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ONE POSITION, TWO ADMINISTRATIONS:
EXPLORING THE THEOLOGICAL OVERLAP BETWEEN
1689 FEDERALISM AND PROGRESSIVE
COVENANTALISM

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Theology

by
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December 2021

APPROVAL SHEET

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To Candice.

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PREFACE

I am indebted to a number of individuals who have given me support throughout this project. Alex Tibbott has been a most helpful and dependable source of feedback, encouragement, and sometimes correction as I wrestled with this project. I am similarly grateful to my advisor, Dr. Gregg Allison, whose expertise and encouragement have benefitted me greatly. Thanks is likewise owed to Stephen Wellum and Richard Lucas for their helpful and thoughtful feedback.

I first came to know what Progressive Covenantalism and 1689 Federalism are through many mornings of coffee and good conversation with a friend, Josh Philpot. Thanks, Brother—sure miss those conversations. The godly examples of my father, Brad, and grandfather, Art, undergird and explain any thoughtfulness that might be found here. Instruments in the hands of the Lord, they are.

A new paragraph is in order if I am to mention my loving and supportive wife, Candice. Her backing has been the crucial piece, with no close second. I thank the Lord every day for sending her my way.

I pray that the cause of clarity and unity in the church may be furthered, even a bit, by this project. Soli Deo Gloria.

Blake Johnson

Amarillo, Texas

December 2021

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Calling a church body “Reformed” immediately sets it apart in significant doctrinal and practical ways. Historical markers like the “Five *Solas*” spring forward to provide identity and unity among confessors. Beneath the surface of that unity, however, distinctions and nuances abound—many that find their origins in the seventeenth century. Alongside the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, completed in 1646, Particular Baptists articulated a distinct Baptist covenant theology (hereafter BCT) in 1677 via the *Second London Baptist Confession of Faith*.¹ They did so using the *Westminster Confession* as their basic framework. As Sam Waldron explains, “The purpose for this method was to show, wherever possible, the continuity of faith which existed between the Particular Baptists and their other reformed brethren in Great Britain.”² A credobaptist understanding of covenant theology continued to develop over time.

Examining the modern history of Baptist denominations exceeds the scope of this thesis, but it suffices to say that by the mid twentieth century, the rich Reformed tradition had been lost to much of the Baptist world.³ Efforts to recover that tradition

¹ This was originally published in 1677 and ratified at the first national assembly in 1689.

² Samuel Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, 5th ed. (Darlington, CO: Evangelical Press, 2016), 13.

³ James Renihan calls the latter half of the Twentieth Century “a *ressourcement* of early Baptist theological literature” that deepens “our understanding of a key precept at the root of their theology—covenantalism.” James Renihan, foreword to Samuel Renihan, *From Shadow to Substance: The Federal Theology of the English Particular Baptists (1642-1704)*, vol. 16, Baptist History and Heritage Studies (Oxford: Regent's Park College, 2018). Likewise, Michael Haykin writes of Baptists having undergone a “rediscovery of Reformed theology in the past fifty years.” Michael Haykin, outside back cover of Samuel Renihan, *From Shadow to Substance*.

have led to disunity among otherwise like-minded brethren. To wit, Earl Blackburn laments that

For the past fifty years, the resurgence of Calvinistic soteriology (i.e., the “doctrines of grace,” the Reformed Faith, or the Five Points of Calvinism) among Baptists has been marked by disturbing distractions regarding God’s Covenant Theology, creating disunity and further divisions between us . . . [Some,] reacting to Paedobaptist Covenant Theology, have rejected historic Baptist Covenant Theology as well, claiming that one cannot be a Baptist and still hold to Covenant Theology. Thus, historic baptistic covenantal theology . . . has suffered an uphill battle for Calvinistic Baptist unity and for a confessional basis for associational fellowship and cooperative missions.⁴

As recently as the last twenty years, the rediscovery of many early seventeenth-century Baptist writings has produced a distinct Baptist understanding of covenant theology known as 1689 Federalism. Below, I will detail its origins and distinctives, but it is significant at this point to note that 1689 Federalists—notably Richard Barcellos, Pascal Denault, James Renihan, and Samuel Renihan—have underscored those distinctives that distinguish them both from Paedobaptists *and* from others within BCT.⁵ In the world of BCT, then, I am deliberately making a distinction between 1689 Federalists and others, often called “20th Century Reformed Baptists” (hereafter 20RB)—an approach to Covenantalism represented in works by Samuel Waldron, Fred Malone, and Earl Blackburn, to name a few.⁶ 1689 Federalists are strengthening the world of BCT with increasing clarity and historical-theological insight.

⁴ Earl M. Blackburn, *Covenant Theology: A Baptist Distinctive* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2013), 11.

⁵ See, among other works, Richard C. Barcellos, *Recovering a Covenantal Heritage: Essays in Baptist Covenant Theology*, (Palmdale, CA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014); Pascal Denault, *The Distinctiveness of Baptist Covenant Theology: A Comparison Between Seventeenth-Century Particular Baptist and Paedobaptist Federalism*, 2nd ed. (Vestavia Hills, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2017); James Renihan, ed., *Faith and Life for Baptists: The Documents of the London Particular Baptist Assemblies, 1689-1694* (Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2016); Samuel Renihan, Regent’s Park College, and Centre for Baptist History and Heritage, *From Shadow to Substance: The Federal Theology of the English Particular Baptists (1642-1704)*, 2018.

⁶ The fundamental distinction between the two groups within BCT is seen in their willingness, or not, to follow Presbyterian Covenantalism in its assertion of a “one covenant, two administrations” perspective regarding the relationship between the Mosaic and New Covenants. 20RBs follow this viewpoint; 1689 Federalists do not. For examples of this among 20RBs, see Blackburn, *Covenant Theology*, 25-26; and Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, 128 and 128n2. For a helpful explanation of the history between both forms of CBT, see Rexford Semrad,

When movements are born out of the kind of fighting that Blackburn alludes to above, they run the risk of adopting an overly defensive and polemical posture that cannot recognize the emergence of sympathetic developments. As the spectrum of biblical-theological systems has been further clarified in recent years with the arrival of Progressive Covenantalism (hereafter PC), its arrival has been challenged and opposed by 1689 Federalists instead of celebrated for what it is—the logical conclusion of three hundred years of work by Reformed Baptists.⁷ The PC perspective, with its flagship work written in 2012 by Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum entitled *Kingdom Through Covenant* (hereafter *KTC*)⁸, has found support from a number of pastors and theologians in the Reformed Baptist world. Such a historic development will contribute much in the coming years to the question, “What is the most effective way forward for Reformed Baptists?” 1689 Federalism and PC both represent development in the Baptist world that is helpful and hopeful.

Thesis

I will contend that the most effective way forward for 1689 Federalists is to cease their efforts at carving out a place within traditional Covenantalism and instead to identify PC as the system that most properly fits their theological distinctives. Because the distinctives of PC are overtly sympathetic to the priorities of 1689 Federalism, 1689 Federalism should identify itself as a subset of PC rather than as a subset of covenant

“Covenant Theology, the 2LBC & CBTS,” *Covenant Baptist Theological Seminary* (blog), December 14, 2020, cbtseminary.org/covenant-theology-the-2lbc-cbts.

⁷ To say this is, admittedly, to use the term loosely and not in the stricter ways it usually appears. My intention with this moniker is something like the general distinction that Brandon Adams has called “non-dispensational, calvinistic, credobaptist covenantalism.” Brandon Adams, “Non-Dispensational, Calvinistic, Credobaptist Covenantalism Compass,” *Contrast* (blog), August 7, 2012, <https://contrast2.wordpress.com/2012/08/07/non-dispensational-calvinistic-credobaptist-covenantalism-compass/>.

⁸ Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant : A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018). The second edition was published six years after the first (2012). Unless otherwise noted, references made to *KTC* are to the second edition.

theology. Such a reorganization of labels along the theological spectrum would benefit PC by supplying it an improved historical footing. Simultaneously, 1689 Federalism would be supplied with clarity and freedom, no longer needing to engage in the constant effort of distinguishing itself from Presbyterian covenant theology (hereafter CT).

Methodology

I will begin by demonstrating that, while the priority and distinctives represented by PC align with those of 1689 Federalism, the interactions between proponents of the two positions have consistently included misrepresentation and misunderstanding. Careful analysis of the published interactions between the two systems bear this out. 1689 Federalism works will display an awareness and, at times, appreciation of the PC position—even as those works demonstrate misunderstandings that need to be corrected. PC writings, by contrast, early on took the route of overlooking the distinctives found in 1689 Federalism in favor of interacting more directly with Dispensationalism and Presbyterian CT. PC would benefit from more intentional interaction with 1689 Federalism. Second, I will examine the theological priorities and distinctives of each, showing where they align and where they differ. In particular, matters pertaining to the Law lie at what divides proponents of these two systems; and thus, a separate chapter will be devoted to Law. Finally, I will suggest ways in which such a realignment of the boundary markers between systems will bless and sharpen proponents of both PC and 1689 Federalism; namely, through the enhancement of internal clarity and the advancement of the principle arguments of each.

CHAPTER 2

PUBLISHED INTERACTIONS BETWEEN THE TWO SYSTEMS OF 1689 FEDERALISM AND PROGRESSIVE COVENANTALISM

Published exchanges between proponents of PC and 1689 Federalism have been somewhat limited. This is understandable, given the relative obscurity of the 1689 Federalist position (obscurity that is rapidly diminishing) and the relative newness of the PC position itself (the first edition of its flagship work, *KTC*, was published in 2012). Such interactions have already produced helpful clarity and dialogue; yet on both sides, interactions include lack of engagement, misunderstanding, and seeming mischaracterizations that have complicated the dialogue.

Treatment of 1689 Federalism within Progressive Covenantalism

A comparison of the first and second editions of *KTC* reveals an increased attentiveness to the varieties and distinctions within covenant theology. Gentry and Wellum were content in the first edition to describe, unnuanced, “the basic contours of covenant theology,”¹ followed by an excellent summary of *Paedobaptist* covenant theology. Although “Reformed Baptists” are referred to at places in general terms, the distinct ideas that came to be identified as “1689 Federalism” are not mentioned in the first edition. Such a lack of nuance led many to object along similar lines of a review written by Christopher Bruno, who suggested that “Gentry and Wellum have not

¹ Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 1st ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 59.

sufficiently interacted with the long history of covenant theologians in the Baptist tradition.”²

Fairness demands recognition that such was their stated purpose from the beginning; it was not their intent to interact with all forms of CT. Yet, perhaps as a result of feedback from voices like Bruno, the second edition of *KTC* continues the quotation given above with an important qualification: “Given the variety of forms of covenant theology—Presbyterian and Dutch Reformed (and differences within each of these groups, such as Federal Vision), Seventh-day Adventist, and even Reformed Baptist—our main focus is on the view of Paedobaptist covenant theology.”³ For them to do this is, in one sense, fair enough; it is helpful that the second edition is explicit in the application of the term “covenantal” to refer to Paedobaptist covenantalism specifically. However, proceeding in that manner presents a number of problems.

First, and most relevant to the present work, there continues to be an insufficiently nuanced representation of BCT. After expanding upon the “Presbyterian and Dutch Reformed” group by recognizing the existence of subsets—specifically, Federal Vision—Gentry and Wellum mention “Reformed Baptist” as if it were a unique and monolithic approach to CT.⁴ Indeed, in the footnote that accompanies the statement about Reformed Baptists, readers are directed to three works to better understand BCT. Two of those works are Richard Barcellos’ *Recovering a Covenantal Heritage* and Earl Blackburn’s *Covenant Theology: A Baptist Distinctive*. Gentry and Wellum do not clarify, however, that these two authors represent views that differ from one another on

² Christopher Bruno, “Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants, A Review Article,” *Themelios* 37, no. 3 (2012).

³ Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 76.

