

# The Nature of the New Covenant: A Case Study in Ephesians 2:11-22

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## INTRODUCTION

Although it has traditionally been commonplace throughout church history to affirm the prominence of the new covenant in Scripture to some degree or another, recently new studies have sought to show in what way the new covenant is prominent and how it relates to the biblical metanarrative and specifically to the other major biblical covenants.<sup>1</sup> In particular, recent discussion has centered on a perspective labeled “progressive covenantalism,” which attempts to provide a mediating position between dispensationalism and covenant theology.<sup>2</sup> In this scheme the new covenant is seen as the culmination of the biblical storyline, such that all of God’s covenant promises in the OT have reached their fulfillment in the new covenant inaugurated by Christ. Jesus is the true Adam, the true Israel, and the true David, and therefore the true recipient of the covenant promises. This christotelic hermeneutic clarifies *in what way* Christ fulfills the OT’s covenant promises, such as the Abrahamic promises of land and descendants, and therefore it clarifies *in what way* the new covenant relates to those covenant promises.

In light of this recent discussion, this article seeks to use Ephesians 2:11-22 as a case study in order to examine more carefully the nature of the new covenant, particularly in Paul's theology.<sup>3</sup> The purpose is not to impose a particular theological system upon the text but to glean from the text certain observations that can speak to Paul's theology of the new covenant. In the final analysis, I will contend that "progressive covenantalism" is fundamentally correct in its hermeneutical perspective, and I will offer several concluding observations regarding the nature and prominence of the new covenant in Paul's theology.

**EPHESIANS 2:11-22 AND THE NEW COVENANT**

Ephesians 2:11-22 is a particularly fruitful text for analysis of the new covenant, for in it Paul describes the Gentiles' plight, solution, and new identity in light of the covenant concept. Significantly, the only time the word "covenant" (*diathēkē*) occurs in Ephesians is in 2:12, where Paul reminds the Gentiles that at one time they were "strangers to the covenants of the promise." The covenantal nature of the Gentiles' plight, then, is explicit. But this does not exhaust the covenantal concept in the passage, for there are other words and phrases that implicitly demonstrate that the new covenant was central to Paul's understanding of the Gentiles' *plight* and *solution* and their *new identity* in Christ. The categories of the Gentiles' plight, solution, and new identity serve as the structure of the text, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The Structure of Ephesians 2:11-22

|         |                              |                                       |
|---------|------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 2:11-12 | Plight of the Gentiles       | Strangers to the Covenants            |
| 2:13-18 | Solution for the Gentiles    | Brought into a Covenant of Peace      |
| 2:19-22 | New Identity of the Gentiles | Members of the New Covenant Community |

Ephesians 2:11-12 describes the plight of the Gentiles, 2:13-18 the solution for the Gentiles, and 2:19-22 the new identity of the Gentiles as full and equal members of the people of God. Each of these sections are cast in light of the Gentiles' covenant relationship (or lack thereof) to God and his people. Hence, one could summarize the message of 2:11-22 in this way: "Even though at one time the Gentiles were not in a covenant relationship with God, by his grace they have been brought into a new covenant relationship with God through the death of Christ, and as a result they are now and will forever be full members of the new covenant community."

### **THE COVENANTAL PLIGHT OF THE GENTILES (2:11-12)**

In 2:11-12, Paul calls on the Gentiles to remember their covenantal plight in redemptive history and in their own experience prior to conversion.<sup>4</sup> In verse 11 he reminds them that they were popularly known among ethnic Jews as "the uncircumcised."<sup>5</sup> From a physical perspective, the Gentile believers were uncircumcised; they had never received the physical sign of the Abrahamic covenant, circumcision of the foreskin (Gen 17:11; *Jub.* 15:33-34), which also came to be associated with the Mosaic covenant (Gal 5:3).<sup>6</sup> From a salvation-historical perspective, circumcision had been the rite of initiation into a covenant relationship with God and his people.<sup>7</sup> This relationship the Gentiles had by and large failed to experience in the OT.

However, in 2:11 Paul hints that physical circumcision no longer counts for covenant membership after the coming of Christ, since he describes the character of that circumcision as something handmade and strictly physical (*en sarki cheiropoiētou*). Now that Christ has come, physical circumcision is not supernatural and inward but natural and outward. In other words, this negative perspective on physical circumcision anticipates that the covenantal plight of the Gentiles was *not* resolved through a return to the old covenant that God made with Israel at Sinai, or through a return merely to the covenant with Abraham. If there was to be a covenantal solution for the Gentiles, as Paul later argues, it would be a different kind of covenant with a different sign. Indeed, it would be a new covenant whose sign was not outward and something handmade but something inward, supernatural, and divinely-made—or as Paul can describe it elsewhere, a circumcision of the heart (Col 2:11). Hence, the mark of membership in this new covenant would not be defined along the same

genealogical and ethnic lines as defined within the old covenant, but along the lines of changed hearts that trust and hope in the Lord. Faith in Jesus Christ would be the mark of membership in this new covenant.

