

# Christological Reflections in Light of Scripture's Covenants

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In a newly published work, *Kingdom through Covenant*, Peter Gentry and I sought to demonstrate how central the concept of “covenant” is the narrative plot structure of the Bible.<sup>1</sup> To be sure, this is not a new insight. Almost every variety of Christian theology admits that the biblical covenants establish a central framework that holds the story of the Bible together. In fact, from the coming of Christ and the beginning of the early church, Christians have wrestled with the relationships between the covenants, particularly the old and new covenants. It is almost

the wrestling with the strong and weak within the church (Rom 14-15), and the implications for the church on how to live in relation to the old covenant now that Christ has come (Matt 5-7; 15:1-20, par.; Acts 7; Rom 4; Heb 7-10). In reality, all of these issues are simply the church wrestling with covenantal shifts—from old covenant to new—and the nature of fulfillment that has occurred in the coming of Christ.

However, our work sought to provide a *via media* between the current biblical-theological way of “putting together” the biblical covenants, i.e., between the theological systems of dispensational and covenant theology. In addition, we also intended to demonstrate how our understanding of the relationship between the covenants could help illuminate various theological issues and debates. In this article, I want to summarize some of our findings, particularly related to the overall theme of this edition of *SBJT*, namely Christology. Obviously given the constraints of this format, I cannot even begin to lay out the entire argument here; one will have to read the book in order to see

impossible to discern many of the early church’s struggles apart from covenantal wrestling and debates. For example, think of how important the Jew-Gentile relationship is in the NT (Matt 22:1-14, par.; Acts 10-11; Rom 9-11; Eph 2:11-22; 3:1-13), the claim of the Judaizers which centers on covenantal debates (Gal 2-3), the reason for the calling of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15),

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how we have developed our case! Instead, I simply want to describe two ways a proper understanding of the unfolding and progressive nature of the biblical covenants helps illuminate and ground the biblical presentation of first, the glorious person of Christ, and secondly, our Lord's work.

### THE BIBLICAL COVENANTS AND THE IDENTITY OF JESUS

In what ways does a proper understanding of biblical covenants affect our understanding of the *person* of Christ? Before we begin it is important to state what I mean by the word "person." In this context I am using the term to address the question: "Who is the Jesus of the Bible as an entire individual?" or, in today's terminology, "What is the *identity* of Jesus the Christ?" I am not primarily using it as it is used in classical theology and particularly the Chalcedonian Definition. At Chalcedon it specifically refers to the "subject" or the "who" of the incarnation in relation to the persons of the Godhead and thus the intra-Trinitarian personal relations. I am no doubt assuming this entire theology, but my main aim here is to speak to the issue of how Scripture and the biblical covenants unpack for us the *identity* of Jesus—who Jesus is as an individual and his significance for us.<sup>2</sup>

If we ask the all-important question—Who is the Jesus of the Bible?—Scripture presents a straightforward answer which the church has confessed throughout the ages: Jesus is *God the Son incarnate*. As God the Son he has existed from all-eternity, co-equal with the Father and Spirit and thus fully God. Yet, at a specific point in time he took to himself our human nature and became incarnate in order to save us from our sin by his glorious life, death, resurrection, and ascension. Or, as summarized by the later Chalcedonian Creed: Jesus is fully God and fully man, one person existing in two natures now and forevermore.

How does Scripture teach these incredible truths about Jesus? How did the church draw this theological conclusion from the diverse biblical data? For the most part, the church appealed to

individual texts which not only establish Jesus' unique relation to the Father, but also demonstrate his unique divine status and prerogatives, his divine work and acts, and his divine name and titles.<sup>3</sup> However, and this is the point I want to strongly emphasize, an often neglected way of establishing Jesus' identity is by tracing out the storyline of Scripture. As God's redemptive plan is progressively disclosed *through* the biblical covenants (viewed diachronically) the identity of the coming Son (Messiah) becomes more defined.<sup>4</sup> By the time the curtain of the NT opens, OT expectation of a Messiah to come who will inaugurate God's saving reign and usher in the new covenant age, is viewed as the obedient son, the antitype of all the previous covenant mediators, yet one who is also uniquely *the* Son who is identified with the Lord, hence God the Son incarnate. Four steps will sketch out how Scripture identifies the Jesus of the Bible by unpacking the biblical covenants which all terminate in Christ.

First, Scripture begins with the declaration that God, as Creator and Triune Lord is the sovereign ruler and King of the universe. From the opening verses of Genesis, God is introduced and identified as the all-powerful Lord who created the universe by his work, while he himself is uncreated, self-sufficient, and in need of nothing outside himself (Pss 50:12-14; 93:2; Acts 17:24-25). As the Lord, he chooses to enter into covenant relations with his creatures through the first man, Adam. But sadly, Adam willfully and foolishly rebels against God's sovereign rule and by his act of disobedience, sin and all of its disastrous effects are brought into this world. Instead of leaving us to ourselves and swiftly bringing full judgment upon us, God acts in grace, choosing to save a people for himself and to reverse the manifold effects of sin.<sup>5</sup> This choice to save is evident in the *protoeuangelion* (Gen 3:15), given immediately after the fall to reverse the disastrous effects of sin upon the world through a coming deliverer. This promise, in embryonic form, anticipates the coming of a Redeemer, the "seed of the woman," who though

wounded himself in conflict, will destroy the works of Satan and restore goodness to this world. This promise creates the expectation that when it is finally realized, all sin and death will be defeated and the fullness of God's saving reign will come to this world as God's rightful rule is acknowledged and embraced.

