacrificial system), and inhabited by a new indwelling Presence (the Spirit of God dwelling in the corporate community). The church as temple is the eschatological fulfillment of everything the old covenant temple pointed toward, but it is not the old covenant temple in a new form. It is the new thing to which the old was always pointing.

V. THE ISRAEL OF GOD AND THE ROYAL PRIESTHOOD

Galatians 6:16 and 1 Peter 2:9–10

A. *Galatians 6:16, The Israel of God*

Galatians 6:16 contains the most contested phrase in the entire ecclesiological debate about the Israel-church relationship: "And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God." The question is whether "the Israel of God" refers to the church as a whole (identifying the church with Israel in some sense), or to Jewish Christians specifically (distinguishing them as a subset of the "them" who walk by the rule), or to some other referent. The Progressive Covenantal and most Reformed readings take "the Israel of God" as a designation for the whole community of those who belong to Christ, Jew and Gentile alike, who constitute the true, eschatological Israel by virtue of their union with the true seed of Abraham.

The argument for reading "the Israel of God" as a designation for the whole church rests on the context and logic of the entire letter to the Galatians. Paul has been arguing throughout that those who belong to Christ are Abraham's descendants (Galatians 3:29), that the Abrahamic promise is fulfilled in Christ and extended to all who are in Him, and that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything but only a new creation (Galatians 6:15). The "rule" by which the "Israel of God" walks is therefore the rule of the new creation in Christ, the rule that Paul has been articulating throughout the letter. The community that walks by this rule is the new covenant community, the community of those who are in Christ, which is to say the true Israel, not the ethnic Israel that insists on circumcision as the basis of covenant membership, but the eschatological Israel constituted by faith in Christ, the true seed.

Regardless of the precise referent of "the Israel of God" in Galatians 6:16, the broader argument of Galatians 3–4 establishes beyond reasonable doubt that the church is the community of Abraham's true heirs, those who belong to Christ, the singular seed in whom the Abrahamic promise is concentrated. This does not mean that the church is identical to ethnic Israel or that the promises made to Israel are simply transferred wholesale to a Gentile-dominated institution. It means that the covenant promises find their intended fulfillment in the community constituted by union with Christ, who is Himself the fulfillment of every covenant. The church participates in those promises not by replacing Israel but by being incorporated into the one in whom Israel's calling reaches its telos.

B. 1 Peter 2:9–10, The Royal Priesthood and Holy Nation

Peter's declaration in 1 Peter 2:9–10 is the New Testament's most explicit application of old covenant Israel's covenant identity to the new covenant church: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you who had not received mercy, but now have received mercy." Every one of these designations is drawn from the Old Testament's description of Israel's covenant identity: "chosen race" from Deuteronomy 7:6; "royal priesthood" and "holy nation" from Exodus 19:6; "people for God's own possession" from Exodus 19:5 and Deuteronomy 7:6; "you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God" from Hosea 2:23. Peter applies to the new covenant church, a community that includes Gentile believers who were never part of ethnic Israel, the full range of covenant identity that Exodus and Deuteronomy had ascribed to Israel at Sinai.

The significance of 1 Peter 2:9–10 for the Progressive Covenantal ecclesiology is twofold. First, it demonstrates that the New Testament writers do not hesitate to apply Israel's covenant identity to the church, not because the church is Israel, but because the church is the fulfillment of what Israel was always called to be: the priestly community, the holy nation, the people of God's own possession, through whom the excellencies of the God who called them out of darkness would be proclaimed to the world. Second, it demonstrates that this covenant identity belongs to the new covenant community as a whole, not merely to the Jewish members of that community. The Gentiles who "once were not a people" have now become the people of God through the mercy that has been shown to them in Christ. Their inclusion in the covenant identity of Israel is not the erasure of the distinction between Jew and Gentile but its eschatological resolution in the one new humanity that Christ has created.

Peter's use of Hosea 2:23 is particularly instructive for the Progressive Covenantal hermeneutic. Hosea's original prophecy was addressed to northern Israel, whose covenant infidelity had caused God to declare that they were "not My people" (Lo-ammi). The promise of Hosea 2:23 was the promise of Israel's restoration: God would again say to those who were not His people, "You are My people." Paul applies the same text to the inclusion of Gentiles in the people of God in Romans 9:25–26; Peter applies it to the new covenant church broadly. Both apostles read Hosea's promise as finding its fulfillment in the church's constitution through the gospel, not because they are allegorizing away the original prophecy's reference to Israel, but because they understand Christ's work to be the event in which the restoration of "not My people" to the status of "My people" reaches its eschatological fullness. The Progressive Covenantal hermeneutic is not an innovation; it is the hermeneutic that the apostles themselves practice.