In 2:12 Paul continues the covenantal plight of the Gentiles with a fivefold description that serves to highlight their plight. At one time they had been “separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the covenants of the promise, without hope, and without God in the world.” It is difficult to see how Paul could have described a direr situation for the Gentiles! The fact that the Gentiles at one time were in this predicament meant that they had no hope of salvation but only the fearful expectation of life in the world without God and never-ending judgment and torment in the life to come.

Most significant in this chain is that the Gentiles were separated from Christ, for to be separated from the hope of Israel’s Messiah entailed separation from any of Israel’s promises and privileges. From this perspective, to have Christ is to have everything; to be separated from Christ is to have nothing. The Gentiles had nothing: they did not have the right of citizenship (*politeia*) within the people of God, and they had no place within the covenants of Israel. As a result, they were utterly hopeless and godless in the world.

The covenants the Gentiles were estranged from consisted of all the covenants properly associated with Israel: the Abrahamic, Sinai, Davidic, and new covenant.<sup>8</sup> The covenant with Abraham held forth the promise of blessing for the Gentiles (Gen 12:3), but Abraham’s offspring had to be physically circumcised. The covenant at Sinai, which flowed from the promise to Abraham, was a covenant made with the nation of Israel and was structured along national and ethnic lines. The covenant with David, which also flowed from the promise to Abraham and held forth the promise of blessing for the Gentiles (see 2 Sam 7:19; Ps 72:8-11), was a covenant with David and his descendants as kings of God’s people. Finally, even the new covenant, as Jeremiah 31:31 makes clear, was a covenant to be made “with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.” In other words, all these covenants, properly speaking, were Israel’s covenants and thus the Gentiles were “strangers” to them.

It is instructive to note at this point that Paul does not treat the covenantal plight of the Gentiles as insignificant. On the contrary, it was a dire predicament, for to be outside a covenant relationship with God and his people was akin to having no hope and to be without God in the world. It was a way of saying that the whole trajectory or stream of salvation in the OT was

flowing, and the Gentiles were not in the stream! The concept of a covenant relationship with God and others, then, is at the heart of Paul's soteriology and ecclesiology. It has everything to do with a person's salvation and what it means to be at peace with God and at peace with one another. The place where soteriology and ecclesiology intersect is at the covenant concept. In this sense it is at the heart of Paul's gospel and is central in the grand scheme and storyline of the Bible. Not surprisingly, then, since the plight of the Gentiles was framed in a covenantal way, in 2:13-18 Paul unpacks the solution for the Gentiles in a correspondingly covenantal manner.

### **THE COVENANTAL SOLUTION FOR THE GENTILES (2:13-18)**

As Paul moves to the solution for the Gentiles, he emphasizes the notion of reconciliation and peace with God and with one another. The main point is stated in 2:13: "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ." To what, or to whom, were the Gentiles brought near? Certainly they were brought near to God's people, but it is sometimes lost on the reader that in 2:14-18 the underlying assumption is that the Gentiles have been brought near *to God* by the blood of Christ. As 2:16 says, Jesus died "in order to reconcile the two (Jews and Gentiles) in one body *to God* through the cross, having killed the enmity in himself." Or as 2:18 puts it, "For through him we both have access in one Spirit *to the Father*." In other words, Jesus died to reconcile people to God, to bring them "near" God so that they might be at peace with God and have access into his presence. Hence, the nearness achieved through the death of Christ in 2:13 is not merely horizontal but also—and in some sense, more fundamentally—vertical.

Nevertheless, 2:14-18 also emphasizes that Jesus also accomplished a horizontal reconciliation where the Gentiles have been brought near to God's people. An examination of the frequent use of the numerals "one" and "two" testify to this fact.

2:14 he made us *both one*<sup>9</sup>

2:15 he might create in himself *one* new man in place of the *two*

2:16 he might reconcile *both* in *one* body

2:18 through him we *both* have access in *one* Spirit to the Father

In other words, humanity is comprised of two groups, Jews and Gentiles. Gentiles are "far off" and Jews are "near" (2:17). Until the time of Christ there

was enmity between Jews and Gentiles, but now in Christ such enmity—what Paul calls in 2:14 the “dividing wall of hostility”—has been broken down.

The source of this hostility must have something to do with the law of Moses, as the flow of 2:14-15 indicates. In 2:14 Jesus is defined as “our peace,” for he unified Jews and Gentiles by “destroying the dividing wall of hostility in his flesh.” Although there is much discussion regarding which wall Jesus destroyed, the most likely explanation is in 2:15: Jesus’ destruction of the wall is equivalent to his “abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, the law of commandments and ordinances is the wall! In order for Jews and Gentiles to be unified as God’s “one new man” (v. 15), then the law had to be abolished.<sup>11</sup>

Now of course, this is where the covenant concept comes back into the discussion, for the law is nothing other than the old covenant made at Sinai with Israel (see Exodus 19-24). This law-covenant was nationalistic and was drawn along lines of ethnicity and nationality. Hence, to be in the covenant community one had to submit and adhere to the religious and civil stipulations of the covenant (e.g., circumcision, food laws, festivals, etc.). In essence, Gentile converts were required to submit to the Jewish way of life, and in this sense the old covenant was a dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles. As such, if Gentiles were to be members of the covenant community *as Gentiles*, a new covenant needed to be established with different stipulations. It was this old covenantal wall that Jesus abolished by his death, so that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord may be saved” (Joel 2:32; Rom 10:13).<sup>12</sup>

But the old covenant was not only a dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles; it also divided humanity from God. Verses 15-16 are carefully structured to show that the abolition of the old covenant served two purposes: (1) to unite Jews and Gentiles, and (2) to reconcile Jews and Gentiles to God.