Second, God's promise receives greater definition and clarity *through* the biblical covenants. As God's plan unfolds in redemptive history and as God enters into covenant relations with Noah, Abraham, Israel, and David, step by step, God, by his mighty acts and words, prepares his people to anticipate the coming of the "seed of the women," the deliverer, the Messiah. A Messiah who, when he comes, will *fulfill* all of God's promises by ushering in God's saving rule to this world.<sup>6</sup> This point is important for establishing the identity of the Messiah, especially the truth that he is God the Son incarnate. On the one hand, Scripture teaches that the fulfillment of God's promises will be accomplished *through a man* as developed by various typological persons such as Adam, Noah, Moses, Israel, and David, all seen in terms of the covenants. On the other hand, Scripture also teaches that this Messiah is more than a mere man since he is *identified with God*. How so? Because in fulfilling God's promises he literally inaugurates *God's* saving rule (kingdom) and shares the very throne of God—something no mere human can do—which entails that his identity is intimately tied to the one true and living God.<sup>7</sup> This observation is further underscored by the next point which brings together the establishment of God's kingdom through the inauguration of the new covenant.

Third, how does God's kingdom come in its *saving/redemptive/new creation* sense? As the OT unfolds, God's saving kingdom is revealed and comes to this world, at least in anticipatory form, through the biblical covenants and covenant mediators—Adam, Noah, Abraham, and his seed centered in the nation of Israel, and most significantly through David and his sons. Yet, in the OT, it is clear that all of the covenant mediators (sons) fail

and do not fulfill God's promises. This is specifically evident in the Davidic kings who are "sons" to Yhwh, the representatives of Israel, and thus "little Adams," but they fail in their task. It is only when a true obedient son comes, a son which God himself provides that God's rule finally and completely is established and his promises are realized. This is why, in OT expectation, ultimately the arrival of God's kingdom is organically linked to the dawning of the new covenant. This is also why when one begins to read the Gospels, one is struck by the fact that the kingdom of God is so central to Jesus' life and teaching; he cannot be understood apart from it.<sup>8</sup> But note: in biblical thought one cannot think of the inauguration of the kingdom apart from the arrival of the new covenant.

In this regard, Jeremiah 31 is probably the most famous new covenant text in the OT, even though teaching on the new covenant is not limited to it. New covenant teaching is also found in the language of "everlasting covenant" and the prophetic anticipation of the coming of the new creation, the Spirit, and God's saving work among the nations. In fact, among the post-exilic prophets there is an expectation that the new covenant will have a purpose similar to the Mosaic covenant, i.e., to bring the blessing of the Abrahamic covenant back into the present experience of Israel and the nations,<sup>9</sup> yet there is also an expectation of some massive differences from the old, all of which are outlined in Jeremiah 31. Probably what is most *new* about the new covenant is the promise of complete forgiveness of sin (Jer 31:34). In the OT, forgiveness of sin is normally granted through the sacrificial system. However, the OT believer, if spiritually perceptive, knew that this was never enough, as evidenced by the repetitive nature of the system. But now in verse 34, Jeremiah announces that sin will be "remembered no more," which certainly entails that sin finally will be dealt with in full.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, especially when other texts are considered, the OT anticipates a perfect, unfettered fellowship of God's people with the Lord, a harmony restored between creation and God—a new creation and a

new Jerusalem—where the dwelling of God is with men (see Ezek 37:1-23; cf. Dan 12:2; Isa 25:6-9; Rev 21:3-4). That is why it is with the arrival of the new covenant age that we also have God’s saving kingdom brought to this world, which is precisely the fulfillment of the *protoeuangelion*.

Fourth, let us now take this basic storyline of Scripture and explain how it answers the crucial question: Who is Jesus? If we step back for a moment and ask—*Who* is able, or what kind of person is able to fulfill all of God’s promises, inaugurate his saving rule in this world, and to establish all that is associated with the new covenant including the full forgiveness of sin?—in biblical thought the answer is clear: it is *God alone* who can do it and no one else.<sup>11</sup> Is this not the message of the OT? Is this not the message of the covenants? As the centuries trace the history of Israel, it becomes evident that the Lord alone must act to accomplish his promises; he must initiate in order to save; he must *unilaterally* act if there is going to be redemption at all. After all, who ultimately can achieve the forgiveness of sin other than God alone? Who can usher in the new creation, final judgment, and salvation? Certainly none of these great realities will ever come through the previous covenant mediators for they have all, in different ways, failed. Nor will it come through Israel as a nation for her sin has brought about her exile and judgment. If there is to be salvation at all, God *himself* must come and usher in salvation and execute judgment; the arm of the Lord must be revealed (Isa 51:9; 52:10; 53:1; 59:16-17; cf. Ezek 34). Just as he once led Israel through the desert, so he must come again, bringing about a new exodus in order to bring salvation to his people (Isa 40:3-5).<sup>12</sup>