VI. THE NEWNESS OF THE NEW COVENANT CHURCH

Four Marks That Define the Eschatological Community

A. Universal Regeneration, Universal Indwelling, and Ethnic Inclusion

The church of the new covenant is genuinely new in at least four ways that distinguish her from the old covenant community of Israel, and each of these marks of newness has direct and consequential implications for the church's constitution and practice. The first mark of newness is the universal regeneration of the new covenant's members.

As we have argued from Jeremiah 31:34, the new covenant community is defined by the characteristic that all its members know the Lord personally, not by instruction from a human teacher, but by the direct, Spirit-wrought work of God in their hearts. This is the fulfillment of what the prophets anticipated when they promised a new heart and a new spirit poured out on all the Lord's people (Ezekiel 36:26–27; Joel 2:28–29). The old covenant community was mixed; the new covenant community, by definition, is regenerate. The church should therefore be constituted of those who give credible evidence of regeneration.

The second mark of newness is the universal indwelling of the Spirit. In the old covenant, the Spirit came upon individuals for specific tasks, upon prophets to speak the word of God, upon judges to deliver the people, upon craftsmen to build the tabernacle, but did not dwell in all the people as a permanent, constitutive presence. The new covenant's promise, repeatedly announced by the prophets and fulfilled at Pentecost (Acts 2:17–18, citing Joel 2:28–29), is that the Spirit will be poured out on all flesh, on sons and daughters, young men and old men, male and female servants. The church lives in the era of the Spirit's universal indwelling; every member of the new covenant community is indwelt by the same Spirit that was given only to the prophets and the anointed kings in the old. This is what makes the new covenant community a community of genuine spiritual perception, one that does not require a mediating priestly class to approach God on its behalf, because every member has direct access to the Father through the Son by the one Spirit (Ephesians 2:18).

The third mark of newness is the ethnic inclusiveness of the new covenant community. The old covenant community was constituted along ethnic and national lines: it was the community of Israel, with Gentiles admitted only through a process of proselytism that included circumcision and commitment to the Mosaic law. The new covenant community is constituted along entirely different lines: by union with Christ through faith, regardless of ethnic origin, social status, or sex (Galatians 3:28). The inclusion of Gentiles in the new covenant community on entirely equal terms with Jewish believers is itself one of the most powerful signs of the covenant's newness, a development that Paul calls a mystery hidden for ages but now revealed (Ephesians 3:4–6): “that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” The new covenant community is therefore universal in a way that the old covenant community was not, and this universality is itself a fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise that all the families of the earth would be blessed.

B. The Finished Work of Christ as the Covenant's Foundation

The fourth and most fundamental mark of the new covenant's newness is the basis on which it rests. The old covenant was established on the basis of the anticipatory sacrifices of the Levitical system, sacrifices that could “never take away sins” (Hebrews 10:11) but that pointed forward to the one sacrifice that could. The new covenant is established on the basis of the finished, once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus Christ, “who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, to cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God” (Hebrews 9:14). This is why the author of Hebrews can argue that the old covenant is now obsolete: not because God has abandoned His redemptive purposes, but because those purposes have been accomplished in the death of the Mediator, whose “one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified” (Hebrews 10:14).

The new covenant's foundation in the finished work of Christ gives the new covenant community a certainty and a fullness of forgiveness that the old covenant could only anticipate. The worshiper under the Levitical system returned year after year to offer sacrifices that reminded him of his sins; the worshiper under the new covenant approaches the throne of grace with the confidence of those whose sins have been forgiven once for all, whose

consciences have been cleansed, and whose High Priest has passed through the heavens and sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high (Hebrews 4:14–16; 10:19–22). The church’s worship, her prayer, her mission, and her life together are all grounded in this finished work. She does not gather each Lord’s Day to perform a sacrifice; she gathers to celebrate a sacrifice that has already been performed, once for all, in the eternal sufficiency of the blood of the Son of God.