⁴ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 76.

the very matters being defined within *KTC*.⁵ 1689 Federalism itself is mentioned only once in the entire work, and that in a footnote.⁶

The lack of engagement with the diversity within BCT gives the impression that BCT is monolithic, leading to mischaracterization. There are numerous instances in *KTC* where the PC position is held up against “the covenantal view” in places where 1689 Federalism would side with *KTC*—even, at times, over against proponents of 20RB. While the finer points of both theological systems are detailed below, Table 1 provides a sample of such instances within the *Prolegomena* section of *KTC*.⁷ This lack of nuance, then, hides both (1) the significant agreement between PC and 1689 Federalism and (2) the deliberate departures from 20RB that are made by 1689 Federalism.

Table 1. Descriptions of CT within *KTC*

<i>KTC</i> Description of CT	Accurate for 20RB	Accurate for 1689 Federalism
“Historically, CT has maintained . . . the ‘covenant of grace’ made through Christ . . . and administered in history through a series of covenants from Adam to Christ.” ⁸	Yes	No
“CT acknowledges that throughout redemptive history, the covenant of grace is administered differently, but overall, each biblical covenant is substantially or essentially the same.” ⁹	Yes	No

⁵ Ten pages later, they acknowledge that Barcellos and Blackburn represent diverging views within BCT. There, the same two works grouped together are given as examples of the diversity within BCT. See Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 86n125.

⁶ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 86n125.

⁷ The astute reader will notice that, while three of the characterizations apply to 20RB (leaving four to apply only as regards Paedobaptist covenant theology), none of the characterizations apply in the case of 1689 Federalism.

⁸ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 74 (emphasis added).

⁹ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 75 (emphasis in original).

Table 1 continued

KTC Description of CT	Accurate for 20RB	Accurate for 1689 Federalism
“Within CT, then, Israel and the church are so linked that the only real differences between the two communities are that the New Testament ‘church’ is more racially mixed than predominantly Jewish and that the ‘church’ is a more knowledgeable version of ‘Israel.’” ¹⁰	No	No
“[The covenant of grace] was then progressively revealed and fulfilled in history through variously administered covenants with Noah, Abraham, Israel, and David.” ¹¹	Yes	No
“As Horton <i>and all covenant theologians</i> acknowledge, not everyone in the covenant of grace is elect.” ¹²	No	No
“For this reason, covenant theologians teach that the circle of the covenant people is wider than the circle of election.” ¹³	No	No
“Or contra CT, Jesus’s <i>New Covenant</i> people are not a mixed community . . .” ¹⁴	No	No

The decision to present CT without acknowledging these differences within BCT leads to a second problem: it grants Paedobaptists the sole right of representing “historic covenant theology.” While I am here arguing for a realignment of historic demarcations, Reformed Baptists (dating back to their Particular Baptist forebears) have identified themselves as something of a Baptist-subset within CT.¹⁵ Granting Paedobaptists the right of comprehensive representation creates a false impression that

¹⁰ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 76.

¹¹ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 84.

¹² Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 90 (emphasis added).

¹³ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 94.

¹⁴ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 150.

¹⁵ Samuel Renihan clearly demonstrates this in his dissertation. Samuel Renihan, *From Shadow to Substance: The Federal Theology of the English Particular Baptists (1642-1704)*, vol. 16, Baptist History and Heritage Studies (Oxford: Regent's Park College, 2018).

does injustice to history. It is true that Paedobaptist covenant theology enjoys a rich historical heritage, but so does BCT – and this is downplayed by the appearance in table 1 of words like “historically” and “all covenant theologians” when referring to matters from which Baptist theologians have dissented since the seventeenth century. The companion work edited by Stephen Wellum and Brent Parker, *Progressive Covenantalism*, speaks in similarly broad strokes on this topic. In his chapter on the mosaic law, Jason Meyer writes of “[his] reading of theologians within the Reformed tradition,” and says that “they seemed zealous to almost equate the old covenant and the new covenant. The impulse is to affirm that the Mosaic covenant is the same in ‘essence and substance’ with the new covenant.”¹⁶ Again, this is true of Paedobaptist covenant theologians; it is not true of BCT broadly nor of the 1689 Federalist position specifically, which maintains a robust historical position reaching back to the seventeenth century. Thus (as expressed in one review of *KTC*), because “many self-professed covenant theologians are also advocates of *credo-baptism*,” the argument of *KTC* is less an argument against CT *per se* than it is against paedobaptism.¹⁷

Treatment of Progressive Covenantalism within 1689 Federalism

1689 Federalists have reacted to the development of the PC system at somewhat regular intervals. After the 2012 publication of *KTC*, Samuel Renihan wrote a review article in 2014.¹⁸ Prior to the release of the work *Progressive Covenantalism*, Brandon Adams had already published an extended response to one of its chapters in a

¹⁶ Jason Meyer, “The Mosaic Law, Theological Systems, and the Glory of Christ,” in *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course between Dispensational and Covenant Theologies*, ed. Stephen Wellum and Brent Parker (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 79.

¹⁷ Bruno, “Kingdom Through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants, A Review Article.” While Bruno here engages with the first edition of *KTC*, the critique holds true for the second as well.

¹⁸ Samuel Renihan, “Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants, A Review Article,” *Journal of the Institute of Reformed Baptist Studies*, 2014, 154–76.

blog post.¹⁹ Samuel Renihan, James Renihan, and Richard Barcellos discussed PC on a video blog hosted on a prominent website for 1689 Federalists.²⁰ However, these interactions have not always fostered clarity and understanding. There seem to be two problems that have thus far hindered effective interaction with PC. The first problem has created the second one.

One hopes the first problem will be promptly resolved: 1689 writers are not yet interacting in print with the updated, second edition of *KTC*. Samuel Renihan created helpful dialogue in his 2014 review of the first edition, but to date no review has been released of the second edition from a 1689 Federalist viewpoint. Renihan's recent book, *The Mystery of Christ*, is a significant contribution to the biblical-theological sphere, and as we will see, displays a certain affinity for the PC position.²¹ Yet, even in this book (published in 2019), Renihan references the first edition of *KTC* rather than the second—likely a publication necessity. Still, the second edition awaits a formal reply from the 1689 position. Such a slowness to incorporate the changes made in the second edition of *KTC* puts 1689 proponents in the increasingly awkward position of dealing with a caricature rather than the actual PC system.

This would seem to be the cause of the second problem from the 1689 side: a persistent confusion shown between PC and New Covenant Theology (hereafter NCT). Perhaps the clearest example of this is found at the website 1689federalism.com, created by Brandon Adams.²² Adams has done much in recent years to help organize and

¹⁹ Brandon Adams, "1689 Federalism Response to Wellum's 'Progressive Covenantalism and the Doing of Ethics,'" July 24, 2015, <https://contrast2.wordpress.com/2015/07/24/response-to-wellums-progressive-covenantalism-and-the-doing-of-ethics/>. The chapter Adams is responding to had been posted online prior to the book being published.

²⁰ Samuel Renihan, Richard Barcellos, and James Renihan, "1689 Federalism Compared to New Covenant Theology and Progressive Covenantalism," accessed May 21, 2020, video.

²¹ Samuel Renihan, *The Mystery of Christ: His Covenant and His Kingdom* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2019).

²² "1689 Federalism," Confessional Baptist Covenant Theology, accessed July 8, 2020, <http://www.1689federalism.com/>.

publicize the 1689 Federalism view.²³ He posted an interview, entitled “1689 Federalism v. New Covenant Theology and Progressive Covenantalism,” which exemplifies the matter: those interviewed merely reference PC in this rebuttal of NCT rather than treating it separately. The section on PC opens with Samuel Renihan introducing PC as “another form of NCT.”²⁴ He critiques PC for “throw[ing] the category of the covenant of grace out the window.” Barcellos predicts that *KTC* “is going to be the ‘grand-daddy’ for a lot of New Covenant guys for some time to come.”²⁵

The identification of PC as a form of NCT arises out of the first edition of *KTC*, in which Gentry and Wellum identify their position as “fit[ting] broadly under the umbrella of what is called ‘New Covenant theology’” and “a species of New Covenant theology.”²⁶ However, in the second edition published in 2018, Gentry and Wellum reject the NCT label, citing key theological distinctions that separate PC from NCT.²⁷ PC advocates have clearly and repeatedly explained their divergence from NCT.²⁸ It is time for those within the 1689 Federalist camp to acknowledge the proper distinction between PC and NCT in print, which will go a long way toward allowing for a greater open-mindedness when evaluating PC.

²³ His website has become an organized gathering place for work done from the 1689 perspective. In addition to displaying written works, reviews, and a helpful FAQ page with questions about the 1689 Federalist perspective, Adams publishes a series of video interviews comparing 1689 Federalism to the competing theological systems of Westminster Federalism, Dispensationalism, and “New Covenant Theology/Progressive Covenantalism.”

²⁴ Samuel Renihan, “1689 Federalism Compared to New Covenant Theology and Progressive Covenantalism,” 5:00, <http://www.1689federalism.com/>.

²⁵ See 8:45 mark of interview.

²⁶ Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 1st ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 24.

²⁷ See Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 35, 35n9, where they refer to “significant differences” with NCT. Regarding even the most contentious issue in the debate—the decalogue—Jason Meyer criticizes NCT as “too cold with respect to the law.” Jason Meyer, “Mosaic Law, Theological Systems, and the Glory of Christ,” in *Progressive Covenantalism*, ed. Stephen Wellum and Brent Parker (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 78-79. Even as they acknowledge the name NCT to be an umbrella-term with room for variety within, PC advocates have worked to distance themselves from it.

²⁸ See Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 35, and Meyer, “The Mosaic Law, Theological Systems, and the Glory of Christ,” 78-79.

Correcting these breakdowns in communication on both sides is a first step, yet the broad agreement and shared priorities has yet to be demonstrated. I now turn to the matter of defining each system, or rather, letting each system declare their goals and defining their hermeneutical approaches. I demonstrate in their own words that the claims staked by the two groups overlap sufficiently to warrant a redrawing of traditional boundary-markers.

CHAPTER 3

SIMILARITIES IN PRIORITY

How do the priorities of PC and 1689 Federalism, as expressed by their proponents, align? In this chapter I present the driving priorities of each and show the extent of their alignment.

Priorities for both systems may be organized into two groups. First, their priorities in approaching the metanarrative of Scripture may be properly viewed as “broad” priorities. I will present two such priorities regarding metanarrative and how each system emphasizes them. Second, there are more “narrow” priorities that reflect particular interpretive goals in each system. I will present two such priorities regarding ecclesiology and the typological significance of Israel.

Broad Priorities: Approaching the Metanarrative

Broad priorities concern an approach to the scriptures as a whole. What metanarrative ought to be applied to our reading of scripture? While expressed differently at points, both systems emphasize two broad priorities in particular: first, the recognition that God’s saving interactions with man happen by means of covenant; and second, the significance of the progress of revelation vis-à-vis the development from one biblical covenant to the next.

Covenant as the Mode of Divine Interaction with Man

The systems of PC and 1689 Federalism both rest comfortably within the Reformed/Covenantal camp, in that they structure their theology around the concept of covenant.¹ This is not controversial, and thus I will only briefly demonstrate it.

Within Progressive Covenantalism. PC advocates name this priority as the reason their position is identified with the moniker “Progressive *Covenantalism*.” It suffices to simply quote the first two sentences of *KTC*: “The purpose of this book is to demonstrate two claims. We want to establish, first, how central and foundational the concept of *covenant* is to the Bible’s narrative plot structure”² Wellum and Parker make the same point in their introduction to *Progressive Covenantalism*—that “God’s plan unfolds *through the covenants*.”³

Within 1689 Federalism. 1689 Federalists have little difficulty demonstrating that Particular Baptists, from their origins, have understood the storyline of scripture through the lens of covenants. The *Second London Baptist Confession* affirmed, verbatim with the *Westminster Confession*, that all God’s voluntary condescension to man “He hath been pleased to express by way of covenant.”⁴ Nehemiah Coxe, an editor of the confession, expressed the perspective held by all 1689 Federalists that “the holy and wise God has always dealt with the children of men in a way of covenant.”⁵

¹ Gentry and Wellum offer this as definitional to covenant theology – and assent to it themselves. Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 32.

² Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 31.

³ Stephen Wellum and Brent Parker, eds., introduction to *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course Between Dispensational and Covenant Theologies* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 2 (emphasis original).

⁴ From the Second London Baptist Confession, 7.1. In William Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Chicago: Judson Press, 1959), 259.

⁵ Nehemiah Coxe and John Owen, *Covenant Theology from Adam to Christ*, ed. Ronald Miller, James Renihan, and Francisco Orozco (Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2005), 38.

Conclusion. Both positions assert the centrality of covenant in understanding the interactions between God and man. This shared priority is easy to see, yet by itself it does not distinguish the two positions from the wider world of CT. They begin to do so by emphasizing a second broad priority, that of recognizing the deliberate progression between the covenants as vital in understanding the significance of the covenants themselves.

Valuing the Progression of the Covenants

The second broad priority goes beyond the prioritizing of covenants in general, and instead emphasizes the significance of *progressive revelation* that connects those biblical covenants.

Within Progressive Covenantalism. In the introduction to their work *Progressive Covenantalism*, Stephen Wellum and Brent Parker point to this broad priority as the rationale behind their use of the first term in the name “*Progressive Covenantalism*.”⁶ Gentry and Wellum define the purpose of *KTC*:

We assert that *the progression of the covenants* forms the backbone of Scripture’s metanarrative, the relational reality that moves history forward according to God’s design and final plan for humanity and all creation, and unless we “put together” the covenants correctly, we will not discern accurately “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27).⁷

The first chapter of *KTC* is clear that the primary distinction in view is with CT. Rather than understanding the relationship between biblical covenants primarily in terms of the progressive development between them, CT emphasizes the placement of the covenants underneath the theological headings “covenant of works” (CoW) and “covenant of grace” (CoG). Though PC does not emphasize these categories, neither do its proponents deny

⁶ *Progressive* seeks to underscore the unfolding nature of God’s revelation over time, while *Covenantalism* emphasizes that God’s plan unfolds through the covenants and that all of the covenants find their fulfillment, telos, and terminus in Christ.” Wellum and Parker, introduction to *Progressive Covenantalism*, 2.

⁷ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 31.

them.⁸ Instead they are persuaded that viewing the biblical covenants through the CoW/CoG lens distracts from where the true emphasis should rest: on what is displayed in the progression from one covenant to another. This, they argue, is where biblical theology should hold precedence over the systems created within systematic theology.

Within 1689 Federalism. 1689 Federalism, too, places a high premium on the progression of the biblical covenants. Samuel Renihan began his critique of *KTC* (first edition): “The fundamental argument of *Kingdom through Covenant* is sound . . . The overall metanarrative is also sound. There is a great tension/need in the progress of the historical covenants for one who will do perfectly all that God commands.”⁹ He continued, “Yet, PC has established the perfect foundation for reaching the right conclusion: God establishes and governs distinct kingdoms through distinct covenants. *The metanarrative of Scripture is God’s progressive revealing of his salvation kingdom through the kingdoms and covenants of Scripture.*”¹⁰

Similarly, Brandon Adams affirms in a 2018 interview that God’s gracious plan for mankind “becomes more and more defined through each successive covenant that God makes after Abraham,” so that the value is found in the fact that, “through each covenant . . . we get a clearer picture of the reality that those covenants are testifying to.”¹¹

⁸ For example, Wellum and Parker state in the introduction of *Progressive Covenantalism* that they are wrongly accused of denying a covenant of grace. Wellum and Parker, introduction to *Progressive Covenantalism*, 3n7. Daniel Scheiderer, after carefully considering the Progressive Covenantalism perspective, writes that “we cannot conclude that progressive covenantalists deny the covenant of works as articulated by Reformed Baptists.” Daniel Scheiderer, “Progressive Covenantalists as Reformed Baptists,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 82 (2020), 144.

⁹ Renihan, “Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants, A Review Article,” *Journal of the Institute of Reformed Baptist Studies*, 2014, 162.

¹⁰ Renihan, “Kingdom through Covenant: A Review Article,” 175 (emphasis added).

¹¹ Brandon Adams, “Brandon Adams Joins Us to Discuss Baptist Covenant Theology” (According to Christ podcast), January 30, 2018, <https://accordingtochrist.com/2018/01/30/episode-3-brandon-adams-joins-us-to-discuss-baptist-covenant-theology/>.

Conclusion. Upon comparison, then, we find agreement regarding these broad priorities between PC and 1689 Federalism as they have been stated. As demonstrated in chapter 2, however, things have not been that simple, and agreement even at such a broad level has been downplayed. The complicating matter regards the question of whether to use/emphasize the CoW/CoG distinctions. PC, due to its hesitation to use such terminology, has had to deal with the mischaracterization that it denies the categories altogether—both the verbiage and the substance. 1689 Federalism, for reasons to be explored further below, has felt a deep need to affirm their agreement with the CoW/CoG schema. Yet given the way they apply these labels—namely, viewing the New Covenant as *the* CoG—their acceptance of the terms as valid representations of redemptive history does not display any meaningful separation between them and the PC position. While there is some difference in theological method, both groups share the sense that Scripture is fundamentally to be understood through the lens of the progressive revelation that is witnessed in the covenantal progression. I now turn to priorities of a narrower variety, in order to further evaluate the extent of like-mindedness between the two systems.

Narrow Priorities: Ecclesiology and Typological Significance of Israel

Shifting to more “narrow” priorities, the second published work of PC self-definition, *Progressive Covenantalism*, presents ten priorities of theological interpretation. Table 2 names those areas and shows the underlying realm in which the distinction is being made. These are the “narrower” areas in which PC proponents felt the need to clarify and emphasize their position. We can safely judge, then, that beyond the general priorities displayed in the name “Progressive Covenantalism,” particular points of interpretation are prioritized in the arenas of (1) ecclesiology, (2) typological significance of Israel, and (3) Law.

Table 2. Theological distinctives defined in *Progressive Covenantalism*

Chapter Title	Arena in Which Distinction Is Being Made
Ch. 1: “Father of a Multitude of Nations: New Covenant Ecclesiology in OT Perspective”	Ecclesiology
Ch. 2: “The Israel-Christ-Church Relationship”	Ecclesiology
Ch. 3: “The Mosaic Law, Theological Systems, and the Glory of Christ”	Law
Ch. 4: “Covenantal Life with God from Eden to Holy City”	Law
Ch. 5: “Circumcision of Flesh to Circumcision of Heart: The Typology of the Sign of the Abrahamic Covenant”	Ecclesiology (Circumcision/Baptism) ¹²
Ch. 6: “Good-bye and Hello: The Sabbath Command for New Covenant Believers”	Law
Ch. 7: “The Warning Passages of Hebrews and the New Covenant Community”	Ecclesiology
Ch. 8: “Progressive Covenantalism and the Doing of Ethics”	Law
Ch. 9: “The Dispensational Appeal to Romans 11 and the Nature of Israel’s Future Salvation”	Typological Significance of Israel (Rom 11)
Ch. 10: “The Land Promise Biblically and Theologically Understood”	Typological Significance of Israel (Abrahamic land promise)

Taking advantage of this self-proclamation by PC advocates, I shall use these three narrow priorities as a further litmus test for the degree of unity seen in the priorities of both systems.¹³ As before, following the presentation of each group I will offer a

¹² Admittedly, chapter 5 is more focused on the question of continuity/discontinuity between circumcision and baptism than on baptism in and of itself. The aim and implication of Meade’s arguments, however, are decidedly within the realm of Ecclesiology.

¹³ What follows will demonstrate the agreement within 1689 Federalism on these priorities, but it should be noted that 1689 Federalism, as it names its own priorities, places its emphases on the same issues. Samuel Renihan helpfully summarizes those priorities (as he represents the Particular Baptists of the 17th and 18th centuries): (1) the existence and distinction between the covenant of works and covenant of grace; (2) the viewing of the Abrahamic covenant as a covenant of works; (3) a typology in which types reveal antitypes but are distinct in substance from them. See Renihan, *From Shadow to Substance*, 324-325.

concluding analysis of the two positions. The perspective of each position regarding (1) the nature of the Old and New covenant communities (discussed within the “ecclesiology” section below) and (2) the relationship between the Old and New covenant communities (discussed within the “typological significance of Israel” section below) find clear alignment, and thus are dealt with in this chapter. The matter of the Law, however, requires special attention, as it is the realm that is typically viewed as an impasse between PC and 1689 Federalism. A comparison of their approaches to the Law, then, is reserved for chapter 4.

Ecclesiology

Ecclesiology is especially important when surveying the spectrum of Old Covenant/New Covenant continuity. Here I refer to the understanding in each system of the *nature* of the communities within the Old and New Covenants.¹⁴

Within Progressive Covenantalism. PC emphasizes two particular distinctives of their ecclesiology. First, they stress that identity as New Covenant citizens stems from spiritual adoption rather than physical birth. Second, they stress the newness of the New Covenant community as compared to national Israel. I shall examine each in more detail.

First, New Covenant citizens are identified by a spiritual adoption that is not in any way connected to their physical birth. Jason DeRouchie summarizes the argument well: “The physical genealogical principle so evident in the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants does *not* continue once the Abrahamic covenant reaches its fulfillment in the new, for membership is now solely conditioned on *spiritual* rebirth, generated through

It is easy to see how their priorities are likewise within the realms of ecclesiology and the typological significance of Israel. In chapter 5 I will argue that the 1689 Federalist priority of historical theology will reinforce the goals of PC.

¹⁴ This ought to be distinguished from their understandings of the *relationship between* the communities. This is what is meant by “typological significance of Israel”—the following section.

the sacrificial death of the servant king (Isa 53:10).”¹⁵ This is affirmed and expanded at length in *KTC*.¹⁶ By contrast, the old covenant was mixed by nature. Gentry and Wellum distinguish between two “seeds” in Abraham:

But as an entire community, not all Israel was Israel (Rom 9:6). Within the national Israel, there was a distinction between the natural-biological and spiritual seed of Abraham . . . [I]t was only the believers within the nation—the remnant—who were the spiritual seed of Abraham, the “true Israel” in a salvific sense.¹⁷

The two communities differ, then, in their very natures.

Second, the New Covenant community truly represents a *new* entity—a significant point of distinction from traditional CT. The church is “a transformed, new community (contra covenant theology) yet a community that lasts as a covenant people forever and not merely a present-day illustration of what believing nations will be like in the future (contra dispensational theology).”¹⁸ A particular point of emphasis in this understanding is to see Christ as the antitype of Israel rather than the church itself:

Because Jesus is the antitype of the previous covenant heads, he, as the true Israel, David’s greater Son, Abraham’s true seed, and the last Adam, constitutes a New Covenant people, who are in continuity with believing saints of old but who are new in the covenant sense of a believing, transformed people . . . [A]n equation of [Israel and the church] without noting their covenantal differences is also untenable.¹⁹

Seeing Christ as the antitype of national Israel allows us to recognize the unique nature of the New Covenant church, since the type is only a shadow of its antitype.

Within 1689 Federalism. How do these two points of emphasis compare to those within 1689 Federalism? Given that both points (means of NC membership and the

¹⁵ Jason DeRouchie, “Father of a Multitude of Nations: New Covenant Ecclesiology in OT Perspective,” in *Progressive Covenantalism*, 22-23.

¹⁶ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 150-51, 156, 814-817.

¹⁷ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 710.

¹⁸ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 16-17.

¹⁹ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 731-732. See also Brent Parker, “The Israel-Christ-Church Relationship,” in Wellum and Parker, *Progressive Covenantalism*, 39-68.

newness of the NC community) are traditionally-accepted tenants within BCT, it is not surprising to find agreement concerning them.