However, as the biblical covenants establish, alongside the emphasis that God *himself* must come and accomplish these great realities, the OT also stresses that the Lord will do so *through* another David, a human figure, but a human figure who is also closely identified with the Lord himself. Isaiah pictures this well. This king to come will sit on David’s throne (Isa 9:7), but he

will also bear the very titles and names of God (Isa 9:6). This King, though another David (Isa 11:1), is also David’s Lord who shares in the divine rule (Ps 110:1; cf. Matt 22:41-46). He will be the mediator of a new covenant; he will perfectly obey and act like the Lord (Isa 11:1-5); yet he will suffer for our sin in order to justify many (Isa 53:11). It is through him that forgiveness will come for he is, “The Lord our righteousness” (Jer 23:5-6). In this way, OT hope and expectation, which is all grounded in the coming of the Lord to save, is joined together with the coming of the Messiah, one who is fully human yet also one who bears the divine name (Isa 9:6-7; Ezek 34).

It is this basic storyline of Scripture which serves as the framework and background to the NT’s presentation of Jesus. Who is Jesus? He is the one who inaugurates *God’s* kingdom and new covenant age. In him, the full forgiveness of sin is achieved; in him, the eschatological Spirit is poured out, the new creation dawns, and all of God’s promises are fulfilled. But, in light of the OT teaching, who can do such a thing? Only one who is both the Lord *and* the obedient Son, which is precisely how the NT presents Jesus. The NT unambiguously teaches that this *human* Jesus is also the Lord since he alone ushers in *God’s* kingdom. He is the eternal Son in relation to his Father (see Matt 11:1-15; 12:41-42; 13:16-17; Luke 7:18-22; 10:23-24; cf. John 1:1-3; 17:3), and also the one who has taken on our flesh and lived and died among us in order to win for us our salvation (John 1:14-18). In him, as fully human, the glory and radiance of God is completely expressed since he is the exact image and representation of the Father (Heb 1-3; cf. Col. 1:15-17; 2:9). In him, all the biblical covenants have reached their *telos* and by his cross work, he has inaugurated the new covenant and all of its entailments. But it is crucial to point out: to say that he has done all of this is to identify him *as God the Son incarnate*, fully God and fully man.<sup>13</sup>

It is for this reason that the NT presents Jesus in an entirely different category from any created

thing. In fact, Scripture so identifies him with the Lord in all of his actions, character, and work that he is viewed, as David Wells reminds us, as “the agent, the instrument, and the personifier of God’s sovereign, eternal, saving rule.”<sup>14</sup> In Jesus Christ, we see all of God’s plans and purposes fulfilled; we see the resolution of God to take upon himself our guilt and sin in order to reverse the horrible effects of the fall and to satisfy his own righteous requirements, to make this world right, and to inaugurate a new covenant in his blood. In Jesus Christ, we see the perfectly obedient Son who is also the Lord, taking the initiative to keep his covenant-promises by taking upon our human flesh, veiling his glory, and winning for us our redemption. In him we see two major OT eschatological expectations unite: he is the sovereign Lord who comes to rescue and save his people, who is, simultaneously, David’s greater Son. In this way, our Lord Jesus Christ fulfills all the types and shadows of the OT who is also the eternal Son, identified with the covenant Lord and thus God-equal to the Father in every way. The biblical covenants, then, nicely teach us who Jesus is and, in fact, he cannot be understood apart from them.

### **THE BIBLICAL COVENANTS AND THE ACTIVE OBEDIENCE OF CHRIST**

Let us now turn to an examination of how the unfolding nature of the biblical covenants help illuminate the important biblical truth of Christ’s active obedience. Historically and in contemporary theological discussions, people have disputed the biblical and theological basis for the active obedience of Christ.<sup>15</sup> In Reformed theology (but not limited to it), the discussion of Christ’s active obedience is part of the larger discussion of the nature of Christ’s cross work and how his work is applied to us in salvation. Often the distinction is made between Christ’s *active* and *passive* obedience.

On the one hand, active obedience, as Wayne Grudem explains, is conceived of in terms of the way “Christ had to live a life of perfect obedience to God in order to earn righteousness for us. He

had to obey the law for his whole life on our behalf so that the positive merits of his perfect obedience would be counted for us.”<sup>16</sup> As that active obedience is applied to us, it is viewed in terms of the *imputation* of Christ’s righteousness to us, tied to the larger discussion of justification by grace through faith. In other words, our Lord, in his life and death, acts as the obedient Son in our place so that his righteousness is legally reckoned to us by faith union in him.

On the other hand, passive obedience refers to Christ, as our substitute, bearing our sin in our place and paying the penalty we rightly deserve. Together they emphasize that for our Lord Jesus to act as our Savior, his whole life and death is one act of obedience to the Father on our behalf. Salvation requires that our Lord not only had to pay for our sin as our substitute (passive obedience); he also had to live a life of perfect, devoted obedience before God, as our representative (active obedience). In so doing, as the obedient Son, he fulfilled God’s righteous demands for us both in regard to penal sanctions and positive demands.