The finished work of Christ as the new covenant’s foundation also has implications for the church’s self-understanding as a community of those who have been fully and finally forgiven. The old covenant’s annual Day of Atonement was a covenant-wide acknowledgment that sins had been committed and that a sufficient sacrifice had not yet been offered. The new covenant’s Lord’s Supper is a covenant-wide proclamation that the sufficient sacrifice has been offered: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes” (1 Corinthians 11:26). The church proclaims, in the bread and the cup, that the covenant’s foundation has been laid in the body and blood of her Lord, and that the forgiveness Jeremiah promised, “I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more”, is the present, realized possession of all who belong to Him. The Lord’s Supper is, in this sense, the new covenant community’s own confession of what makes her a new covenant community: not her own righteousness or her own spiritual achievement, but the finished and remembered sacrifice of her Mediator.

VII. THE ECCLESIOLOGICAL ENTAILMENTS

What Progressive Covenantalism Demands of the Church

A. *Regenerate Membership and Believers’ Baptism as Covenantal Necessities*

If the new covenant community is, by definition, a community of the genuinely regenerate, a community whose members all know the Lord personally, whose hearts have been transformed by the Spirit, whose sins have been forgiven through the blood of the Mediator, then the visible church should be constituted of those who give credible evidence of exactly that regenerate status. This is the ecclesiological entailment of the Progressive Covenantal reading of Jeremiah 31, Galatians 3, Ephesians 2, and 1 Peter 2. It is not derived from a narrow Baptist traditionalism or from a proof-texted argument about baptism in isolation; it flows from a comprehensive covenantal and biblical-theological understanding of what the new covenant is, who its members are, and what distinguishes it from the covenant it replaces.

Believers’ baptism by immersion is the ordinance that is directly entailed by this ecclesiology. If the new covenant sign, baptism, is the sign of the new covenant’s reality (regeneration, union with Christ, the washing away of sins in the blood of the Mediator), then it should be administered to those who bear the reality it signifies: those who personally confess faith in Christ and give credible evidence of genuine regeneration. To administer baptism to an infant who cannot yet personally profess faith is to administer the new covenant sign to someone who does not yet bear the new covenant reality, and in doing so, to blur the very distinction between the old and new covenants that Jeremiah’s prophecy establishes. The Baptist insistence on believers’ baptism is, at its deepest level, an insistence on the integrity of the new covenant’s definition of its own community.

It is important to be clear about what this argument does and does not claim. It does not claim that the children of believers have no special relationship to the covenant community or to the means of grace. The children of

believing parents grow up in covenant households, under the ministry of the Word, in the fellowship of the church, surrounded by the prayers of the congregation and the loving witness of their parents. They are not in the same position as the children of pagans. They are not, however, covenant members in the formal sense, baptized and admitted to the Lord's Table, until they personally profess faith. When they do profess faith, they are to be baptized and received into the full covenant membership of the community. The Baptist practice is not a rejection of the covenant family; it is a covenantally honest recognition that new covenant membership, unlike old covenant membership, is not transmitted by birth but by regeneration.

B. The Church's Identity as a Hermeneutical Lens

The Progressive Covenantal understanding of the church's relationship to Israel and the covenants also shapes the church's use of the Old Testament in preaching, teaching, and pastoral ministry. If the old covenant promises are fulfilled in Christ, and if the church participates in those fulfilled promises by virtue of her union with Christ, then the Old Testament is read in the church not as a collection of direct promises addressed to the contemporary congregation in their original form, but as the record of God's progressive covenantal work that finds its telos in Christ and His community. The promise of the land is not a promise that the contemporary church will possess the literal territory of Canaan; it is a promise fulfilled in Christ's inheritance of the whole earth, which the church will share in the new creation. The promise of the Davidic throne is not a promise that David's dynasty will be restored in Jerusalem; it is a promise fulfilled in the reign of the risen Christ, in which the church presently participates through her union with her King.

This hermeneutical lens does not diminish the Old Testament's authority or relevance for the church; it locates that authority and relevance properly. The Old Testament is authoritative for the church because it is the Word of the God who has fulfilled its promises in Christ and who continues to speak through it to the new covenant community. It is relevant because the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the same God who is the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, and His character, His purposes, His promises, and His demands are consistent across both testaments. But the church reads the Old Testament through the lens of its fulfillment in Christ, understanding the shadows in light of the substance, the types in light of the antitype, the promises in light of the Yes and Amen that Christ is to all of them (2 Corinthians 1:20). This is not an innovation; it is the hermeneutic that Jesus Himself modeled when He opened the Scriptures on the Emmaus road and "explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures" (Luke 24:27).