Regarding the means of membership in the New Covenant, Samuel Renihan writes, “The people of the Old Covenant were brought into being through natural generation within the confines of the offspring of Abraham. In the New Covenant, the people of the covenant are brought into being by supernatural generation, that is, regeneration.”²⁰ 1689 Federalists affirm, therefore, the spiritual nature of the new covenant community.

Regarding the newness of the New Covenant community, 1689 proponents join PC in its efforts to bring clarity on this point. Renihan states, “The body of Christ, the company of those united to Jesus and enjoying the benefits of His salvific work, did not appear or begin subsequent to Christ’s appearance.”²¹ One clarification should be made at this point. It is true that Renihan makes the above statement about the church on his way to making another, related point—that of distinguishing between the visible and invisible church: “This means that inwardly, or invisibly, the church began as far back as Eden after the fall.” He goes on:

[T]he church may have begun outwardly after the death of Christ, above all at Pentecost. But inwardly, its people began long before. The church existed before Israel. The church existed in Israel. The church emerged out of Israel. As the womb of the Christ, Israel was the womb of the Church. The gospel was continuous throughout them all.²²

When Renihan speaks of “its [the church’s] people” existing before Israel, he distinguishes what the Bible calls “true Israel” from the national people of the Old Covenant. Thus it is not a rejection of what he affirmed previously—that the church “did not begin subsequent to Christ’s appearance.”

²⁰ Samuel D Renihan, *The Mystery of Christ: His Covenant and His Kingdom* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2019), 166.

²¹ Renihan, *The Mystery of Christ*, 190.

²² Renihan, *The Mystery of Christ*, 192.

Conclusion. The two positions are in essential agreement here. 1689 Federalism distinguishes “true Israel” from the national (physical) people of the Old Covenant in precisely the way that PC distinguishes between the spiritual and natural seeds in Abraham. These narrow ecclesiological priorities include (1) the nature of New Covenant citizenship and (2) the newness of the new covenant community vis-à-vis Israel. In both convictions, the voices of PC and 1689 Federalism proponents ring out harmoniously.

Typological Significance of Israel

Two things warrant discussion at this point. The first is that, while the matter of the typological significance of Israel is clearly related to the first narrow priority of ecclesiology, I am referring here to specific matters of interpretation related to Israel and the church. The second is to say that the principal concern relating to matters of continuity has already been discussed: the significance of the biblical-theological flow seen in the developmental progression of the biblical covenants. I have shown that in this primary concern, the two groups are in substantial agreement.

The narrow priorities relating to the typological significance of Israel concern (1) the place of national Israel in the divine plan and (2) the proper understanding of the Abrahamic land promises.

Within Progressive Covenantalism. Richard Lucas and Oren Martin helpfully elucidate the PC priorities surrounding Israel and the church.²³ For both, the significant points of clarity involve distinguishing PC from dispensational interpretations. Lucas, approvingly and repeatedly quoting from covenant theologians on the issue, interprets Romans 11 to teach that “Gentiles who are experiencing the messianic

²³ See Richard Lucas, “The Dispensational Appeal to Romans 11 and the Nature of Israel’s Future Salvation,” and Oren Martin, “The Land Promise Biblically and Theologically Understood,” in Wellum and Parker, *Progressive Covenantalism*, 235-53 and 255-274 (respectively).

salvation [belong] not to a new body discontinuous to Israel but to Israel itself . . . [T]he church is not so much a replacement for Israel or even a ‘new’ Israel; it is the continuation of ‘Israel’ in the era of fulfillment.”²⁴ Thus the PC viewpoint falls along the spectrum of CT on this matter.

The PC understanding of the Abrahamic land promises is more distinct within the spectrum of covenantal thought. In line with its biblical-theological priorities, PC stresses that “land did not become theologically significant first with Abraham.”²⁵ Rather, the land promise made to Abraham should be seen as the beginning of a restoration of what was lost to Adam. When seen in its proper place along the spectrum of redemptive history, the land promised to Abraham may be more easily understood to have as its *telos* the encompassing of the entire world.²⁶ The “promised land” itself, then, functioned as a type “that reaches its antitypical fulfillment first in Christ who inaugurates a new age, second in believers as God’s new covenant people.”²⁷

Within 1689 Federalism. The distance from dispensationalism is similarly emphasized in 1689 Federalism—particularly regarding the dispensational insistence upon an enduring place for the nation in God’s future plans. 1689 Federalists stress that national Israel was a “Jewish kingdom” that was merely “preparatory” in nature.²⁸

Renihan helpfully employs a construction-analogy to depict this:

Many construction projects put up “coming soon” signs and conceptual art of what the final product will look like. The Kingdom of Israel was one giant “Coming

²⁴ Lucas is here quoting Douglas Moo. Lucas, “The Dispensational Appeal to Romans 11 and the Nature of Israel’s Future Salvation,” 253.

²⁵ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant*, 832.

²⁶ Thus the statement by Paul in Romans 4:13, interpreting the inheritance promised to Abraham as being “the world.”

²⁷ Martin, “The Land Promise Biblically and Theologically Understood,” 274.

²⁸ Renihan, *The Mystery of Christ*, 181.

Soon” sign concerning the Messiah. From their land to their temple to their own genealogy to their sacrifices, they were a picture of the Messiah and his kingdom.²⁹

National Israel preserved the messianic line. With the arrival of Messiah, scaffolding for the building project was no longer necessary.

Conclusion. The Abrahamic land promises are handled only slightly differently by 1689 Federalists when compared to PC. The distinction is not substantial; the two differ as to what they choose to emphasize. Whereas PC emphasizes the plan of God from the beginning—that the land promises would find their intended fulfillment in Christ’s authority over the whole earth (Matthew 28:18)—1689 Federalists tend instead to emphasize the promised land as a temporary aspect of the temporary old covenant.³⁰ Undoubtedly, this has implications regarding their perspectives regarding typology, and the place of the promised land within OT typology.

Differences, then, exist; yet it would be a mistake to draw conclusions that underemphasize the extent of agreement between them. Nehemiah Coxe, a particular Baptist forefather often cited by 1689 Federalists, tied together both of the above emphases in writing about the divinely intended goal of Old Testament shadows and types. Because the land of Canaan had belonged to Israel through a gratuitous promise that preceded the Law conditions, Coxe writes,

They were never utterly cut off from that good land. Nor did they cease to be a peculiar people to God until the end of their being made such was fully answered. That promise expired with the accomplishment of its design in the introduction of the Israel of God to the full enjoyment of those spiritual blessings which were the substance of what was only darkly shadowed by their temporal enjoyments.³¹

Even as PC would disagree with the portrayal of “that promise” as having “expired,” the reader can clearly hear the PC emphasis upon fulfillment in Coxe’s

²⁹ Renihan, *The Mystery of Christ*, 188.

³⁰ Examples are manifold. See, for example, Samuel Renihan, *The Mystery of Christ*, 110, 114, 163.

³¹ Coxe and Owen, *Covenant Theology from Adam to Christ*, 89.

subsequent conclusion: “It was not Abraham’s immediate seed, but his mediate, that became as numerous as the dust of the earth and took possession of the land flowing with milk and honey.”³² On these two matters concerning the typological significance of Israel, both PC and 1689 Federalism display priorities that fall along the lines of traditional covenantal interpretation, and in opposition to perspectives along the dispensational spectrum. Though their emphases differ, 1689 Federalists share the PC emphasis on the typological nature of the land. On these distinctives, then, 1689 Federalism and PC agree.

Broad and Narrow Priorities: Concluding Thoughts

What is represented by the monikers of PC and 1689 Federalism is really one approach to interpreting scripture and to conceiving of redemptive history, with only minor differences of emphasis. Both prioritize the covenant as the mode of divine interaction with mankind and even explicitly emphasize the progressive nature of the covenants.

More narrowly, advocates of the two positions sound nearly interchangeable when discussing the very matters that seem to occupy their attention most: ecclesiology and Old/New continuity/discontinuity. New Covenant members are a spiritual (born of the Holy Spirit) people, a people of a spiritual adoption and not, as with Old Covenant members, a people of a physical seed. Both PC and 1689 Federalism succeed to thus distinguish themselves from Presbyterian CT.

The final narrow priority—perhaps the one most significant to the present considerations—is the matter of rightly understanding the Law. Due to both its significance and to the need for careful nuance and scrutiny, it is singled out in the following chapter.

³² Coxe and Owen, *Covenant Theology from Adam to Christ*, 90.

CHAPTER 4

LAW: THE HEART OF THE MATTER

Disputes and nuanced arguments about the law are a substantial cause for many of the differences along the spectrum of covenant theology.¹ The alignment demonstrated in the previous chapter is obscured by divergences (both substantial and in degrees of emphasis) between proponents of PC and 1689 Federalism. Significantly, however, the shared rejection of the “one covenant, two administrations” approach eliminates much of the difficulty that traditional CT encounters with its “continuity-heavy” outlook on the law. This ought to have cleared the ground to allow for fruitful dialogue between PC and 1689 Federalism on the matter of the law itself. Unfortunately, however, the subject of law has been perhaps the greatest victim of misunderstanding and misrepresentation between the two positions.

It is difficult to overemphasize the significance of this chapter in the overall argument. This is the matter that will forever stand as a barrier, naysayers insist, to any nearer unity between PC and 1689 Federalism. I will grant that differences exist, especially in terms of allegiances to particular vocabulary and ways of describing certain details of covenant and law.² I will contend, however, that moving past the terms themselves reveals sufficient agreement on *substance*, which warrants a closer unity.

¹ For good reason; Jason Meyer helpfully quotes Jonathan Edwards to this effect: “There is perhaps no part of divinity attended with so much intricacy, and wherein orthodox divines do so much differ as stating the precise agreement and differences between the two dispensations of Moses and Christ.” Quoted in Jason Meyer, “Mosaic Law, Theological Systems, and the Glory of Christ,” in *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course between Dispensational and Covenant Theologies*, ed. Stephen Wellum and Brent Parker (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 97.

² In particular, the question as to the usefulness/propriety of categories like “tripartite division of law,” “Covenant of Works” and “Covenant of Grace.”

Most certainly, it reveals the thesis of this paper: 1689 Federalism is more properly designated a subset of PC than a subset of CT.

Like chapter 3, I will suggest a broad priority and a narrow one, this time on the topic of law. I will present the perspective of both systems and end with a conclusion as to their alignment or divergence.

Broad Priority: Rejection of “One Covenant/ Two Administrations” Continuity

The division within the broader BCT world concerning the CoG was introduced briefly in chapter 1. 20RBs have argued for a certain continuity between the historic covenants that aligns 20RBs with Paedobaptist covenant theologians. Against this perspective both PC and 1689 Federalists contend, although their objections take on different nuances.

Within Progressive Covenantalism

Inherent to the PC reading of scripture is the notion that the biblical covenants progressively build upon one another—tensions between law and grace grow as each covenant progressively prepares for the great revelation of the mystery of Christ. This leads them to object to the traditional view of Paedobaptist covenantalism, namely, that all of the post-fall covenants are subsumed together under a covenant of grace umbrella. Against such an approach, Gentry and Wellum argue that

it is more accurate to think of God’s *one* plan revealed through a *plurality* of covenants, which reaches its fulfillment and terminus in Christ and the new covenant. This allows us to speak properly of the *continuity* of God’s plan across time, now fulfilled in the New Covenant, and it also helps us avoid “flattening” the differences between the covenants and downplaying the significant progression between them.³

³ Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 655 (emphasis original).

Again and again, Gentry and Wellum employ the criticism that CT “flattens”—either the Abrahamic covenant,⁴ the newness of the new covenant community,⁵ or the differences between the covenant signs.⁶ Each of these critiques is the result of CT overdoing the continuity between what came before the cross and what came after.