Why have some disputed the biblical basis for the active obedience of Christ? A number of reasons could be given all the way from a misunderstanding of the terms, to thinking that it can only be maintained as it is linked to a specific understanding of the “covenant of works,” and to a rejection that God demands perfect obedience for salvation.<sup>17</sup> Yet, such a dismissal or even worse, rejection, greatly affects how we think of Christ’s cross and its application to us. As Greg Van Court reminds us, the active/passive distinction is not just an attempt to describe the judicial character of justification:

It is also a means of articulating the holiness and infinite worth of God’s character and the positive and negative aspect that is inherently and inseparably bound up in all true obedience to his perfect will. For example, it is not enough to have no other gods before him; if one is to be acceptable before holy God, he must love him

with all his heart, mind, and soul. It is not enough to refrain from committing adultery; if a husband is to be obedient to God, he must love his wife as Christ loved the church and gave his life for her. It is not enough to put off filthiness; one must also put on righteousness. Righteousness is not merely the negative lack of what is bad but also the positive fulfillment of what is good. It is this positive aspect of Christ's obedience to the will of the Father even unto and especially unto death that Reformed theologians have termed *active*.<sup>18</sup>

Or, as John Murray nicely states,

We must not view this obedience in any artificial or mechanical sense. When we speak of Christ's obedience we must not think of it as consisting simply in formal fulfillment of the commandments of God. What the obedience of Christ involved for him is perhaps nowhere more strikingly expressed than in Hebrews 2:10-18; 5:8-10 where we are told that Jesus "learned obedience from the things which he suffered," that he was made perfect through sufferings, and that "being made perfect he became to all who obey him the author of eternal salvation."... It was requisite that he should have been made perfect through sufferings and become the author of salvation through this perfecting. It was not, of course, a perfecting that required the sanctification from sin to holiness. He was always holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners. But there was the perfecting of development and growth in the course and path of his obedience—he *learned* obedience. The heart and mind and will of our Lord had been moulded—shall we not say forged?—in the furnace of temptation and suffering. And it was in virtue of what he had learned in that experience of temptation and suffering that he was able, at the climactic point fixed by the arrangements of infallible wisdom and everlasting love, to be obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.<sup>19</sup>

Given the importance of the active obedience of Christ for understanding Christ's work and its application to us, how is it best demonstrated? As in the discussion of the identity of Christ, one must establish its biblical basis text by text. But it is also important to remember that texts are embedded in an overall storyline which provides the categories, structures, and framework to make sense of individual texts. In the case of the active obedience of Christ, one's grasp of the biblical covenants is crucial in establishing its grounding. Let us develop this point in three steps.

First, the active obedience of Christ is intimately related to the larger question of the unconditional-conditional nature of the biblical covenants. What exactly do I mean by this distinction? In *Kingdom through Covenant*, we spend a lot of time addressing it. There we discuss that a common way to distinguish the biblical covenants is to employ the unconditional-unilateral (royal grant) versus conditional-bilateral (suzerain-vassal) distinction.<sup>20</sup> It is on this basis that the Abrahamic, Davidic, and new covenant are often characterized as a royal-grant covenant (unconditional) covenant, while the covenant with creation and the covenant with Israel is described as a suzerain-vassal covenant (conditional). From here a variety of theological conclusions are drawn depending upon the issue. Yet, as we discuss in the book, for a variety of reasons, we dissent from this common way of distinguishing the biblical covenants. Instead, we argue that the OT covenants consist of unconditional (unilateral) and conditional (bilateral) elements blended together. In fact, it is precisely due to this blend that there is a deliberate *tension* within the covenants—a tension which is heightened as the storyline of Scripture and the biblical covenants progress toward their fulfillment in Christ *and* a tension which is important in grounding Christ's active obedience.

On the one hand, what the covenants and storyline of Scripture reveal is the sovereign promise-making and covenant-keeping God who never fails. He is the covenant Lord who supremely

reveals himself as the God of *hesed* and *'emet* or, in NT terms, “grace and truth.” As Creator and Lord, he chooses to enter into relationships with his creatures, and in that relationship he always shows himself to be the faithful partner. He always remains true to himself, his own character, and his promises, and it is on this basis alone that we can hope, trust, and find all our confidence in him. Does not the author of Hebrews capture this point well when he reflects on the certainty of God’s covenant promises, especially as those promises are brought to fulfillment in Christ? The author states: “So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us” (Heb 6:17, 18). The covenants, then, reveal first and foremost the incredible sovereign-personal Triune God of Scripture who is our covenant Lord, who makes and keeps his promises and as such they can never be thwarted. It is for this reason that all of the biblical covenants are unconditional or unilaterally guaranteed by the power and grace of God. Whether it is with Adam in the garden, God’s commitment to his image-bearers and creation, tied to his promise in Genesis 3:15, will never fail. That same promise runs across the entire canon and it is developed through the biblical covenants until it comes to its most profound fulfillment in the coming of God’s own dear Son. It continues in the Noahic; it is given more definition and expansion in the Abrahamic; it undergirds the old covenant and the Davidic, and, as noted, it reaches its crescendo in Christ.