The ecclesiological entailment of this hermeneutical lens is a church that is deeply rooted in the whole of Scripture, not a church that skips the Old Testament because it seems irrelevant to the new covenant age, and not a church that applies the Old Testament's national and ceremonial provisions directly to contemporary life without the Christological and covenantal mediation that the New Testament consistently models. The church that reads the Old Testament through the lens of Christ will find there a richer, deeper, more comprehensive vision of redemption than any reading restricted to the New Testament alone can provide. She will find in the Psalms the prayers of the Messiah and His people. She will find in the prophets the vision of the new covenant's glory. She will find in the law the character of the God who writes it on the heart. And she will find in the whole redemptive story the one God who has been about the business of forming a people for Himself from the very beginning, a people who, in the fullness of time, gathered around the cross, were sealed by the Spirit, and were constituted as the eschatological community of the living God.

“For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws into their minds, and I will write them on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be My people.”

Hebrews 8:10, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Progressive Covenantalism	The hermeneutical framework holding that Scripture narrates one unified redemptive story moving through a progressive series of covenants (Adamic, Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic) to their fulfillment in the new covenant established by Christ. Distinguished from Covenant Theology (too much continuity) and Dispensationalism (too much discontinuity). The church is the new covenant community, neither mere Israel continued nor a wholly new entity.
Covenant Theology	The Reformed hermeneutical tradition holding that there is one covenant of grace across both Testaments, administered differently but substantially continuous, and that the church is the new covenant expression of the one people of God that has existed since Abraham. Infant baptism is understood as the new covenant counterpart to old covenant circumcision. Distinguished from Progressive Covenantalism by its stronger emphasis on continuity.
Dispensationalism	The hermeneutical tradition, developed in the nineteenth century, holding that Israel and the church are two distinct peoples of God with two distinct programs and destinies. The church is understood as a parenthesis between the suspension and resumption of God's purposes for national Israel. Distinguished from Progressive Covenantalism by its radical discontinuity between Israel and the church and its futurist reading of Old Testament prophecy.
New Covenant	The covenant promised in Jeremiah 31:31–34, established through the blood of Christ (Luke 22:20; Hebrews 9:15–17), and characterized by four defining features: internalized law, direct covenant relationship, universal personal knowledge of God among all its members, and full and final forgiveness of sins. The new covenant fulfills and supersedes the Mosaic covenant, constituting the eschatological community of God's people.
Seed of Abraham	Paul's argument in Galatians 3:16 identifies Christ as the singular seed of Abraham in whom all the nations are blessed (Genesis 12:3). Those united to Christ by faith are, by extension, Abraham's descendants and heirs of the Abrahamic promise (Galatians 3:29), regardless of ethnic origin. The Abrahamic covenant's blessing is realized in the new covenant community constituted by union with Christ.
One New Humanity	Paul's phrase in Ephesians 2:15 (<i>kainon anthrōpon</i> , "one new man") describing what Christ has created by reconciling Jew and Gentile to God in one body through the cross. The church is neither the continuation of Israel nor a Gentile replacement of Israel, but a new eschatological community in which the old ethnic and religious distinctions are abolished and a new covenant humanity is constituted by union with Christ.
Israel of God	The designation in Galatians 6:16 applied by Paul to the community that walks by the rule of the new creation in Christ. On the Progressive Covenantal reading, a designation for the whole new covenant community, Jew and Gentile alike, who constitute the true, eschatological Israel by virtue of their union with Christ, the true seed of Abraham.
Hermeneutics	The science and art of biblical interpretation: the principles and methods by which the meaning of Scripture is determined and applied. The hermeneutical question of how to read the Old Testament in relation to the New, with what degree of continuity and what degree of newness, is the central question dividing Covenant Theology, Dispensationalism, and Progressive Covenantalism.
Typology	The hermeneutical framework in which persons, events, and institutions in the Old Testament are understood to prefigure and point forward to their antitype in the New, the greater reality to which they correspond. Adam as a type of Christ (Romans 5:14); the tabernacle and temple as types of the true dwelling of God in Christ and the church; the Passover as a type of Christ