This is not to suggest that PC believes Old Testament covenants to be devoid of grace. Ardel Caneday represents the PC position well when he writes that, “however we are to characterize the law covenant, Scripture compels us to acknowledge that it entails grace.”⁷ This reality is made abundantly clear in *KTC*.⁸

More complicated, however, is the matter of how PC regards CoG itself as a category. Wellum and Parker object to Samuel Renihan “wrongly assum[ing] we deny the covenant of grace (because we do not define it like he does).”⁹ However, some hear Wellum to reject the CoW/CoG categories without inserting an alternative category or understanding. For instance, speaking on behalf of the PC position, he writes, “In contrast to covenant theology, we do not divide the covenants in redemptive history into two categories of ‘the covenant of works’ (Law) and ‘the covenant of grace’ (Grace/Gospel).”¹⁰ Upon closer reflection, however, this seems to be less a theological

⁴ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 143, 692, 814-17.

⁵ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 156.

⁶ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 157.

⁷ Ardel Caneday, “Covenantal Life with God from Eden to Holy City,” in Wellum and Parker, *Progressive Covenantalism*, 110.

⁸ See, for example, Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*: “the old covenant is based on grace” (350); “the faithfulness and grace of Yahweh toward Israel in bringing them to Canaan” (418); naming as the “first similarity” between the Old and New Covenants the fact that the “basis is the same (the grace of God)” (563).

⁹ Wellum and Parker, introduction to *Progressive Covenantalism*, 3n7.

¹⁰ Stephen Wellum, “Progressive Covenantalism: Key Points of Definition,” unpublished work, submitted in “Progressive Covenantalism” Facebook Group, uploaded June 14, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/ProgressiveCovenantalism/permalink/2618556391771850>.

objection, and more a *terminological* hesitation. Wellum suspects that the term may be more misleading than helpful, given the historical baggage it carries:

In reality, the “covenant of grace” is a comprehensive theological category, not a biblical one. This does not mean that it is illegitimate. . . . If [it] is used to underscore the unity of God’s plan of salvation and the essential spiritual unity of the people of God in all ages, it is certainly helpful and biblical. But if it is used to flatten the relationships and downplay the significant amount of progression between the biblical covenants . . . then it is unhelpful, misleading, and illegitimate.¹¹

Thus Wellum and Parker object to the accusation that they “deny the covenant of grace.”¹² Their insistence is upon the primacy, in terms of theological method, of biblical theology before systematic theology.

Within 1689 Federalism

1689 Federalists likewise object to attempts in CT to unite Old and New covenants into a single covenant of grace. Using the same language as PC writers, Samuel Renihan objects that “the Westminster position flattens that difference” between the sacraments of the Old and New Covenants.¹³ Elsewhere, Renihan expands on his objection:

Covenant theology must give due attention to the continuity of salvation throughout history, as well as the progressive revelation of God in the same. One way in which this balance has not been maintained in the past is by covenant theologies that equate the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenants with the new covenant . . . The problem is that in such a system, a progression of covenants becomes one covenant, and the system therefore controls, reduces, and flattens out the progressive nature of the biblical material from which it is derived.¹⁴

¹¹ Stephen Wellum, “Baptism and the Relationship between the Covenants,” in *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn Wright (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2006), 126-27. Wellum proceeds to call for a “moratorium” on CoG as a category “In order to make headway in the baptismal divide and think biblically regarding the relationships between the covenants.”

¹² Wellum and Parker, introduction to *Progressive Covenantalism*, 3n7.

¹³ *1689 Federalism Compared to Westminster Federalism*, Confessional Baptist Covenant Theology, accessed June 19, 2021, <http://www.1689federalism.com>. For quote location, see 6:30ff.

¹⁴ Samuel Renihan, *The Mystery of Christ: His Covenant and His Kingdom* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2019), 22.

Pascal Denault issues the same complaint upon reflection on the book of Hebrews: “How could two covenants with such different foundations have the same substance? If the old and new covenants were established on different promises (Heb 8:6), how could they have the same substance?”¹⁵

Whereas such a lack of unity between the covenants leads PC to a sparing use of the covenant of grace category, 1689 Federalism firmly insists that the category has relevance and ought to be preserved. They maintain the standard of the Second London Baptist Confession 7.2-3, which itself quite intentionally departed from the language of the WCF 7.5. The bold text in Table 3 highlights select differences between them. Denault clarifies the limitations of his seventeenth-century Particular Baptist forbears’ usage of the concept, saying that they “saw a unity of substance in the covenant of grace from Genesis to Revelation, but they didn’t see this same unity between the Old and New Covenants. Therefore, they did not accept the idea that those two covenants were two administrations of the same covenant.”¹⁶

Table 3. Confessional distinctions between WCF and 2LBC

WCF 7.3, 5	2LBC 7.2-3
<p>3. Man by his fall having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace . . .</p> <p>5. This covenant was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel . . .</p>	<p>2. Moreover, man having brought himself under the curse of the law by his fall, it pleased the Lord to make a covenant of grace . . .</p> <p>3. This covenant is revealed in the gospel; first of all to Adam in the promise of salvation by the seed of the woman, and afterwards by farther steps, until the full discovery thereof was completed in the New Testament</p>

¹⁵ Pascal Denault, *The Distinctiveness of Baptist Covenant Theology: A Comparison between Seventeenth-Century Particular Baptist and Paedobaptist Federalism*, 2nd ed. (Vestavia Hills, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2017), 76.

¹⁶ Pascal Denault, “By Father Steps: A Seventeenth-Century Particular Baptist Covenant Theology,” in *Recovering a Covenantal Heritage: Essays in Baptist Covenant Theology*, ed. Richard C. Barcellos (Palmdale, CA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014), 81.

Conclusion

It is crucial to notice two significant similarities. First, both groups object to the Paedobaptist understanding of CoG. PC does so by distancing from interpretive practices behind the term. 1689 Federalism does so by simply redefining it to be equated with the New Covenant (a move with which PC sensitivities are generally comfortable).¹⁷ Second, both are enjoined in strong criticism as to the “flattening” effect that Paedobaptist federalism has upon the Abrahamic covenant.

As to their different levels of comfort with CoG language, when one takes the time to look beneath the surface and understand the point each seeks to make, there does not seem to be a meaningful difference in substance. Daniel Scheiderer summed it up well when he wrote of Wellum, “What he desires is that the covenant of grace not be a means of ignoring redemptive-historical development, and in this he stands alongside his Baptist forbears.”¹⁸

Scheiderer has also helpfully compiled PC statements concerning the covenant of grace and, comparing them to the Second London Baptist Confession, concludes that they are consistent with one another.¹⁹ PC desires to maintain the continuity of God’s salvific plan and the necessity of grace, while avoiding the excesses of Paedobaptist CT; so does 1689 Federalism. 1689 Federalism desires to set the new covenant apart in a way that preserves redemptive-historical development; so does PC.

¹⁷ Wellum says of 1689 Federalism: “They only put the New Covenant under the COG. Now there’s a real advantage to that. . . . This is somewhat similar to what I’ve been describing in the sense of the progress of the covenants leading us to the New Covenant. I think they’re at this point pretty close to what I’m trying to say in terms of PC. Yet they still want to retain this COG language; they’re fine to do so, I just don’t think you *need* to do so. It’s theological language, they’re taking it from the confession, that’s fine—but I don’t see anywhere that that’s sacrosanct and that one *has* to do that, I still want to speak about the plan of God, tied to the New Covenant.” Stephen Wellum, *Differences between Covenant, New Covenant, and Dispensational Theology, Part 3*, The Church at Pecan Creek (Denton, TX, 2021), <https://www.sermonaudio.com/playpopupvideo.asp?SID=83021210173850>.

¹⁸ Daniel Scheiderer, “Progressive Covenantalists as Reformed Baptists,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 82 (2020): 146.

¹⁹ Daniel Scheiderer, “Progressive Covenantalists as Reformed Baptists,” 144-46. Scheiderer makes the same point regarding the covenant of works (139-42).

Narrow Priority: Proper Continuity and Discontinuity Regarding Law/Ethics and the New Covenant

The matter of continuity between Law and the New Covenant represents a significant area of miscommunication between 1689 Federalism and PC. This, again, is due partly to the fact that PC has been associated with NCT without doing justice to the nuances of their particular position.

At the same time, 1689 Federalism has expended much effort to clarify its own position regarding the nature of this continuity, most notably in the work of Richard Barcellos, in going beyond merely applying the traditional tripartite division of the law. Barcellos has additionally considered the nature of the ongoing authority of the law in light of the redemptive-historical shift that the Cross has created.²⁰

In this section, I summarize the distinctions and emphases that each group makes in order to answer the question: How much do the PC and 1689 Federalism positions differ concerning “the eternal moral law of God” (henceforth EML), specifically its manifestation in the Ten Commandments and in the New Covenant? I will show that 1689 Federalism is unfairly accused of equating the Ten Commandments with EML,²¹ even as PC is unfairly accused of rejecting any ongoing application of the Ten Commandments. They again find themselves standing upon (largely) shared ground.

The evidence is best presented as answering two questions. First, does EML *as revealed in the Decalogue* continue to manifest authority and relevance in the New Covenant era? Second, does the nature of the authority of the Decalogue change in a New Covenant context?

²⁰ Richard Barcellos, *In Defense of the Decalogue: A Critique of New Covenant Theology* (Enumclaw, WA: Winepress, 2001).

²¹ Wellum, for example, characterizes all of covenant theology as committing this error, and cites work done by Douglas Moo as evidence. He references an occasion, however, in which Moo is responding directly to the position of theologian Greg Bahnsen. This context is not mentioned by Wellum. See Wellum and Parker, *Progressive Covenantalism*, 216n3, and Douglas Moo, “Response to Greg L. Bahnsen,” in *Five Views on Law and Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 1709-71.

Does Eternal Moral Law, as Revealed in the Decalogue, Continue to Manifest Authority and Relevance in the New Covenant Era?

The present distinction being made concerns “the law” as Mosaic Decalogue, coming 430 years after Abraham (Gal. 3:17), versus “the law” as a moral imperative that reflects the character of God Himself and is therefore eternal. It is important to clarify between the two, as the use of one moniker (“the law”) to designate both often contributes to misunderstanding. This first of the two questions serves primarily to prepare the ground for the second.

Within PC. First, it must be established that advocates of PC do in fact view the Decalogue as a revelation of EML. Gentry and Wellum write emphatically, “The Ten Words are presented as absolute commands or prohibitions, usually in the second-person singular. They are general injunctions not related to a specific social situation. . . You shall not steal today, not tomorrow, not this week, not this month, not this year--as a general rule, never!”²²

The question, then, is whether and how PC understands the Decalogue to have relevance and authority in a New Covenant context, as well as the extent to which the Decalogue may be *identified with* EML. As to the first question, PC has clearly answered in the affirmative. Brian Rosner insists that the law is not abolished in the sense of its function as the “revelation of the character and will of God;”²³ thus the New Testament

²² Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 344.