On the other hand, all the biblical covenants also demand an obedient partner (son). This is evident with Adam as commands and responsibilities are given to him and the expectation is that he will do so perfectly. Furthermore, as the covenants unfold the same emphasis is in all of them. Complete obedience and devotion are demanded

from the covenant mediators and the people; God demands and deserves nothing less. In this sense, there is a conditional/bilateral element to all the covenants. It is this latter emphasis on God’s demand of complete obedience from his creatures which is crucial in establishing the grounding to the active obedience of Christ. This is consistent with who he is as the standard of righteousness and justice. To demand anything less than full devotion from his creatures would be a denial of himself. In addition, in creating us, our Triune God made us for himself, to know him, to worship him as servant-kings, to obey him, as we fulfill our task to extend his rule to the entire creation.

Second, in the covenant of creation, it is best to think of God’s initial arrangement with Adam as holding forth a conditional promise of everlasting life. Even though this point is often disputed, there are good reasons to maintain it.<sup>21</sup> In this regard, God’s specific command and warning to Adam in Genesis 2:16-17 and the emphasis on the tree of life (Gen 2:9) is important. Admittedly, in the text, no reward is explicitly given, yet in light of the entire canon, this conclusion is warranted. First, think of the command *not* to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It is best to view this command as a test of Adam’s obedience to the Lord. He was created to love God and his neighbor with a heart of love and devotion. The specific prohibition was a test to discern whether Adam would be what he was created to be: an obedient son. Sadly, Adam failed and the consequence of his action was no private affair. As the first man and representative head of the human race, his choice brought death into this world—spiritually and physically—for the entire human race.

In addition, think of the tree of life. It is best to see it as an implied promise of life especially in light of Genesis 3:22 where God expels man from Eden so that he will not take of the tree and live forever.<sup>22</sup> The expulsion from Eden not only speaks of God’s judgment upon Adam (and the entire human race) but it also gives a glimmer of hope that eternal life is still possible, especially set in

the context of the Genesis 3:15 promise of a coming deliverer. Together the two trees present two choices in Eden: life or death. As Micah McCormick rightly notes, “If the tree of the knowledge of good and evil loomed over Eden with the threat of death, so too did the tree of life course with the expectation of everlasting life.”<sup>23</sup> Canonically, it is significant that the tree of life appears again in the new creation.<sup>24</sup> Not only are believers told that they will eat of the tree of life if they preserve until the end (Rev 2:7), but in the new creation all who dwell there are sons of God who enjoy the tree of life (Rev 22:1-5). G. K. Beale captures the significance of this when he writes: “To ‘eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God’ is a picture of forgiveness and consequent experience of God’s intimate presence (22:2-4).... The ‘tree’ refers to the redemptive effects of the cross, which bring about the restoration of God’s presence.”<sup>25</sup> In this light, it is legitimate to conclude that the tree of life symbolizes eternal life—held out to Adam in the beginning and won by our Lord Jesus Christ.

Putting together these pieces, especially in light of the larger Adam-Christ typological relationship (Rom 5:12-21; 1 Cor 15:22, 45-49; cf. Heb 2:5-18), where Adam failed, Christ succeeded in gaining eternal life for his people. Death (physical and spiritual) was the result of Adam’s disobedience; eternal life (spiritual and physical) was the result of Christ’s act of obedience—an obedience which characterized his entire life including the supreme act of obedience in his death (Phil 2:8). Adam acted as our covenantal head yet failed the test. God demanded from him covenant loyalty, devotion, and obedience, but he did not fulfill the purpose of his creation. As Michael Horton rightly notes, “Adam is created in a state of integrity with the ability to render God complete obedience, thus qualifying as a suitable human partner,”<sup>26</sup> yet he failed. Our Lord, as the second Adam, lived a life of complete love, devotion, and obedience to his heavenly Father for us—showing us what an obedient son looks like—and in the greatest act of obedience possible, went to the cross for us to

pay for our sin and satisfy God’s own righteous requirements which we violated in our sin, rebellion, and disobedience.

Third, building on the previous point, it is important to observe how *tension* grows as we progress *through* the biblical covenants in regard to God’s demand for obedient covenant partners. To be sure, the Lord himself always remains the faithful covenant partner as the promise-maker and promise-keeper. By contrast, all the human covenant mediators—Adam, Noah, Abraham, Israel, David and his sons—show themselves to be unfaithful, disobedient covenant-breakers—some to a greater extent than others. As a result, there is no faithful, obedient son who fully obeys the demands of the covenant. Obedience *must* be rendered but there is no obedient son to do so. How, then, can God remain the holy and just God that he is and continue to be present with us in covenant relation? How can he remain in relation with us unless our disobedience is removed and our sin is paid for in full? The only answer is this: God himself, as the covenant-maker and keeper, must unilaterally act to keep his own promise *through the provision of a faithful, obedient Son*. It is only through his obedience—in life and in death—that our redemption is secured, our sin is paid for, and the inauguration of an unshakeable new covenant is established.