	the Passover Lamb (1 Corinthians 5:7). Typology is central to the Progressive Covenantal reading of the OT.
Supersessionism	The view that the new covenant supersedes (fulfills and replaces) the old covenant. Distinguished from harsh supersessionism (which denies any future role for ethnic Israel in redemptive history) and fulfillment supersessionism (which holds that the old covenant is fulfilled and completed in Christ, without implying that God's purposes for the Jewish people are entirely exhausted). Progressive Covenantalism holds a fulfillment supersessionism grounded in the New Testament's own argument from Hebrews 8.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the church's identity is inseparable from the whole story of Scripture, that to understand what the church is, we must understand what God was doing in Abraham, in Moses, in David, and in the prophets, and how all of that reaches its appointed fulfillment in Jesus Christ and His new covenant community. The church is not a free-floating institution that appeared in the first century without antecedent. She is the eschatological telos of a covenant story that stretches across the entire canon, and the richness of her identity can only be appreciated by those who read that story in its fullness.

We must believe that the newness of the new covenant is not rhetorical flourish but theological reality, that Jeremiah 31:34's promise of universal personal knowledge of God is the defining characteristic of the community that lives under the new covenant, and that the church's constitution, her ordinances, and her membership practices should reflect that newness with integrity. The Baptist practice of regenerate church membership and believers' baptism is not a denominational quirk but a covenantal necessity, the ecclesiological expression of the conviction that the new covenant community is defined by regeneration and personal faith, not by birth and covenant ancestry.

We must believe that Christ is the fulfillment of every covenant promise, and that reading the Old Testament Christologically is not an imposition on the text but the hermeneutic that the apostles themselves modeled and that Jesus Himself taught on the road to Emmaus. The Old Testament is the church's book, the record of the God who is her God, the story of the redemptive purposes that found their climax in her Lord, and the treasury of prophetic wisdom that illuminates the present age for those who read it through the lens of Christ's fulfillment.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

We should feel the weight and the wonder of belonging to the community that the whole Old Testament was pointing toward. When we gather around the Lord's Table, we are not merely observing a memorial ordinance; we are participating in the new covenant meal that the Passover prefigured, the covenant renewal feast that the whole sacrificial system anticipated, the eschatological banquet that the prophets envisioned. We are the people in whom Jeremiah's promise has been fulfilled: our sins have been forgiven, the Spirit has written the law on our hearts, we know the Lord. That should produce not familiarity but wonder, not a casual religiosity but the reverent astonishment of those who understand what they are.

We should feel a renewed gratitude for the Baptist heritage that, at its best, has been the most consistent advocate within the Protestant world for taking the new covenant's newness seriously. The insistence on regenerate membership, believers' baptism, and a gathered community of the personally converted is not simply a tradition we have inherited; it is a theological conviction grounded in the most careful reading of what Jeremiah promised, what Paul argued, and what the author of Hebrews demonstrated. To hold these convictions is to stand in a long line of men and women who understood that the new covenant was indeed new, and who refused to reconstitute the church on an old covenant basis.

We should desire a congregation that reads and preaches the whole Bible, that does not skip the Old Testament because it seems distant or irrelevant, but that reads it with the Christological lens that unlocks its meaning and discloses its inexhaustible riches. The psalms should be prayed in our worship; the prophets should be preached

from our pulpits; the stories of the patriarchs and the kings should be read as the stories of the God who is our God, the stories of the redemptive journey that brought us here. A church that knows only the New Testament knows half a Bible and therefore less than half a God.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Read Jeremiah 31:31–34 alongside Hebrews 8:6–13 this week, noting how the author of Hebrews reads and applies Jeremiah’s prophecy. Identify the four characteristics of the new covenant that Jeremiah describes and ask: in what ways does the life of this congregation reflect those four characteristics? Are we a community in which the law is being written on hearts? In which the personal knowledge of God is evident? In which the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed and believed?
- Locate your own theological heritage on the map drawn by this lesson. Were you formed in a Covenant Theology tradition, a Dispensationalist tradition, or a Progressive Covenantal tradition? What did that formation get right? What did it leave incomplete or unclear? How has this lesson’s engagement with the three positions refined, confirmed, or challenged your inherited convictions?
- If you are a parent of children who have not yet personally professed faith, reflect on your covenantal responsibility toward them in light of this lesson. They are growing up in a covenant household, under the ministry of the Word, in the fellowship of the church, and this is a profound privilege and opportunity. Pray specifically for their regeneration and conversion this week, recognizing that you are not merely raising morally well-behaved children but hoping and praying for the Spirit’s transforming work in their hearts that will make them members of the new covenant community.
- Choose one passage from the Old Testament that you have found difficult or opaque and re-read it this week with the following question: how does this passage point to Christ, or find its fulfillment in Christ, or illuminate something about the new covenant community? Bring your observations to the next study session as a contribution to the group’s engagement with the whole of Scripture.
- Pray for the Jewish people, the physical descendants of Abraham, that the God who made promises to their fathers in the covenants would open their eyes to see that those promises find their fulfillment in the One to whom Moses and the prophets bore witness. The gospel is “to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Romans 1:16); the church’s mission to the nations does not exclude the descendants of Abraham but includes them in the most profound possible way, as those for whom the promises were first made.