2:15a By abolishing the law of commandments in ordinances

2:15b-16 In order that

He might create the two into one new humanity

So making peace

He might reconcile both in one body to God

By killing the enmity in himself

As it relates to Jews and Gentiles, the abolition of the law meant a new creation and a new humanity; as it relates to humanity’s relationship to God, the abolition of the law entailed that “both” Jews and Gentiles can now find

reconciliation to God in Christ alone. The implication for the nature of old law-covenant is that it was a problem both horizontally (in excluding the Gentiles from the people of God) and vertically (in excluding humanity from God). It provided “enmity” (*echthros*) between people (2:14) and “enmity” (*echthros*) between people and God (2:16).

Even though it is clear that the Sinai law-covenant could not bring life, this did not mean for Paul that the covenant itself was evil. Indeed, the problem with the covenant was a function of the deeper problem within humanity. As Paul can affirm in Romans 7:12, “The law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.” The law was given by God, and so it was good. The problem was that it was used by sin to deceive and produce all manner of sin, so as to kill humanity (Rom 7:7-11). So the “problem” with the old covenant—if one can speak in those terms—was simply that it was not designed to overcome human sin. On the one hand, it was designed to bring life (e.g., Lev 18:5), yet on the other hand, it was impotent or powerless to bring life to people on account of sin and hardness of heart. So in effect, the old covenant did *not* bring life but only death. Or as Paul puts it in Ephesians 2:14, it was in the end a “dividing wall of hostility”!

### ***Jesus as “Our Peace” (2:14)***

The focus of Paul’s argument up to this point has primarily been negative: Jesus is “our peace” inasmuch as he did away with the old covenant as a “wall of hostility.” Thus far the covenantal plight of the Gentiles has been solved by the removal of a covenant that barred them from God and his people. But the argument does not remain purely negative: Jesus also is “our peace” in that he established by his death a new “covenant of peace” in which Jewish and Gentile Christians have access to God.

The term “peace” (*eirēnē*) is the dominant term Paul uses throughout 2:13-18 to describe the positive effects of Jesus’ death. In 2:14 Jesus is described as “our peace,” a designation that may harken back to Isaiah 9:6 (MT 9:5).<sup>13</sup> In 2:15 the result of his new creation activity is “peace.”<sup>14</sup> And in 2:17 he “came and preached peace” to both Jews and Gentiles.<sup>15</sup> And even where the word *eirēnē* is absent, the concept of peace is present in the language of nearness (2:13), reconciliation (2:16), and access to the father (2:18).

Further, the basis for this peace is the death of Christ. In 2:13 nearness to God comes “by the blood of Christ,” a reference to Jesus’ death as a sacrifice.

In 2:14 Jesus destroys the dividing wall of hostility “in his flesh,” which refers primarily, if not exclusively, to his death.<sup>16</sup> Finally, in 2:16 Jesus reconciles humanity to God “through the cross.”<sup>17</sup> Hence, the death of Christ in 2:13-18 is a sacrificial death that produces peace between people and God. The goal or solution is peace, and the means is the cross.

Since the term “peace” is crucial to understand the solution for the Gentiles, it is necessary to discern what kind of peace Jesus brings. The Greek term *eirēnē* can describe merely the absence of hostility, in which enemies lay down their weapons against one another. But it can also indicate the presence of a relationship of love, loyalty, and faithfulness, which is, we might add, the nature and goal of a covenant relationship. This meaning of *eirēnē* comports with the Hebrew term *shālôm*, which describes the total well-being of an individual or relationship.<sup>18</sup>

The meaning of *eirēnē* in Ephesians 2:13-18 is clarified by a close analysis of 2:17, which claims that Jesus “came and preached peace to you who were far off [Gentiles] and peace to those who were near [Jews].” This double proclamation of peace derives from Isaiah 57:19, “Peace, peace, to the far and to the near.” In Isaiah the double proclamation of peace appears at the beginning of the phrase and then describes the recipients of the peace, namely, the “far” and the “near.” Paul reworks and reassigns the double proclamation of peace so as to clarify that the recipients of peace are both “far” and “near.”