In this regard, it is important to note how much the NT stresses the obedience of Christ.<sup>27</sup> John Calvin is correct when he states, “Now someone asks, how has Christ abolished sin, banished the separation between us and God, and acquired righteousness to render God favorably and kindly toward us. To this we can in general reply that he has achieved this for us by the whole course of his obedience.”<sup>28</sup> A whole course of obedience which not only refers to Christ’s obedient death on our behalf, but also his entire obedient life, lived out for us as our representative head. In the context of the covenant of creation, God’s demands must be perfectly satisfied, either personally or representatively. “To reflect God as his image-bearer is there-

fore to be righteous, holy, obedient—a covenant servant, defined as such by the covenant charter (Hos 6:7, with Isa 24:5; Jer. 31:35-37; 33:20-22, 25-26).”<sup>29</sup> Christ fulfills Adam’s role; he recapitulates Adam’s testing in the garden, yet he does not fail. In his obedient life he fulfills the covenant of creation representatively, and by his obedient death, he acts as our substitute paying the debt we could never repay. And all of his work as the head of the new covenant becomes ours, not by physical birth or anything in us, but solely by God’s sovereign grace as the Father chooses us in him, the Spirit unites us to him by new birth, and his righteous standing becomes ours as a result.

It is in this covenantal context that we must think of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the believer and how it is that his active obedience becomes ours. It is by Christ acting as our covenant head and we, by God’s grace and through repentance and faith, come under his covenant headship. As John Murray rightly states, “Christ’s obedience was vicarious in the bearing of the full judgment of God upon sin, and it was vicarious in the full discharge of the demands of righteousness. His obedience becomes the ground of the remission of sin and of actual justification.”<sup>30</sup> God reckons or counts our entire sin to be Christ’s and Christ’s entire righteousness to be ours. This great exchange provides the basis for the forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life. In this way, Scripture speaks of three great imputations. “The first great imputation is Adam’s entire guilt from the Fall to all people (Rom 5:12, 18a, 19a; Ps 51:5). The second is the elect’s entire sin to Christ (Isa 53:4-6; Rom 8:3-4; 1 Cor 5:21a; Gal 3:13). The third is Christ’s entire righteousness to his elect (Rom 3:21-22; 5:18a, 19b; 1 Cor 5:21b; Phil 3:9).”<sup>31</sup>

Viewing Christ’s active obedience, imputation, and justification within context of the biblical covenants is nothing new. Yet, in light of today’s debates, it helps illuminate and underscore the great gospel truth of salvation by grace alone, by faith alone, and by Christ alone. In a recent article wrestling with the “new perspective on Paul,”

Kevin Vanhoozer rightly suggests that viewing Christ’s work and how it becomes ours in the context of Christ’s covenant representation of his people and our faith union with our covenant head, is a more biblical way of thinking. When we do so, it now makes sense to say that God reckons Christ’s,

right covenantal relatedness ours ... [since] Christ does everything that Israel (and Adam) was supposed to do. He suffers the covenant sanction and fulfills the covenant law, including its summary command, “to love God and your neighbor as oneself.” In counting us righteous, then, God both pardons us (“there is therefore now no condemnation” [Rom 8:1]) and gives us the positive *status* of rectitude, a down payment, as it were, sealed with the Spirit, on our eventually achieving an actual righteous *state* (i.e., sanctification)... Christians become members of God’s covenant family by receiving the Son’s status: *righteous sonship*. Jesus Christ was the righteous Son the Father always wanted Israel, and Adam, to be.... Sons and daughters in Christ, we have Christ’s righteousness standing before God *and* unity with one another as members of Christ’s one body.<sup>32</sup>

## CONCLUDING REFLECTION

Here, then, are two examples of how understanding the progressive, unfolding nature of the biblical covenants helps illuminate the glories of our great Redeemer, first in terms of his identity, and secondly in terms of his new covenant work as our Lord and Savior. In some small way, may these short reflections on the biblical storyline and biblical covenants lead us to greater love, adoration, and obedience to the Lord of Glory.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012).

<sup>2</sup>On this point see for example, Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other*

*Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> See e.g., Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, eds. *The Deity of Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011); Robert M. Bowman, Jr. and J. Ed. Komoszewski, *Putting Jesus in His Place: The Case for the Deity of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007); Simon J. Gathercole, *The Pre-existent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006); Robert L. Reymond, *Jesus, Divine Messiah: The New and Old Testament Witness* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2003); Murray J. Harris, *3 Crucial Questions about Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994); idem, *Jesus as God: The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> In this article we will not address the historical-critical issue of whether messianism is prevalent or even exists in the OT; I simply assume that it is for the sake of this article and presentation. On this issue, see Stanley Porter, ed., *The Messiah in the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007); J. H. Charlesworth et al., eds., *The Messiah: Developments in Earliest Judaism and Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992); John J. Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God: Divine, Human, and Angelic Messianic Figures in Biblical and Related Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); Walter Kaiser, *The Messiah in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995); Robert Reymond, *Jesus: Divine Messiah*.