Key Texts: *Jeremiah 31:31–34; Galatians 3:26–29; 6:16; Ephesians 2:11–22; 1 Peter 2:9–10; Hebrews 8:6–13*

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- Before this lesson, how did you think about the relationship between the Old Testament people of God and the New Testament church? Was the church, in your understanding, a continuation of Israel, a replacement of Israel, or something else entirely? What shaped that instinct, your theological tradition, your reading of Scripture, your pastoral formation?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read Jeremiah 31:31–34 carefully. What four characteristics of the new covenant does Jeremiah describe? How does each characteristic contrast with what Jeremiah says about the Mosaic covenant (verse 32)? What does the phrase “they will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they will all know Me” imply about the membership of the new covenant community?
- Read Hebrews 8:6–13. Why does the author say that the new covenant is established on “better promises” (verse 6)? What does he quote from Jeremiah 31 (verses 8–12)? What conclusion does he draw in verse 13 about the old covenant? How does the author’s use of Jeremiah 31 support the Progressive Covenantal reading of the new covenant community?
- Read Galatians 3:26–29. What is the basis of being “sons of God” in verse 26? What is the role of baptism in verse 27? What distinctions are abolished in verse 28, and why? How does verse 29 identify the new covenant community in relation to the Abrahamic covenant?
- Read Ephesians 2:11–22. What was the condition of the Gentiles before Christ (verses 11–12)? What has Christ accomplished “in His flesh” (verses 14–16)? What is the “one new man” (verse 15), and what does this phrase reveal about the church’s relationship to both Israel and the Gentile world? What metaphor does Paul use for the church in verses 19–22, and what is its significance?
- Read 1 Peter 2:9–10. List the four designations Peter applies to the new covenant church. For each, identify the Old Testament passage from which it is drawn (Exodus 19:5–6; Deuteronomy 7:6; Hosea 2:23). What does Peter’s application of these Israel-specific passages to the largely Gentile church tell us about the church’s relationship to Israel’s covenant identity?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson argues that the Covenant Theology position fails to do justice to the genuine newness of the new covenant as Jeremiah 31:34 defines it. Is this argument exegetically persuasive? How would a thoughtful Covenant Theologian respond? What is the strongest version of the Covenant Theology response to the argument from Jeremiah 31:34, and how would a Progressive Covenantalist answer it?
- The lesson argues that the Dispensationalist position fails to account for the New Testament’s own reading of the Old Testament, in which the apostles consistently apply Israel’s covenant identity to the church. Is this argument exegetically persuasive? What is the most important Old Testament text that a Dispensationalist would cite in support of a future role for national Israel, and how would a Progressive Covenantalist engage that text?
- Paul argues in Galatians 3:16 that “the seed” in the Abrahamic promise refers singularly to Christ. Is this a legitimate exegetical move, or is it a creative reinterpretation of the Genesis text? How does Paul’s reading

of “seed” (singular vs. plural) function in his broader argument, and how does it shape the Progressive Covenantal understanding of who inherits the Abrahamic promises?