### ***Peace to the “Far” and “Near” in Isaiah 56-57***

That Paul is consciously alluding to Isaiah 57:19 is confirmed by an examination of the immediate context in Isaiah, for Isaiah is in the midst of redefining who constitutes the true people of God—or as Paul can say, “one new man” (Eph 2:15). In Isaiah 56:1-2 the person who “keeps justice and does righteousness” and who ensures the Sabbath is not profaned will receive God’s salvation and righteousness. This redefinition of the people of God is clarified in Isaiah 56:3-8 where even the “foreigner” and “eunuch”—those who are outcasts in Israel and do not share Israel’s covenantal privileges—have an opportunity to be part of God’s people. Indeed, if they are true members of the covenant community, God will “give them an everlasting name” (56:5) and will “bring [them] to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer” (56:7). Moreover, these previous covenantal outcasts serve as priests in the very temple of God, for they “minister” (*shārat*) to

the Lord in the temple and offer burnt offerings and sacrifices (56:6-7).<sup>19</sup> In other words, the picture is *not* one in which foreigners and eunuchs are only peripheral members in God's people; rather, they are full members of God's people and have equal access to the temple presence of God on his holy mountain! Indeed, Isaiah 56 portrays a new community reconstituted along the lines of covenant faithfulness ("those who hold fast my covenant").

Conversely, Isaiah 56:9-57:13 redefines God's people by warning Israel that persistence in idolatry would only bring destruction. Israel cannot trust in their genealogy or covenantal privileges. Rather, "he who takes refuge in me shall possess the land and shall inherit my holy mountain" (57:13), for God chooses to dwell "with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit" (57:15). Those who trust in and humble themselves before the Lord, then, will be healed and comforted (57:18). They are the new creation of God, because God himself "creates the fruit of lips" (57:19a).<sup>20</sup> In this context comes Isaiah's double proclamation of peace: "Peace, peace, to the far and to the near, says Yahweh, and I will heal him" (57:19b).

The proclamation of peace in Isaiah 57:19, then, is a universal proclamation of restoration and salvation. It is issued to the "far" and the "near," signifying that both Jews and Gentiles are invited to put away their sin and idolatry and to turn to the Lord in repentance and faith.<sup>21</sup> Those who experience this peace find more than a mere absence of hostility toward God, but instead find comfort, healing, and restoration.<sup>22</sup>

### ***Peace through the Death of the Servant in Isaiah 52:13-53:12***

Although the worldwide invitation for salvation is clear enough from Isaiah 57:19, the questions remain: How will a person qualify to receive this peace with God? Who in the entire world "keeps justice and does righteousness"? Who "chooses the things that please God and holds fast to his covenant"? These questions remain, for Isaiah 57:20-21—the last two verses of Isaiah 57—reiterate that the wicked will *not* receive this peace: "But the wicked are like the tossing sea; for it cannot be quiet, and its waters toss up mire and dirt. 'There is no peace,' says my God, 'for the wicked'" (ESV). In fact, Isaiah 57:21 is echoed in Isaiah 48:22, "'There is no peace,' says Yahweh, 'for the wicked'" (cf. Isa 53:6; 59:1-2; 64:6). Like a tolling bell, this phrase reminded Israel and all of humanity that God is holy and will not tolerate sin and unrighteousness. So how can anyone, whether Jew or Gentile, find peace with God?

This tension is resolved in Isaiah 52:13-53:12, which is Isaiah's Fourth Servant Song. Although space prevents a detailed analysis, a crucial verse that resolves the tension is Isaiah 53:5, where the servant dies as a substitute for the sins of the people: "He was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon him, and with his stripes we are healed." The first pair of lines in this verse describe *on what account* the servant died ("for our transgressions" / "for our iniquities"), whereas the second pair describe *the purpose for which* the servant died ("for our peace" / "we are healed"). The terms "peace" (*shalom*) and "healing" (*rapa'*) are the same two terms that are offered to the far and the near in Isaiah 57:19 ("*peace, peace* to the far and the near, and I will *heal* him")!<sup>23</sup> In other words, the promise of peace and healing in Isaiah 57:19 is directly connected to and based on the substitutionary death of the servant in Isaiah's Fourth Servant Song. The only way for a sinful humanity to be reconciled to God is through the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ.

### ***The New Covenant of Peace in Isaiah 54-55***

We have already noted how Isaiah's concept of peace with God connotes much more than the absence of hostility but involves concepts of restoration and reconciliation. But we can press even further, for this peace is defined in Isaiah 54-55 as the peace of a new and everlasting covenant.

In Isaiah 54-55 God promises once again to show compassion on his people. He was the Maker, the Husband, and the Redeemer of his people, and so the return from spiritual exile would entail the beginning of unceasing and endless compassion on his people. In fact, God compares the everlasting nature of his compassion with the covenant with creation in the days of Noah (54:9-10). As God had sworn in an "everlasting covenant" never again to destroy the earth with a flood (cf. Gen 9:16), so God swears in a new "covenant of peace" (*berit shalom*) never again to be angry with his people. In fact, even if God's covenant with creation could be overturned (54:10a), yet God's covenant of peace would stand firm (54:10b). For this reason, the same covenant is described as the "everlasting covenant" in the next chapter (55:3). The "everlasting covenant" in 55:3 is a covenant based on the faithfulness of the greater David, Jesus Christ (55:3; cf. Acts 13:34),<sup>24</sup> and as a result this covenant ensures that Zion's children will experience "great peace" (54:13) and "abundant pardon" (55:7). Indeed, in 55:12 all

the nations are invited to join in the joy and “peace” of Zion as the creation itself breaks forth in song.