²³ Brian Rosner, *Paul and the Law: Keeping the Commandments of God*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 31 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 78. PC advocates lean heavily for these distinctions on the work of Brian Rosner. The work referenced here is named as a resource that “implicitly teaches aspects of PC” in a bibliography of PC resources created by John Jeffery, with the assistance of Richard Lucas and Brent Parker. John Jeffery, “A Bibliography of Progressive Covenantalism Resources” unpublished bibliography, submitted in “Progressive Covenantalism” Facebook Group, uploaded June 5, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/ProgressiveCovenantalism/permalink/2610746695886153>.

authors appeal to it as having authority in the realm of New Covenant ethics.²⁴ He simply states, for example, that Paul “takes for granted in Romans 13:8-10, for example, that adultery, murder, theft and covetousness are wrong because of the Decalogue.”²⁵

It is the second question—that of identification between the Decalogue and EML—that sets apart the PC emphasis. The enduring authority of the Decalogue is explained by the simple fact that, when one speaks about the Decalogue, one is speaking about Holy Scripture. Wellum emphasizes this point by means of a question:

What is our standard for ethics? How do we establish moral norms? The simple answer: *all* of Scripture is our standard, and it alone establishes moral norms. . . . The *entire* OT, including the law covenant, functions for us as the basis for our doctrine *and* ethics. Although Christians are not “under the law” *as a covenant*, it still functions as *Scripture* and demands our complete obedience.²⁶

The Decalogue, then, has not monopolized EML in the Old Testament. The PC concern is that identifying one with the other creates several hermeneutical problems. It also disrupts the redemptive-historical flow of scripture, since the Decalogue is a document, operating in a particular covenantal context.²⁷ If the goal of Christians is to submit to EML, then to do this properly they must read ethical demands with a covenantally-aware mindset, for “though all Scripture is our standard, its moral instruction requires careful application depending on our covenantal location.”²⁸

²⁴ The fact that PC is still frequently accused of having no place for an enduring authority of the Decalogue, despite this frequent assertion by its advocates, shows how slow many have been to properly distinguish between PC and some NCT writings. For two examples of PC clarifications here, see Stephen Wellum, “Progressive Covenantalism and the Doing of Ethics,” in Wellum and Parker, *Progressive Covenantalism*; Tom Schreiner, “The Old Covenant Is Over. The Old Testament Is Authoritative,” Let’s Talk: Bible & Theology (blog), November 1, 2018, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/old-covenant-response-andy-stanley/>.

²⁵ Rosner, *Paul and the Law*, 163. Also helpful and direct, Rosner writes, “In fact, all of the law is useful for moral teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness” (205).

²⁶ Stephen Wellum, “Progressive Covenantalism and the Doing of Ethics,” 216-17.

²⁷ In terms of practical, ethical outcomes, however, there is little meaningful difference: “In the end, both positions [CT and PC] will arrive at similar conclusions regarding God’s moral demands today, yet the difference lies in how we arrive at our conclusions.” Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 783.

²⁸ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 784.

So within PC, the Decalogue does continue to manifest authority and relevance for New Covenant members. It does so as Scripture, not as law-covenant; and it does so as it is applied through the redemptive-historical lens of the New Covenant.

Within 1689 Federalism. 1689 Federalism emphasizes the ongoing authority of the Decalogue on the New Covenant believer. One work that displays this clearly is that of Richard Barcellos, *In Defense of the Decalogue: A Critique of New Covenant Theology*. In it he points out both aspects of continuity and discontinuity.

He describes the continuity directly: “The Decalogue is still binding as a unit under the New Covenant, though not in the same manner in which it was under the old.”²⁹ Responding to certain claims of NCT, he fights for continuity when he insists that “there is no question of the law changing from an objective, definable ethical code to a subjective, undefinable disposition of the heart or to a totally unrevealed, transcendent law.”³⁰

What some PC advocates might not expect, however, is the extent of the emphasis he places upon discontinuity; it sounds remarkably similar to the clarifications made within PC. For example:

The whole Law of Moses, as it functioned under the Old Covenant, has been abolished, including the Ten Commandments. Not one jot or tittle of the Law of Moses functions as Old Covenant law anymore, and to act as if it does constitutes redemptive-historical retreat and neo-Judaizing. However, to acknowledge that the Law of Moses no longer functions as Old Covenant law is not to accept that it no longer functions; it simply no longer functions as Old Covenant law. This can be seen by the fact that the New Testament teaches both the abrogation of the law of the OC and its abiding moral validity under the New Covenant.³¹

One would be forgiven for reading such a statement and thinking it to have been written by Brian Rosner—so similar does it sound to Rosner’s emphases. As a further example:

²⁹ Barcellos, *In Defense of the Decalogue*, 40.

³⁰ Barcellos, *In Defense of the Decalogue*, 37.

³¹ Barcellos, *In Defense of the Decalogue*, 61.

“The law is the same; its application is modified to fit the conditions brought on by the death of Christ and the inauguration of the New Covenant . . . Simply put, the Christian ethic involves the whole Bible. The abrogation of the Old Covenant does not cancel the utility of the Old Testament.”³² Barcellos repeatedly makes the point that the coming of the New Covenant has changed the way the Decalogue is applied and even the way in which it can be said to be binding.³³

Brandon Adams makes the same clarification in a response to Wellum. He offers precision by distinguishing 1689 Federalism from 20RB and Paedobaptists on this very question:

We do not follow Westminster Federalism (“covenant theology”) in arguing that all Mosaic law is still in force today unless abrogated (because it was all abrogated). . . . We agree with PC, in contrast to Westminster Federalism, that the old covenant is a unit, and it expires as a unit. But that does not mean there is not overlap between a transcendent moral law that pre-dated the Mosaic law and the Mosaic law itself. One can affirm that the old covenant is a unit, and expires as a unit, and at the same time affirm that Scripture teaches a tripartite distinction as a means of determining the continuity and discontinuity of the moral law. To clarify even further, the tripartite distinction can sometimes be distracting. What we really recognize in Scripture is a two-fold distinction between moral law (unchanging) and positive law (changing).³⁴

Adams, then, articulates well the ongoing relevance of EML that is revealed in the Mosaic law, while also acknowledging the reality that there are covenantally-located elements within that law that change or even expire.

Conclusion. 1689 Federalism and PC both strongly emphasize three complementary realities concerning the Decalogue: (1) it was abolished along with the entire Old Covenant, and has ceased to be covenantally binding as Old Covenant law; (2) its moral authority endures, although it must be approached in the new conditions brought

³² Barcellos, *In Defense of the Decalogue*, 69.

³³ See, for more examples, Barcellos, *In Defense of the Decalogue*, 38, 40.

³⁴ Brandon Adams, “1689 Federalism Response to Wellum’s ‘Progressive Covenantalism and the Doing of Ethics,’” Contrast (blog), July 24, 2015, <https://contrast2.wordpress.com/2015/07/24/response-to-wellums-progressive-covenantalism-and-the-doing-of-ethics/>.

on by the death of Christ; (3) while a tripartite division can be a helpful tool, the significant distinction is between what endures (EML) and what does not—which depends upon careful discernment of redemptive-historical realities and their typology.

Does the Nature of the Authority of the Decalogue Change in the New Covenant Context?

In many ways the second question has already been addressed. More needs to be said, though, regarding this change, for it is perhaps here that divergence comes—both actual disagreements and differing priorities of emphasis.

Within PC. Of primary importance to PC, the matter of obligation toward the Decalogue must be handled in the same way that obligation to anything in the Old Testament is handled: by considering one’s covenantal location. It is not simply a matter of deciding arbitrarily what to obey, nor of obeying what is affirmed in the New Testament, nor of obeying everything not specifically abrogated by the New Testament. Rather, it is a matter of understanding the significance of covenantal progression. Each of the biblical covenants served a particular purpose in the progress of revelation, and each were pointing to the coming New Covenant. This is typology; and when antitype comes, type passes away.

For example, when Wellum is asked how the Ten Commandments apply to Gentiles, he is able to answer, “You are to obey the Ten Commandments.”³⁵ There is an intentional pause following this statement; then he continues:

You are to obey the Ten as you are to obey all of scripture. How do you obey all of scripture? Take the Ten Commandments and say, “Where are we in the Bible?” Ultimately what covenant are we under? How do we understand their functioning *in that covenant*?

³⁵ Wellum, *Differences between Covenant, New Covenant, and Dispensational Theology*, Part 3.

Thus, for PC, the point concerning the Decalogue is that while it does indeed represent EML, it is a particular manifestation in a particular covenantal context. The Decalogue must be said to function as the Old Covenant itself does: as inspired scripture that reveals EML. Decalogue ceases to function as Law, and therefore PC argues that the relationship of a Christian to the Decalogue is indirect: “The law of Moses has direct authority as Scripture and indirect authority as law; therefore, the law has an indirect application to our lives today.”³⁶

Within 1689 Federalism. 1689 Federalists do not speak of the Decalogue in the same terms as PC. While declaring the whole Law of Moses to be abolished, Barcellos insists that the Decalogue is “binding as a unit” on New Covenant believers.³⁷ Rather than speak in terms of fulfilled typology, he argues for holding the Decalogue in a unique position of prominence.³⁸ It is difficult to know whether Barcellos equates the unit of the Decalogue with the EML when he writes, “Under the OC, the basic, fundamental law of the covenant, the Ten Commandments, was written on tablets of stone. Under the New Covenant, the basic, fundamental law of the covenant will be written on tablets of flesh, of the heart.”³⁹

³⁶ Meyer, “The Mosaic Law, Theological Systems, and the Glory of Christ,” 91. This language is borrowed both from Douglas Moo and Brian Rosner. See Douglas Moo, “Response to Wayne G. Strickland,” in *The Law, the Gospel, and the Modern Christian: Five Views*, ed. Willem VanGemenen (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 315; and the entire emphasis in Rosner’s work relating to the Law’s application as wisdom/prophesy, but not as law. Rosner, *Paul and the Law*.

³⁷ Barcellos, *In Defense of the Decalogue*, 61. Context provided above.

³⁸ “In a very unique way, the Ten Commandments comprise *the* law of God. All other Old Covenant laws were both mediated through Moses and written by Moses.” Barcellos, *In Defense of the Decalogue*, 19. This is the insistence of 1689 Federalists. Renihan likewise says, “There is a unique and special character in the laws inscribed by God himself, i.e., the Ten Commandments, that marks them out from the laws written down by Moses.” Samuel Renihan, “Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants, A Review Article,” *Journal of the Institute of Reformed Baptist Studies* (2014): 172.

³⁹ Barcellos, *In Defense of the Decalogue*, 22-23. The work cited here by Barcellos was straightforwardly directed at refuting NCT, not at presenting a wider representation of 1689 Federalism. Work has continued to be done within the movement since Barcellos wrote those statements in 2001.

A particularly noteworthy example, *The Mystery of Christ* emphasizes the typological nature of the law covenant. “The kingdom of Israel *and its covenants*,” writes Renihan, “were typical shadows of Christ, the substance. As types, they were their own entities serving their own purposes in their own contexts. Yet also as types, they pointed upward and onward to something greater than themselves.”⁴⁰ Given his understanding that types cease when the antitype comes, and given even the 2001 statements by Barcellos concerning redemptive-historical development, it seems clear that 1689 Federalism does recognize a change in how the authority of the Decalogue functions coming into the New Covenant.⁴¹ There is a strong, and understandable, desire to protect the ethical standards that it represents, particularly in the face of more antinomian forms of NCT.

Conclusion. Barcellos poses the operative question: “How can we think of the Ten Commandments as exclusively Old Covenant and as a very important part of the Christian’s rule of life at the same time?”⁴² It seems that he answers his own question as he describes the whole-Bible origins of a Christian ethic. The clarification being made by PC only differs by degree, yet there is a crucial distinction: all scripture is authoritative and all scripture must be read and considered through the lens of one’s covenantal location, paying attention to redemptive-historical flow. 1689 Federalists like Adams and Renihan seem to recognize this and reiterate it, albeit by means of nuances and language that are distinctly 1689 Federalist.

⁴⁰ Renihan, *The Mystery of Christ*, 144 (emphasis added).

⁴¹ Renihan quotes Henry Lawrence approvingly when he wrote that “when the antitype, or truth is fulfilled, or performed, the type ceaseth.” In Henry Lawrence, *Of Baptism*, 238-40, quoted in Renihan, *The Mystery of Christ*, 28. Regarding Barcellos’ statements on redemptive-historical development, I refer to what was previously quoted, “Not one jot or tittle of the Law of Moses functions as Old Covenant law anymore, and to act as if it does constitutes redemptive-historical retreat.”

⁴² Barcellos, *In Defense of the Decalogue*, 26.