- The lesson claims that believers’ baptism and regenerate church membership are the “ecclesial entailments” of the Progressive Covenantal reading of the new covenant, that they flow necessarily from the conviction that the new covenant community is defined by universal personal knowledge of God. Do you find this argument persuasive? What other ecclesiological practices follow from the same conviction? Are there any that the lesson has not identified?
- First Peter 2:9–10 applies to the largely Gentile church the covenant identity that Exodus 19:6 ascribed to Israel at Sinai. Does this mean that the church has “replaced” Israel, in the sense that God no longer has any redemptive purposes for the Jewish people? How does Romans 9–11, Paul’s sustained argument about Israel’s place in redemptive history, nuance the conclusion one might draw from 1 Peter 2:9?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- How does your congregation currently use the Old Testament in its preaching and teaching? Is it read Christologically, in terms of its fulfillment in Christ and its application to the new covenant community? Or does it tend to be read in one of two problematic ways: either too directly (applying Old Testament national promises to contemporary life without Christological mediation) or too dismissively (treating the Old Testament as largely irrelevant to the new covenant age)? What would a more consistently Progressive Covenantal use of the Old Testament look like in your congregation’s preaching?
- If you are a parent, how does the Progressive Covenantal understanding of new covenant membership shape the way you think about raising your children in the faith? What is your responsibility as a covenant parent toward children who have not yet personally professed faith? What is the congregation’s responsibility toward those children? What does it mean to pray and labor for their regeneration while they are in the household of faith?
- The lesson argues that the Baptist practice of regenerate church membership and believers’ baptism is not a denominational preference but a covenantal necessity grounded in the nature of the new covenant. Does your own experience of church membership and baptism reflect this theological seriousness? Was your reception into the church accompanied by the kind of examination and affirmation that the lesson describes as appropriate? If not, what would it mean to take the covenantal significance of your membership more seriously from this point forward?
- The lesson closes with the image of the church as the community in whom Jeremiah’s promise has been fulfilled: sins forgiven, law written on the heart, personal knowledge of God given by the Spirit. Does this description correspond to your experience of this congregation? What specific steps could be taken to make the congregation’s life together a more recognizable expression of the new covenant community that Jeremiah envisioned?

Prayer Focus

Begin by reading Jeremiah 31:31–34 aloud slowly, as the charter of the community in which you are gathered. Let the words land with their full prophetic weight: “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.” You are the people in whom this promise has been fulfilled. The Spirit has been given; the law is being written; the forgiveness has been accomplished in the blood of the Mediator. You did not arrive at this moment by your own spiritual achievement; you arrived here because the God of Jeremiah’s promise is the God who called you. Let that be the ground of every prayer that follows.

Pray with a sense of the whole sweep of redemptive history that led to this congregation’s existence. Give thanks for Abraham, whose faith in the promise of a seed was the beginning of the covenant story that the church inhabits. Give thanks for Moses, through whose covenant the law was given and the sacrificial system established that pointed forward to the one sufficient sacrifice. Give thanks for David, whose throne was the promise of the everlasting King who now reigns at the right hand of the Father. Give thanks for the prophets, who glimpsed through the darkness of exile the new covenant’s glory and longed to see what you have seen (1 Peter 1:10–12). Give thanks that you are the generation in whom “the fullness of time came” (Galatians 4:4) and in whom God sent His Son, born under the law, to redeem those under the law.

Pray for the Jewish people, the physical descendants of the patriarchs, to whom the covenants were given and whose scriptures you read as your own. Pray that the God who made promises to Abraham would open the eyes of Abraham’s physical descendants to see that their Messiah has come, that the new covenant has been established in His blood, and that the Israel of God now includes all who call on the name of the Lord. Pray with the urgency and the hope of Romans 11:25–26, that the fullness of the Gentiles coming in will be the occasion for the redemption of many from Israel, and that the olive tree of the covenant community will be filled with both natural branches restored and wild branches grafted in.

Pray for this congregation as the new covenant community that Jeremiah’s promise describes. Pray that the law of God would be written ever more deeply on the hearts of its members, that this would not be a congregation whose obedience is external and legalistic, motivated by fear or social conformity, but a congregation whose love for God and neighbor flows from the transformed hearts that the Spirit has created. Pray that every member would know the Lord personally and not merely professionally, not merely assenting to correct doctrine but inhabiting the living relationship with the Father, Son, and Spirit that the new covenant has made possible. Pray for those members in whose hearts that work has not yet been clearly done, that the Spirit would accomplish in them what no human teaching can achieve.

Close with the confession that this congregation’s existence is not self-explanatory. It is the result of a covenant story that began before the foundation of the world, that moved through thousands of years of promise and prophecy and shadow and type, and that found its climax in the cross and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. You are the recipients of promises you did not earn, the heirs of a covenant you did not negotiate, the members of a community whose constitution was written in the blood of the Son of God. To Him alone belongs the glory, in the church, and in Christ Jesus, to all generations, forever and ever.

“Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.”

Ephesians 3:20–21, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Jeremiah 31:31–34; Galatians 3:26–29; 6:16; Ephesians 2:11–22; 1 Peter 2:9–10; Hebrews 8:6–13

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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