To summarize the immediate context of Isaiah 57:19, the proclamation of peace to the “far” and the “near” is a universal invitation to be reconciled to God and to join the new covenant community (Isaiah 56-57). The *basis* for the proclamation of peace is the sacrificial, substitutionary death of the servant (Isaiah 52:13-53:12), and the *result* of his death is an everlasting covenant of peace (Isaiah 54-55). It is no wonder that Paul, along with Isaiah, can call his gospel the “gospel of peace” (Eph 6:15; cf. Isa 52:7).

In Ephesians 2:17, then, Paul’s citation of Isaiah 57:19 provides an interpretive window through which we may apply Isaiah’s rich and robust concept of covenantal peace to Paul’s concept of Jesus as “our peace.” For Paul, the time of fulfillment of Isaiah’s promises was at hand. Jesus is “our peace” precisely because he was the servant of the Lord, who by his death inaugurated the new and everlasting covenant of peace. It is a covenant for a worldwide audience—the near and the far—so that whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. The invitation is not limited by one’s ethnicity, for even the eunuch and the foreigner can now join themselves to the one people of God, and this “one new man” is constituted along the lines of one’s relationship to Christ. And so the time is at hand, Paul says, for the heralding of the “gospel of peace” (see Eph 6:15).

Hence, in Ephesians 2:13-18 the covenantal plight of the Gentiles is solved *negatively* through the abolition of the old law-covenant, as well as *positively* through the inauguration of the new covenant. The Gentiles’ lack of outward circumcision, their previous alienation from God, and their estrangement from the covenants of the promise in 2:11-12 are fully resolved, for through the death of Christ the Gentiles are granted to become members of the new covenant, wherein they are at peace with God and one another in the new covenant community.

### **THE COVENANTAL IDENTITY OF THE GENTILES (2:19-22)**

As a result of the new covenant work of Christ, the Gentiles obtain a new identity and status in 2:19-22. Not surprisingly, their identity is described in covenantal terms. Once “strangers (*xenoi*) to the covenants of the promise” (2:12), now in Christ Gentiles are “no longer strangers (*xenoi*)” (2:19).

Once alienated from the citizenship (*politeia*) of Israel (2:12), now in Christ Gentiles are “fellow citizens” (*sympolitai*) with God’s people (2:19). Now in Christ the Gentiles have all the rights and privileges of the saints: “the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (3:6).

Moreover, in a way reminiscent of Isaiah’s eunuch and the foreigner who minister before the Lord in the temple (Isa 56:6-7), so now Gentile believers are described as members of God’s new temple. They are “members of God’s household” (2:19b) and are built on a firm christological and apostolic foundation (2:20). They themselves as God’s people form the building materials for the temple, and God himself dwells among them (2:21-22).

The promise of God’s everlasting temple presence is consonant with the promise of an everlasting covenant. In Ezekiel 37:26-28 God promises an everlasting temple with an everlasting covenant.

I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will set them in their land and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Then the nations will know that I am the Lord who sanctifies Israel, when my sanctuary is in their midst forevermore. (ESV)

The raising of the new temple in Ezekiel coincides with God’s everlasting covenant presence among his people (cf. Rev 21:3).<sup>25</sup> Hence, the Gentiles’ new identity and status as full members of God’s people and integral building materials of God’s temple confirm that they are recipients of the promises of the new covenant.

### **CONCLUSION: EPHESIANS 2:11-22 AND THE NATURE OF THE NEW COVENANT**

This analysis of Ephesians 2:11-22 has demonstrated that the Gentiles’ plight, solution, and new identity are cast in light of the new covenant. Their plight was explicitly covenantal, for they were strangers to Israel’s covenants (2:11-12). Correspondingly, their solution was implicitly covenantal, for Jesus provided reconciliation to God and one another by means of his sacrificial

death that inaugurated Isaiah's covenant of peace (2:13-18). Finally, their new identity in God's "house" was likewise framed against the backdrop of the prophetic expectation that the new and everlasting temple presence of God would coincide with the inauguration of a new and everlasting covenant (2:19-22).

Since 2:11-22 provides a window into the nature of the new covenant, it remains for us to draw some theological conclusions concerning the role of the new covenant in Paul's theology. First, Ephesians 2:11-22 demonstrates that the new covenant is at the heart of Paul's gospel, for the new covenant contains the message of reconciliation with God and one another. The solution for the Gentiles in 2:13-18 is shot through with the language of "peace," which I have shown primarily derives from Isaiah's "covenant of peace." It is no wonder, then, that Paul can refer to his own gospel as the "gospel of peace" (Eph 6:15).<sup>26</sup> In other words, the reason why the gospel is good news for the Gentiles is because in it the Gentiles have been brought into a *new covenant of peace* with God and God's people by the death of Christ, and as a result they have access into the temple presence of God. It is certainly the case that Paul can describe his gospel without referring explicitly to the new covenant, but it is just as certain that when Paul refers to the new covenant, he is describing his gospel.<sup>27</sup>

Second, Ephesians 2:11-22 demonstrates that in Paul's theology the new covenant contains elements of continuity and discontinuity with the major biblical covenants in the OT. The continuity is framed in terms of fulfillment of OT promises, such as Isaiah 57:19 and Ezekiel 37:26-28 (peace with God, God's everlasting presence, etc.). Indeed, the way in which Paul frames the plight of the Gentiles in 2:11-12 and finds it resolved in 2:19 assumes that the hope of Israel expressed in "the covenants of the promise" has now come to fruition in the person and work of Christ. In other words, the stream of redemptive history described in the OT has now been fulfilled in the New, a stream into which the Gentiles have now been assimilated by faith in Christ.