The fourth commandment is admittedly a complicator between the two positions. Chapter 5 will describe a hopeful way forward in the Sabbath conversation between 1689 Federalism and PC, rooted in the fact that 1689 Federalism is willing to identify positive law within the Decalogue. Yet even here, what has been said regarding methodology holds true: PC affirms that the fourth commandment “is still applicable to believers as Scripture. It must, however, be filtered through fact [*sic*] that Christ is the fulfillment of the law.”⁴³ This does not place PC further along the “discontinuity” side of the theological spectrum compared to 1689 Federalism. In fact, it is a sign of continuity, as it reflects the PC commitment to treat all of the laws the same, not making exceptions for certain ones or dividing them up.

Differing views of the Sabbath legitimately divide PC and 1689 Federalism. The question to ask, however, is, why? What is the source of the difference between them? It is not a hermeneutical one, nor does the reason stem from differing views of the covenants. The difference comes in the fact that 1689 Federalism believes that God intended the Decalogue to serve at *the summary* of EML. Adams says, “I believe Wellum has ignored ‘the Bible’s own internal categories’ by ignoring how God very clearly distinguished the decalogue from the rest of the Mosaic law . . . though he has done a better job than Westminster of placing texts in the Bible’s unfolding storyline according to their covenantal location.”⁴⁴ If this is the case, then the difference is one of a particular point of interpretation. It is an interpretive matter of great significance and consequence,

⁴³ Benjamin Merkle, *From Discontinuity to Continuity: A Survey of Dispensational and Covenantal Theologies* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020), 126, Kindle. Wellum repeatedly makes the same point; for example, “Regarding the Sabbath command specifically, we must first set it within its covenantal location and then observe how it functioned not only as a command/sign to Israel (which no longer applies to us), but also as a type of the greater salvation rest offered in Christ (which certainly applies to us!).” Stephen Wellum, “3 Reasons Sunday Is Not the Christian Sabbath,” TGC: Bible & Theology (blog), October 27, 2020, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/sunday-not-christian-sabbath/>.

⁴⁴ Adams, “1689 Federalism Response to Wellum.”

to be sure; but the difference can be accommodated as a nuance within one particular tradition. It need not force a categorical distinction between PC and 1689 Federalism.⁴⁵

Final Analysis and Comparison

The common points of emphasis which have been demonstrated are striking. The whole Law of Moses has been abolished, including the Ten Commandments. It no longer functions as Old Covenant law, yet it has not ceased to function in every sense. It continues to be relevant and to speak with authority to the Christian, and yet the way in which it reaches us has changed. Our standard for ethics must be the whole Bible. What matters is not so much the use of distinctions like the tripartite division, though it can be helpful when used properly; what matters is recognizing an EML that reflects the character of God, and submitting to all of scripture in ways that are covenantally appropriate. The differences in articulation on these points seem more like variety of accents within a single people than different languages altogether. They are differences that should be explored and taken seriously, but are not by necessity a cause for distance. By contrast, the language used by their common interlocutors in these debates—Paedobaptists and 20RBs, with their view of “one covenant, two administration”—represents an altogether different language from them both.

The final chapter of this work, then, will return to the thesis suggestion itself: that 1689 Federalism should view itself as a particular subset of PC rather their current self-identification as a subset of CT. We now have the language in place to identify the benefits of such a unifying identification.

⁴⁵ An excellent example of this approach in action may be seen in D. A. Carson’s review of the book by Philip Ross, *The Finger of God*. His words regarding Ross, while not referring to the present matter, are apropos of what divides 1689 Federalism and PC: “Of course, he [Ross] is not the only contributor to these discussions who has adopted a polarized stance. I could name several ‘new covenant’ theologians who so concentrate on where their opponents are wrong that they never try to see if some careful nuancing of arguments and of the position of at least some of their opponents might enrich all sides in the debate, rather than drive them away into defensive postures.” D. A. Carson, “The Tripartite Division of the Law: A Review of Philip Ross, *The Finger of God*,” in *From Creation to New Creation: Biblical Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Daniel M. Gurtner and Benjamin L. Gladd (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2013), 236.

CHAPTER 5

BENEFITS OF A 1689 FEDERALIST SELF-IDENTIFICATION AS A SUBSET OF PROGRESSIVE COVENANTALISM

There are meaningful ways in which PC and 1689 Federalism would benefit from closer union. In this chapter I explain those potential benefits under two categories. I end, then, with a brief explanation as to the propriety of the particular arrangement suggested by this thesis—1689 Federalism as a subset of PC, rather than the reverse.

Before discussing the benefits to PC and 1689 Federalism themselves, it is worth mentioning ways that this realignment would clarify the theological scene of the Reformed Baptist world for those outside of it.¹ The shift would help distinguish between PC and NCT on the one hand, and between 1689 Federalism and 20RB on the other.

On the one hand, a public identification between the two would greatly improve the general understanding of PC distinctives compared to NCT. One reason for this is that 1689 Federalists deserve partial credit for the confusion in this regard. Another reason is that such a drastic change would force a reevaluation from, for example, John Hendryx. In explaining Monergism’s ban of *KTC*, Hendryx opined “that not many Presbyterians, Reformed or Reformed Baptists will be persuaded by *KTC*’s conclusion.”² If it were to turn out that many Reformed Baptists found substantial representation within the theological designation of PC, there would be no avoiding a reevaluation, and a more careful consideration, of the arguments from the broader world of CT.

¹ As mentioned previously, I acknowledge a broad usage of the term “Reformed Baptist.” See 3n7 of this thesis.

² John Hendryx, “‘Kingdom through Covenant’ and the Inconsistency of Monergism.Com,” Monergism (blog), accessed November 12, 2021, <https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/inconsistency.html>.

On the other hand, 1689 Federalism itself is in need of a more public distinction from 20RB. The fact that both groups self-identify as “Reformed Baptist” and as “Covenantal,” yet differ on such a significant point as the identity of the CoG, is confusing. It hinders understanding, and possibly even robs it entirely from those without the endurance to sift through the details and arguments. If, however, 20RB were designated to be a subset of CT and 1689 Federalism a subset of PC, their differences would be clarified.

Potential benefits for PC and 1689 Federalism may be grouped into two categories: (1) internal clarity and (2) argument advancement.

Benefit: Internal Clarity

Each group stands to benefit internally from 1689 Federalism identifying under the PC umbrella.

Within 1689 Federalism

From the beginning, BCT has had to give disproportionate attention to distinguishing itself from Paedobaptist theology. Samuel Renihan admits that “the majority of the particular Baptists’ writings on covenant theology served a polemical purpose,”³ and those polemics concerned the relevant distinctions with Presbyterians and the Westminster Confession of Faith. According to Renihan, “The polemics of the particular Baptists did not seek to uproot the reformed family tree . . . but to prove the scriptural legitimacy of their distinctives.”⁴ In this way, their work tended to be polemically-focused—perhaps by necessity, but nonetheless in a disproportionate way. As 1689 Federalism has worked to recover such venerable Baptist distinctives,

³ Samuel Renihan, *From Shadow to Substance: The Federal Theology of the English Particular Baptists (1642-1704)*, Baptist History and Heritage Studies 16 (Oxford: Regent’s Park College, 2018), 327.

⁴ Renihan, *From Shadow to Substance*, 328.

proponents have interacted with the works of men like Nehemiah Coxe and Benjamin Keach.⁵ 1689 Federalists have spent much time and effort seeking to prove their rightful place within CT.

A move from a CT to a PC identification brings just the sort of clarity that would allow 1689 Federalism to increasingly shift their focus onto biblical and systematic theology. In these arenas they have much to offer, as the excellent work in *The Mystery of Christ* makes clear.

Within PC

A defining priority in PC has been to lovingly push back against CT and DT in the ways that, as PC sees it, the systems have obscured their respective approaches to scripture. The presentation of their view as a *via media* between the two can create the impression that they are doing something new. This is where closer alignment with and respect for the work of 1689 Federalists could benefit PC: 1689 Federalists have effectively shown that Particular Baptists have long been presenting a cohesive, *alternative*, conception of covenantal organization in scripture. On the part of many Reformed Baptists, open acknowledgement of this as a common feature with PC would go a long way toward enhancing goodwill and creating a greater willingness to partner together.⁶

This is already happening. Wellum, answering a question as to what he would perceive to be the historical origin of his view, points to 1689 Federalism's work to give his answer: "If the 1689 Federalist guys are right, which they seem to be, the Baptists

⁵ And, for that matter, John Owen. Though a Presbyterian, much of his position on these matters aligns with BCT. See Nehemiah Coxe and John Owen, *Covenant Theology from Adam to Christ*, ed. Ronald Miller, James Renihan, and Francisco Orozco (Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2005).

⁶ The desire for such an acknowledgement is easily discernible in Renihan's review of *KTC*: "A good dose of Baptist historical theology might be of great benefit." Samuel Renihan, "Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants, A Review Article," *Journal of the Institute of Reformed Baptist Studies* (2014): 166.

were already, in light of the reformation, modifying covenant theology . . . [S]o you could say at the same period of time that CT is developing, so the Baptists are also developing a view that is not the same.”⁷

An increasing awareness and usage of historic Particular Baptist voices can only stand to strengthen the PC position. They offer significant contributions to the emphases that PC is keen to make, so that as 1689 Federalism draws nearer, those additional conversation partners will only enhance clarity.

Conclusion

Put simply: as regards the pursuit of greater clarity along the theological spectrum, it is the “one covenant, two administrations” distinction of Presbyterian CT and 20RB that need to be more visibly distinguished from the new and singular New Covenant of 1689 Federalism and PC.

Benefit: Argument Advancement

Beyond the matter of internal clarity, a greater unity would be mutually beneficial in advancing the particular arguments of both camps. The reason for this is simple: both groups are drawing from the same “potential constituents.”⁸ Moreover, an intramural debate tends to happen more quickly and productively compared to debates between opposing groups. The latter can too often devolve into unhelpful accusation with little accountability or effort expended to understand the other side. While it is far beyond the scope of the present work to represent or resolve the following examples, I venture to suggest two areas in which this particular union could actually advance theological

⁷ Stephen Wellum, *Differences between Covenant, New Covenant, and Dispensational Theology, Part 3*, The Church at Pecan Creek (Denton, TX, 2021), <https://www.sermonaudio.com/playpopupvideo.asp?SID=83021210173850>.

⁸ My thanks to Richard Lucas for suggesting this analogy.

wrestling that is thought by many to be caught in hopeless gridlock: Sabbath and the Covenant of Grace.

Sabbath⁹

Dialogue between PC and 1689 Federalism has already proven productive regarding the concept of law and the righteousness of God. When Wellum writes that “in the end, God’s righteousness comes apart from the old covenant, and it is only found in the new covenant—that to which the law pointed,” Adams is able to respond, “Strongly agree. And it’s important to point out agreements, since PC is largely unfamiliar with how we differ from Westminster Federalism.”¹⁰

That same productive dialogue has extended into the subject of the Sabbath. In post-*KTC* dialogue, Samuel Renihan distinguished between moral and positive law: moral law is “that which is right because of who God is and how he has made the world,” while positive law is “that which is right because it has been commanded.”¹¹ Representing 1689 Federalism, Renihan names the aspects of law traditionally deemed “ceremonial” and “judicial” as being subdivisions of *positive* law while designating the Ten Commandments as *moral* law. PC would call this oversimplifying the matter, and often the debate would end there. But in his effort to interact with the authors of *KTC*, Renihan goes another step further: he grants two qualifications in the discussion: “First, positive laws from the Mosaic covenant are not binding on the New Covenant people. . . . Second, the way that the law functioned for Israel is surely not the same as the way that

⁹ What follows is nothing like an attempt to summarize or encapsulate the debates about Sabbath. The focus here is quite narrow: the current state of that debate between 1689 Federalism and PC, and what I perceive to be a hopeful way forward in their discussion.