<sup>5</sup> In truth, God's plan is an eternal plan and not one that originates in time. Stating it as we have done only seeks to reflect the drama of the story; it is not meant to deny that God's plan is from before the foundations of the world (see e.g., Ps 139:16; Isa 14:24-27; 22:11; 37:26; 46:10-11; Prov 16:4; 19:21; Acts 2:23; cf. 4:27-28; 17:26; Rom 8:28-29; 9-11; Gal 4:4-5; Eph 1:4, 11-12; 2:10).

<sup>6</sup> For a development of these points see Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*. Also see the work of Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991), and Stephen Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Biblical Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (New Studies in Biblical Theology;

Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> For a development of these points, see David F. Wells, *The Person of Christ: A Biblical and Historical Analysis of the Incarnation* (Westchester: Crossway, 1984), 21-81 and Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*. Some specific texts we have in mind are Pss 2, 45, 110; Isa 7:14; 9:6-7; Ezekiel 34, and Daniel 7.

<sup>8</sup> In the Gospels, the kingdom is mentioned directly thirteen times in Mark, nine times in sayings common to Matthew and Luke, twenty-seven additional instances in Matthew, twelve additional instances in Luke, and twice in John (Mark 1:15; 4:11, 26, 30; 9:1, 47; 10:14, 15, 23, 24, 25; 12:34; 14:25; Matt 5:3 [Luke 6:20]; 6:10 [Luke 11:2]; 6:33 [Luke 12:31]; 8:11 [Luke 13:29]; 10:7 [Luke 10:9]; 11:11 [Luke 7:28]; 11:12 [Luke 16:16]; 12:28 [Luke 11:20]; 13:33 [Luke 13:20]; 5:10, 19, 20; 7:21; 8:12; 13:19, 24, 38, 43, 44, 45, 47, 52; 16:19; 18:1, 3, 4, 23; 19:12; 20:1; 21:31, 43; 22:2; 23:13; 24:14; 25:1; Luke 4:43; 9:60, 62, 10:11; 12:32; 13:28; 17:20, 21; 18:29; 21:31; 22:16, 18; John 3:3). Even though John's Gospel does not use kingdom terminology as often, John refers to these same realities in the language of "eternal life." On this point, see I. Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 498; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Pillar New Testament Commentary: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 187-90. For John, eternal life belongs to the "age to come," which is, importantly, identified with Jesus (John 1:4; 5:26; 1 John 5:11-12) since Jesus himself is the "life" (John 11:25; 14:6). In this way, John ties eternal life to Jesus, just as the Synoptics link the kingdom with Jesus in his coming and cross work. We are not to view the Synoptic Gospels' emphasis on the fulfillment of God's promises by speaking of God's kingdom and John's focus on the fulfillment of God's promises by speaking of eternal life as if they are opposed to each other. See Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 123, who argues this point.

<sup>9</sup> The "new covenant" will bring about the Abrahamic blessing in that it will benefit both Israel and the nations. Within the OT, the new covenant is viewed

as both national (Jer 31:36-40; 33:6-16; Ezk 36:24-38; 37:11-28) and international (Jer 33:9; Ezek 36:36; 37:28). In fact, its scope is viewed as universal, especially in Isaiah (42:6; 49:6; 55:3-5; 56:4-8; 66:18-24). These Isaiah texts project the ultimate fulfillment of the divine promises in the new covenant onto an “ideal Israel,” i.e., a community tied to the Servant of the Lord located in a rejuvenated new creation (Is 65:17; 66:22). This “ideal Israel” picks up the promises to Abraham and is presented as the climactic and ultimate fulfillment of the covenants that God established with the patriarchs, the nation of Israel and David’s son (Isa 9:6-7; 11:1-10; Jer 23:5-6; 33:14-26; Ezek 34:23-24; 37:24-28). As the new covenant texts are picked up in the NT, they are viewed as fulfilled in Christ and then by extension to the church.

<sup>10</sup>The concept of “remembering” in the OT is not simple recall (cf. Gen 8:1; 1 Sam 1:19). That is why in the context of Jeremiah 31:34 for God “not to remember” means that no action will need to be taken in the new age against sin. In the end, to be under the terms of *this* covenant entails that one experiences a full and complete forgiveness of sin. See William Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* (2nd ed.; Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2002), 181-85, for a development of this point.

<sup>11</sup>See Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*, 184, who argues this point. Bauckham labels this teaching of the OT “eschatological monotheism.” By this expression he stresses not only God’s unique Lordship but also as sole Creator and Lord there is the expectation that, “in the future when YHWH fulfills his promises to his people Israel, YHWH will also demonstrate his deity to the nations, establishing his universal kingdom, making his name known universally, becoming known to all as the God Israel has known.” On this same point see N. T. Wright, “Jesus” in *New Dictionary of Theology* (eds. Sinclair B. Ferguson, et al.; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 349, who describes three features of first-century Judaism as, “a. belief in the one creator God who had entered into covenant with Israel; b. hope that this God would step into history to establish his covenant by vindicating Israel against her enemies ... ; c. the determination to

hasten this day by remaining loyal to the covenantal obligations enshrined in the law (Torah).”

<sup>12</sup>See R. E. Watts, “Exodus,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (eds. T. Desmond Alexander, et al.; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000): 478-87.