Still, there are elements of discontinuity in 2:11-22 as well. Now that Christ has come, Paul can describe physical circumcision as something "made in the flesh by hands" (2:11). Now that the "age to come" has dawned in Christ—note the eschatologically-charged "but now" (*nyni de*) in 2:13—Israel's law-covenant is obsolete, having been abolished by Christ (2:14-15).<sup>28</sup> The element of newness is evident in 2:15, for in Christ the people of God

are now described as “one new man.” Jesus, who is the “last Adam” and the “second man” (1 Cor 15:45-47), brings into effect a new creation with a new humanity identified and defined by their relationship to Jesus (Eph 4:22-24). This new reality is described as “the mystery of Christ” in 3:4-6, for in him the Gentiles are full and legitimate members of God’s people. Such discontinuity demonstrates that the nature of the new covenant is qualitatively new.

Third, neither dispensationalism nor covenant theology completely satisfies the biblical data of Ephesians 2:11-22. On the one hand, at the heart of dispensationalism is the distinction between Israel and the church, but Paul’s teaching concerning the “one new man” in Christ suggests there is a *unified people of God* reconstituted along the lines of faith in Christ, as opposed to *distinct peoples of God* within the same covenant community. In a context where Paul is at pains to emphasize that the “two” have now become “one” in Christ, it would be odd if Paul continued to distinguish between Jewish and Gentile believers, either in terms of their *identity* or *function* in the kingdom of Christ (cf. Eph 5:5).<sup>29</sup>

On the other hand, at the heart of covenant theology is the notion that the new covenant community in the present age is mixed with believers and unbelievers. But this conclusion seems to conflict with Ephesians 2:11-22, in which all members of the new covenant community have been reconciled to God through the death of Christ (2:13, 16). In Paul’s theology, to be a member of the new covenant community *is* to be at peace with God, for the covenant is defined as a “covenant of peace.” To be a member of this new covenant *is* to be a member of the “one new man,” all of whom have put on Christ (2:15; cf. 4:22-24). To be part of God’s household *is* to be part of God’s temple and thus to have unhindered access into his presence by the Spirit (2:18-22; cf. Isa 56:6-7). This new reality in which every covenant member “knows the Lord” (cf. Jer 31:34) is precisely why Paul can regard physical circumcision as irrelevant in 2:11. Now that the new covenant has dawned in Christ, Paul does not regard Gentiles in the new covenant as truly “uncircumcised” any longer, for the inward circumcision of the heart to which physical circumcision pointed has become a reality for them in the new covenant community (cf. Col 2:11). Now that they are in Christ, they are Gentiles, but only “in the flesh” (2:11a); from the Jewish perspective they are known as “the uncircumcision,” but from Paul’s perspective they are the true circumcision (2:11b; cf. Rom 2:28-29; Phil 3:3).<sup>30</sup> This community-wide

circumcision of the heart *is* the mark of membership in God's people, a people defined not by genealogy and ethnicity but by regenerate hearts.<sup>31</sup>

In conclusion, this analysis of Ephesians 2:11-22 serves to undergird and corroborate the christotelic hermeneutic outlined in "progressive covenantalism." The mediating position forged strikes the right balance in explaining how the new covenant contains elements of both continuity and discontinuity. Further, its emphasis on Christ as the nexus and fulfillment of all the promises of God is a welcome proposal for understanding the manner in which Paul views how Isaiah's promises are applied legitimately to Gentile Christians.

Nevertheless, more exegetical analysis is needed, for any theological system will stand or fall inasmuch as it remains faithful to the witness of Scripture. Let us, then, be like the noble Jews in Berea, who "received the word with all eagerness, searching the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so" (Acts 17:11).

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<sup>2</sup> Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012). See also *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course between Dispensational and Covenant Theologies* (ed. Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E. Parker; Nashville: B&H, 2016). There have been numerous and variegated responses to Gentry and Wellum's work (e.g., Michael J. Vlach, "Have They Found a Better Way? An Analysis of Gentry and Wellum's *Kingdom through Covenant*," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 24.1 [2013]: 5-24; Samuel Renihan, "Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants: A Review Article," *Journal of the Institute of Reformed Baptist Studies* [2014]: 153-76).

<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, Ephesians 2:11-22 has largely been overlooked as a text that could shed light on Paul's theology of the new covenant, for some Pauline scholars question Pauline authorship of the letter. Even among those who contend for Pauline authorship, this text has been overshadowed by other more obvious "new covenant" texts, such as 2 Corinthians 3 and Galatians 3-4. For a convincing defense of Pauline authorship see Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 2-61.