¹⁰ Brandon Adams, “1689 Federalism Response to Wellum’s ‘Progressive Covenantalism and the Doing of Ethics,’” Contrast (blog), July 24, 2015, <https://contrast2.wordpress.com/2015/07/24/response-to-wellums-progressive-covenantalism-and-the-doing-of-ethics/>. He is quoting Stephen Wellum, “Progressive Covenantalism and the Doing of Ethics,” in *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course between Dispensational and Covenant Theologies*, ed. Stephen J. Wellum and Brent Parker (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 221.

¹¹ Renihan, “Kingdom through Covenant, A Review Article,” 172.

the law functions for the church. The law comes to us through Christ, but not as a covenant like it did for Israel.”¹² Describing the non-binding nature of positive laws from the Mosaic covenant, he further clarifies that “this includes the seventh day observation of the fourth commandment. The apostolic example of the NT positively establishes the observance of the Sabbath on the first day of the week.”¹³ The significance of this clarification by Renihan comes in the admission that the Decalogue *may include positive law*; it is not necessarily a monolithic slab of “moral law” that is immune from consideration as to redemptive-historical development.

If this is the case—and if 1689 Federalists are willing to say so—it is quite possibly a significant starting point for more fruitful discussion on the Sabbath within the Reformed Baptist world. Pair that with the PC insistence that the Decalogue is authoritative but must be applied based on covenantal location, and something of a New Covenant Sabbath *principle* may be nearer than it once was. Brandon Adams, referring to Paul’s application of Leviticus 18:5 to both Jews and Gentiles, reasons that Paul can do so because of “the overlap that exists between the moral law and the Mosaic law. Because of this overlap Paul can quote the Mosaic writings, deducing therefore a principle that applies universally to Jews and Gentiles alike.”¹⁴ All that remains between them, then, is the 1689 Federalist conviction that the Decalogue was intended as the summary of EML. Perhaps on that question, the two can agree to disagree while productively moving the discussion on to the place of Decalogue within biblical typology.

¹² Renihan, “Kingdom through Covenant, A Review Article,” 173-74.

¹³ Renihan, “Kingdom through Covenant, A Review Article,” 174n10.

¹⁴ Adams, “1689 Federalism Response to Wellum.”

Evaluating the Propriety of the “Covenant of Grace” Category outside Covenant Theology

For Paedobaptist CT and 20RB, the need for the COG as a theological category makes sense due to the fact that several biblical covenants are subsumed under this one overarching covenant. For 1689 Federalism, which simply equates the CoG with the New Covenant, the use of CoG as a categorical distinction arises out of more than mere confessional fidelity. Rather, it stems from the conviction that the Bible truly speaks of an “unconditional” covenant. Renihan, sympathizing with the PC critique of the traditional conditional/unconditional framework regarding the covenants, replies this way:

I cannot help but agree with them, to a degree. When it comes to the Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenants there is indeed a blend in which God vows to make good on a promise while demanding that the covenant partner perform certain actions as well. They ought not to be reduced too hastily to one or the other without careful consideration. But when it comes to the CoW and CoG, we have explicit scriptural warrant for doing so.¹⁵

PC does not object to the use of the term CoG in principle.¹⁶ For Wellum, the discomfort is simply with the tendency to prefer theological categories where biblical ones have already been provided and are sufficient.

On this very point, helpful dialogue has begun and needs to be continued.

Renihan responds to PC concerns regarding CoG language by calling it

a false dilemma. The covenant of works and covenant of grace metanarrative is [in *KTC*] pitted against the metanarrative of progressive Covenantalism. That is almost like pitting the chapters of a book against the beginning and end of a book. While classic covenant theology may say that the metanarrative hinges on two covenants, as long as we understand that between the two lies a progression of covenants (as the seventeenth-century Particular Baptists argued), such a dilemma is dissolved.¹⁷

¹⁵ Renihan, “*Kingdom through Covenant, A Review Article*,” 163.

¹⁶ See pp. 29-30 of this thesis.

¹⁷ Renihan, “*Kingdom through Covenant, A Review Article*,” 164.

He proceeds to attempt to summarize the depiction within *KTC* of the new covenant primacy: the NC is unbreakable; the Scriptural storyline centers upon Adam-Christ typology; the unfolding of the Genesis 3:15 promise in the entire story line of Scripture through the biblical covenants. He concludes, “If this is not the basic structure of the classic covenant of works and covenant of grace biblical metanarrative, then I don’t know what is.”¹⁸

The point presently is not whether Renihan is right or wrong in his summation of the position in *KTC*. Rather, it offers hope for progress that could be attained through a closer unity between PC and 1689 Federalism.

1689 Federalism a Subset of Progressive Covenantalism, Rather than the Converse

The present thesis has argued for a particular rearrangement of alignment along the theological spectrum. “Why,” one might ask, “not the reverse? Why not PC identifying as a subset of a larger Reformed Baptist designation?”¹⁹ That alternative organization has benefits of its own. It fosters and displays the existing like-mindedness between the groups. Perhaps another benefit is that it maintains the more traditional use of the term “Reformed Baptist.” I have admittedly used the term quite broadly. However, to suggest PC to be underneath a RB umbrella is to confuse categories. Figure 1 lays out the two possible arrangements, and when seen together it seems that the present argument creates a clearer, more easily articulated picture.

¹⁸ Renihan, “*Kingdom through Covenant*, A Review Article,” 164-65.

¹⁹ Such was the argument of Daniel Scheiderer; see Daniel Scheiderer, “Progressive Covenantalists as Reformed Baptists,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 82, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 137-52.

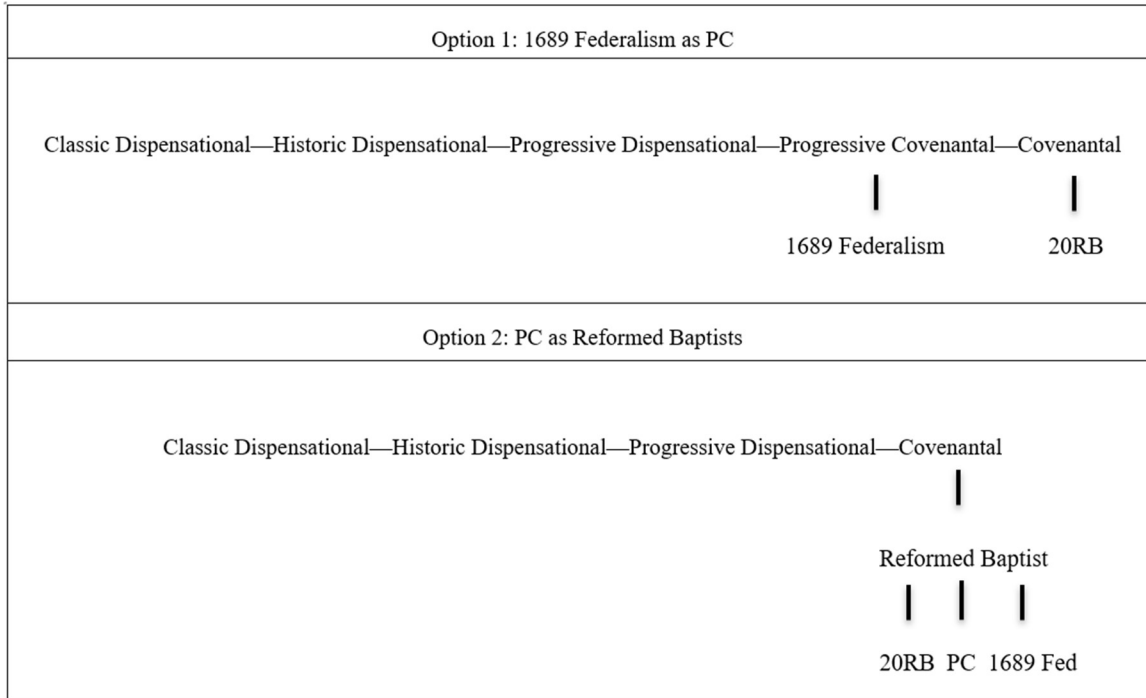


Figure 1. Comparison of two organizational structures

PC has rightly come to exist as a major category (Level One) on the spectrum of dispensational and covenantal theologies. Placing PC underneath the Reformed Baptist designation (Level Three) both fails to add clarity to Level One and further confuses the category of Covenantalism. First, it leaves distinctions between 20RB, PC, and 1689 Federalism unrepresented, thus maintaining the need to multiply explanations as to how they differ. An ideal categorization would minimize the need for further explanation rather than multiply it. Second, it obscures the natural positioning of the “Progressive Covenantal” designation alongside “Progressive Covenantal” and “Covenantal.”

The question is this: in which distinctions does PC fundamentally participate? Benjamin Merkle wrote recently about “theological systems of discontinuity and continuity,” explaining that they “are constructed in an attempt to understand the overall message of the Bible.”²⁰ He places such systems along a spectrum—a “taxonomy of

²⁰ Merkle, *Discontinuity to Continuity*, 5.

theological systems, and rightly aligns them exactly as Option 1 does in figure 1 above.²¹ In 2022, the Spectrum Multiview series will release a new work entitled *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture*.²² Again, PC takes a Level One placement. It is simply a more accurate arrangement.²³

By contrast, 1689 Federalism has never sought to exist in a Level One place on such a spectrum. They have long named themselves a subset within a particular theological system somewhere along that taxonomy, making a particular case concerning Baptist historical theology.

Conclusion

The dual matters of Sabbath-application and COG are substantial, demanding to be reckoned with. There is a reason that so much has been written on these subjects. They will likely continue into perpetuity as sources of disagreement among Christians and even within the Reformed world. Some conversation partners have a better chance than others of making meaningful progress, however. Conversations of a more intramural sort are often better situated to produce greater clarity rather than increasing confusion.²⁴ PC and 1689 Federalism have need of a closer proximity as conversation partners. Such will surely benefit the wider theological world.

²¹ Merkle, *Discontinuity to Continuity*, 6. To the right of Covenant Theology, Merkle adds Christian Reconstructionism.

²² Brent Parker and Brent Lucas, eds., *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture*, Spectrum Multiview Book Series (Westmont, IL: IVP Academic, 2022).

²³ This seems to be what Malcolm Yarnell is referring to when he celebrates the book by Samuel Renihan, *The Mystery of Christ*, as a capable contribution “to the growing literature of ‘progressive Covenantalism.’” Malcolm B. Yarnell III, acknowledgements of *The Mystery of Christ: His Covenant and His Kingdom*, by Samuel Renihan (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2019).

²⁴ Wellum recently said that the nuances in such things “require lots and lots of coffee and good conversation.” Stephen Wellum, *Differences between Covenant, New Covenant, and Dispensational Theology, Part 3*.

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ABSTRACT

ONE POSITION, TWO ADMINISTRATIONS: EXPLORING THE THEOLOGICAL OVERLAP BETWEEN 1689 FEDERALISM AND PROGRESSIVE COVENANTALISM

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This thesis examines the common ground between 1689 Federalism and Progressive Covenantalism, which warrants a closer identification between the two than currently exists. I demonstrate that Progressive Covenantalism carves out a place on the continuity/discontinuity spectrum whereas 1689 Federalism connotes emphasizes a particular relationship between the Old and New covenants while placing the same emphasis as PC on the newness of the New Covenant. Therefore, 1689 Federalists should view themselves as a subset of Progressive Covenantalism rather than as a variety of Covenant Theology.

Chapter 1 summarizes the history of both systems and details the thesis and methodology used to advance the argument. Chapter 2 presents the published interactions between the two systems to-date, highlighting the problems of mischaracterization and misunderstanding that have unnecessarily divided them. Chapter 3 presents the extent of the priorities shared by each system. Chapter 4 focuses on the central point that is said to divide PC and 1689 Federalism: the Law. Broad and narrow priorities are compared and reflected upon. Chapter 5 concludes with several suggested benefits to be gained through a closer alignment between PC and 1689 Federalism.

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