<sup>13</sup>David Wells, *Person of Christ*, 38, captures this point well when he unpacks the significance of Jesus inaugurating the kingdom and the new covenant age which, in biblical thought, *only God can do*. He writes: “This ‘age,’ we have seen was supernatural, could only be established by God himself, would bring blessings and benefits which only God could give, would achieve the overthrow of sin, death, and the devil (which only God could accomplish), and was identified so closely with God himself that no human effort could bring it about and no human resistance turn it back. If Jesus saw himself as the one in whom this kind of Kingdom was being inaugurated, then such a perception is a Christological claim which would be fraudulent and deceptive if Jesus was ignorant of his Godness.” For a similar view, see Reymond, *Jesus, Divine Messiah*, 239-41, and G. E. Ladd, “Kingdom of Christ, God, Heaven,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (ed. W. A. Elwell; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 609.

<sup>14</sup>Wells, *Person of Christ*, 172. Gerald Bray, “Christology” 137, makes the same point when he writes: “The NT claims that Jesus, the son of David and inheritor of the kingly tradition of Israel, became the high priest and victim of the atoning sacrifice, made once for all upon the cross in order to save men from their sins. Only God had the authority to overturn the established order of Israelite society in this way, and establish a ‘new way.’ That this took place is consistent with the first Christians’ claim that Jesus was God in human flesh, and this is in fact implicit in the frequent discussions of his authority which occur in the gospels.”

<sup>15</sup>For example, see Robert Gundry, “Why I Didn’t Endorse ‘The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration’ ... even though I wasn’t asked to,” *Books & Culture* 7, no. 1 (2001): 6-9; cf. the various essays both pro and con in Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier, eds., *Justification: What’s at Stake in the Current Debates?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity,

2005); J. R. Daniel Kirk, "The Sufficiency of the Cross (I): The Crucifixion as Jesus' Act of Obedience," *The Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 24, no. 1 (2006): 36-64; idem, "The Sufficiency of the Cross (II): The Law, the Cross, and Justification," *The Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 24, no. 2 (2006): 133-54.

<sup>16</sup>Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 270. Also see, Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (ed. James T. Dennison, Jr.; trans. George Musgrave Giger; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1994), 2:445-55; Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (ed. John Bolt; trans. John Vriend; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 3:394-95.

<sup>17</sup>For an extensive and excellent discussion of reasons why the active obedience of Christ is disputed or rejected, see Micah J. McCormick, *The Active Obedience of Jesus Christ* (Ph.D. diss.; The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2010), 1-93. Also see Brian Vickers, *Jesus' Blood and Righteousness: Paul's Theology of Imputation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006).

<sup>18</sup>Gregory A. Van Court, *The Obedience of Christ* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2005), 6.

<sup>19</sup>John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 22-23.

<sup>20</sup>See, for example, Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 128-211; Paul R. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God's Unfolding Purpose* (New Studies in Biblical Theology; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 17-43; Michael Horton, *God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 23-110.

<sup>21</sup>For a detailed defense of this view, see McCormick, *The Active Obedience of Jesus Christ*, 108-18.

<sup>22</sup>See Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Word Biblical Commentary; Waco: Word, 1987), 1:62, who argues that "Trees as a symbol of life are well-known in the Bible.... In Scripture, trees, because they remain green throughout summer drought, are seen as symbolic of the life of God (e.g., Ps 1:3; Jer 17:8).... Furthermore, it seems likely that the golden candlestick kept in the tabernacle was a stylized tree of life; the falling of its light on the twelve loaves of the presence

symbolized God's life sustaining the twelve tribes of Israel (Exod 25:31-35; Lev 24:1-9).

<sup>23</sup>McCormick, *The Active Obedience of Jesus Christ*, 112.

<sup>24</sup>There are also many intertextual links in the canon to the tree of life as well. See Prov 3:18; 11:30; 13:12; 15:4; Ezek 47:12, and so on.

<sup>25</sup>G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (New International Greek Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 234-35.

<sup>26</sup>Horton, *God of Promise*, 89.

<sup>27</sup>The NT explicitly speaks of the obedience of Christ in three texts (Rom 5:19; Phil 2:8; Heb 5:8-9; cf. 2:5-18). In addition, the concept or theme of obedience is found in numerous places. For example, the servant theme underscores Christ's obedience (Mark 10:45; Phil 2:7; cf. Isa 42:1; 52:13-53:12); the purpose of Jesus' coming is to do his Father's will as the Son (John 5:19-30; 8:28-29; 10:18; 12:49; 14:31; Heb 10:5-10); his submission to the law (Matt 3:15; Gal 4:1-4); and his being perfected through suffering (Heb 2:10-18; 5:8-10; 7:28).

<sup>28</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. John T. McNeil; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), II:16.5.

<sup>29</sup>Horton, *God of Promise*, 93.

<sup>30</sup>Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 22.

<sup>31</sup>Van Court, *The Obedience of Christ*, 15.

<sup>32</sup>Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Wrighting the Wrongs of the Reformation? The State of the Union with Christ in St. Paul and Protestant Soteriology," in *Jesus, Paul and the People of God: A Theological Dialogue with N. T. Wright* (eds. Nicholas Perrin and Richard B. Hays; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2011), 251, 256.