<sup>4</sup> Many commentators (e.g., Ernest Best, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians* [ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998], 239-40) rightly note that the call for the Gentiles to remember what God has done for them parallels the Deuteronomistic call for Israel to remember what God did for them (Deut 5:15; 15:15; 16:12; 24:18, 22); contra Francis W. Beare (*The Epistle to the Ephesians*, in vol. 10 of *The Interpreter's Bible* [ed. George Arthur Buttrick; Nashville: Abingdon, 1953], 649) and John Muddiman (*A Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* [Black's New Testament Commentaries; London: Continuum, 2001], 116), who think it is evidence of a post-Pauline situation. Even though grammatically the object of *hoti* is 2:12, Paul wants the Gentiles to remember not only who they were apart from Christ but also his reconciling work for them in Christ in 2:13-18 (contra Best, *Ephesians*, 244-45). This is already a hint that Paul considers the Gentiles to be full members of the new community of God.

<sup>5</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations reflect the author's translation.

<sup>6</sup> That the Jews were not the only people to use the ritual of circumcision has been used as an argument for Ephesians as a pseudonymous letter, for it is averred that Paul would have known of the practice elsewhere

- (e.g., Best, *Ephesians*, 239). But the perspective of Ephesians at this point—a perspective with which Paul agreed—incorporates a specifically salvation-historical perception of the Gentiles, in which the Jews considered themselves to be the “true circumcision” and all Gentiles to be uncircumcised before God.
- 7 Tet-Lim N. Yee (*Jews, Gentiles and Ethnic Reconciliation: Paul’s Jewish Identity and Ephesians* [Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 130; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005], 78-81) rightly notes the intimate connection between the Jewish rite of circumcision and the covenant relationship.
  - 8 So Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians* (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 155; Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 189. Neither the covenant with Adam (C. Leslie Mitton, *Ephesians* [New Century Bible; London: Oliphants, 1976], 103) nor the covenant with Noah (Larry J. Kreitzer, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* [Epworth Commentaries; London: Epworth, 1997], 81; Muddiman, *Ephesians*, 121) are likely in view, for those covenants were not made only with Israel but with all humanity. The OT does not think of a plurality of covenants with the patriarchs (contra Charles J. Ellicott, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians: With a Critical and Grammatical Commentary, and a Revised Translation* [5th ed.; London: Longmans, Green, 1884], 45; S. D. F. Salmond, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, in vol. 3 of *The Expositor’s Greek Testament* [ed. W. Robertson Nicoll; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.], 292; cf. Sir 44:12, 18; Wis 18:22; 2 Macc 8:15), nor one Abrahamic covenant with repeated renewals (contra Best, *Ephesians*, 242), nor does it support the notion of one “covenant of grace” with many reaffirmations (contra William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Ephesians* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967], 130; rightly Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 358).
  - 9 It is a grammatical curiosity that in 2:14 the word “both” is neuter (*ta amphotera*), whereas in 2:16 it is plural (*tous amphoteros*). Frank Thielman (*Ephesians* [BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010], 164 [following Best, *Ephesians*, 252]) contends that the neuter connotes spatial imagery in 2:14. In any case, there does not seem to be much difference between the gender switch (so Markus Barth, *Ephesians* [The Anchor Bible, vol. 34; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974], 262-63).
  - 10 For an exhaustive list of possibilities regarding the possible referent of the wall, see Barth, *Ephesians*, 283-87.
  - 11 There is no indication in 2:15 that any part of the old covenant is still binding on believers; rather, the old covenant in its entirety is abolished. Some have held to a tripartite view of the law and that the “law of commandments expressed in ordinances” only refers to the ceremonial or civil aspects of the law, so that the moral law is still in effect (e.g., Peter Balla, “Is the Law Abolished According to Eph. 2:15?” *European Journal of Theology* 3 [1994]: 9-16; John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians* [trans. T. H. L. Parker; vol. 11 of *Calvin’s Commentaries*; Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1965], 150-51; Hendriksen, *Ephesians*, 135). But it is far from clear that the Mosaic law-covenant was intended to have a tripartite division (so Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 355), the phrase “law of commandments in ordinances” itself does not admit of any distinctions but describes the whole Mosaic law-covenant in a plenary fashion typical of the literary style of Ephesians (cf. 1:17; 2:7; so Arnold, *Ephesians*, 163; Best, *Ephesians*, 260; Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* [WBC, vol. 42; Dallas: Word Books, 1990], 142). Further, even if one were to grant the tripartite division of the law, in 2:14-15 the law serves not only as a horizontal but also as a vertical barrier—a function certainly inclusive of the so-called “moral law”!
  - 12 Scholars generally associated with the “New Perspective on Paul” have rightly noted that the law raised barriers, or “boundary markers,” between the Jews and Gentiles (see esp. James D. G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul: Collected Essays* [WUNT 185; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005]).
  - 13 Cf. Micah 5:5 (MT 5:4). So Peter Stuhlmacher, “He is our Peace” (Eph. 2:14): On the Exegesis and Significance of Eph. 2:14-18,” in *Reconciliation, Law, and Righteousness: Essays in Biblical Theology* (trans. Everett R. Kalin; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 182-200; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Ephesians: A Commentary* (trans. H. Heron; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 112; contra Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 127.
  - 14 Present participles (*poiōn*) subsequent to the main verb of the clause (*ktisē*) regularly convey the result of the action of the main verb (Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* [2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Biblical Languages: Greek 2; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999], 188; Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 638).
  - 15 One need not decide the particular time of Jesus’ proclamation in 2:17. For a discussion of the many interpretations of *elthōn* in 2:17, see Best (*Ephesians*, 271-73) who thinks the “least objectionable” option is either Christ’s preaching either during his earthly ministry (cf. John 20:19-21; Acts 10:36-38) or through those who preach the gospel now.
  - 16 So most commentators (e.g., Barth, *Ephesians*, 302-04; cf. Col 1:22).
  - 17 It is possible for the pronoun *autō* in 2:16 to refer to Jesus or his cross (*stauros*), the latter of which would indicate that enmity between God and humanity was “killed” at the cross.

- <sup>18</sup> Claus Westermann, "Peace (*Shalom*) in the Old Testament," in *The Meaning of Peace: Biblical Studies* (ed. Perry B. Yoder and Willard M. Swartley; trans. Walter W. Sawatsky; 2nd ed.; Studies in Peace and Scripture, vol. 2; Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2001), 37-70.
- <sup>19</sup> The verb *sharat* is commonly used of a special priestly service of worship (see Num 3:6; Deut 10:8; 17:12; 1 Chr 15:2; Isa 61:6).
- <sup>20</sup> The fruit of lips could be a reference to the praise of worshipers, although in the context of Isaiah—he lived among a people of "unclean lips" (Isa 6:5)—the phrase aptly describes any kind of right speech within God's people. The transformation and healing of Zion is complete when everyone in the community speaks what is right and true at all times (cf. Zech 8:16; Eph 4:25, 29). This transformation owes entirely to God's work of new "creation" (*bara'*).
- <sup>21</sup> Thorsten Moritz (*A Profound Mystery: The Use of the OT in Ephesians* [Supplements to Novum Testamentum, vol. 85; Leiden: Brill, 1996], 32-34) rightly contends the "near" and the "far" in Isaiah 57:19 refer to Jews and Gentiles, respectively, as opposed to Jews living in the land and those in the diaspora.
- <sup>22</sup> J. Alec Motyer (*The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993], 477) notes that the double use of the term "peace" connotes "what is superlative in kind and total in extent, the truest peace and peace to the exclusion of all else" (cf. Isa 26:3).
- <sup>23</sup> The verb *rapa'* occurs only 7x in Isaiah (6:10; 19:22 [2x]; 30:26; 53:5; 57:18, 19), heightening the plausibility that the promise of healing in 57:18-19 is based on the healing provided by the servant's death in 53:5.
- <sup>24</sup> For a defense of the interpretation of the "faithful *heseds* of David" (Isa 55:3) adopted here, see Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 407-21.
- <sup>25</sup> See also Exodus 15:17; 1 Kings 8:39, 43, 49 (= 2 Chr 6:30, 33, 39); 2 Chronicles 30:27; 3 Maccabees 2:15; Psalms 33:14; 76:2; Daniel 2:11.
- <sup>26</sup> Strikingly, Ephesians 6:14-17 is likewise pregnant with allusions to Isaiah (11:5; 52:7; 59:17).
- <sup>27</sup> Sometimes it has been averred that Paul held an attitude of ambivalence towards the concept of covenant because Paul only used the term "covenant" (*diathēkē*) in polemical contexts (e.g., James D. G. Dunn, "Did Paul Have a Covenant Theology? Reflections on Romans 9:4 and 11:27," in *The Concept of the Covenant in the Second Temple Period* [ed. Stanley E. Porter and Jacqueline C. R. de Roo; Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 71; Leiden: Brill, 2004], 287-307). But this approach overlooks the fact that for Paul a term like "peace" (*eirēnē*) often flies in the same semantic orbit as the term *diathēkē*.
- <sup>28</sup> Paul frequently uses *nyni de* to show that in Christ God's saving promises have ultimately and eschatologically arrived (Rom 3:21; 6:22; 7:6; 1 Cor 15:20; Col 1:22).
- <sup>29</sup> Sometimes it is argued that the "one new man" in 2:15 shows only that the Gentiles are on the same "spiritual plane in their relationship to God" as the Jews, but that Israel maintains a "specific identity and corresponding function in God's historical kingdom program" (Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: the Interface between Dispensational and Non-Dispensational Theology* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993], 218); see also the discussion on this point in *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church: The Search for Definition* (ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992). But the parallel between 2:11-12 and 2:19-22 shows that everything Israel once possessed—including "kingdom" elements like the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of "citizenship" (*politeia* in 2:12, 19)—the Gentiles now also possess.
- <sup>30</sup> The participle *legomenē* ("so-called") probably reflects Paul's negative outlook on outward circumcision (rightly Mitton, *Ephesians*, 102; Thielman, *Ephesians*, 153).
- <sup>31</sup> This is not to say, of course, that everyone on a church membership roll is truly regenerate. Still, churches should strive to align their membership within the congregation to reflect accurately the regenerate nature of the new covenant community.