

Winnowing Fork or Harvest? A Paedobaptist Assessment of the Credobaptist Interpretation of Jeremiah 31 as seen in Stephen Wellum’s “Baptism and the Relationship Between Covenants”

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ABSTRACT

Stephen Wellum’s chapter in *Believer’s Baptism* argues that a proper interpretation of Jeremiah 31 sees God’s new covenant as more exclusive than the old covenant. In this paper, I argue that this interpretation of Jeremiah 31 is faulty on numerous grounds—it does not comport with Jeremiah’s prophecy, it does not comport with the New Testament, and it does not comport with current ecclesiastical reality. Foundational to my argument is that Jeremiah’s prophecy is one of expansion, not of exclusion as Wellum’s exegesis and sacramentology require. In other words, Jeremiah promises a harvest, not a winnowing fork.

1. WELLUM’S ARGUMENT

This paper will examine and critique what I find to be a central argument in Stephen Wellum’s chapter entitled “Baptism and the Relationship Between Covenants” in *Believers Baptism*. I will argue for paedobaptism against Wellum’s credobaptist position. Wellum argues that the paradigm imposed by Scripture clearly indicates a sharp discontinuity (though an analogy remains) between Old Testament circumcision and New Testament baptism. Though Wellum makes multiple arguments, central to his thesis is the relationship between the OT and the NT. He rightly notes that “the baptismal question is a major test-case for one’s entire theological system since it tells much about how one puts the entire canon together.”¹ That is, if one sees a degree of discontinuity from one OT covenant to another, eventually culminating in the new NT covenant, one is much more likely (indeed, almost guaranteed) to see baptism as a *new* sign, distinct from the generational sign of circumcision. On the other hand, if one sees the OT as one covenant with different administrative heads (i.e., the single covenant of grace administered by Noah, Abraham, David, et. al.) he is more

likely to see baptism in continuity with circumcision (albeit with important differences).

For Wellum, the former is the case—the OT is comprised of a distinct redemptive-historical era in which physical promises to national Israel are to be distinguished from the almost completely spiritual promises of the NT. As such, we should expect to see a distinction in the introductory sacrament of baptism. When people enter the new Israel through the new covenant, they enter not through physical promises, but through spiritual ones. They are not brought in by first birth, but by the second from above. Baptism, then, is only applied to those who have been spiritually born again, not those who have been physically born once. This underscores the uniqueness of the new covenant. The *old* covenant was applied to all, regardless of spiritual status. The *new* covenant is much better, in that it only applies to those who are regenerated.

Principal to this thesis is his interpretation of Jeremiah 31. Wellum seeks to show that Jeremiah 31 is not promising a mere expansion of what was already happening in the OT. That is to “flatten” what Jeremiah is saying. He says that paedobaptists “do not acknowledge the ‘newness’ of the new covenant. Their emphasis on the continuity of the covenant of grace has led them to flatten the covenantal differences and thus to misconstrue the nature of the new covenant community.”² Paedobaptists all but erase the distinctions between the OT

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1. Stephen J. Wellum, “Baptism and the Relationship Between Covenants,” in *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, New American Commentary Studies in Bible & Theology, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn Wright (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2007), pp. 168–69. Hereafter, simple references to this work are cited parenthetically by author and page number.

2. Wellum, “Believer’s Baptism,” p. 145 (see also 135–36).

covenants in their attempt to see the unified covenant of grace and in so doing, they “fail to grasp” OT covenantal distinctions (Wellum, p. 146). Jeremiah is not just telling Israel that YHWH will one day do what he is already doing but in an increased way. Rather, YHWH is promising that one day a radically new covenant will be given—Israel will not be partially comprised of those who receive physical marks of inclusion but are actually spiritually excluded. Rather, Israel will be comprised of *only* the regenerate (Rom. 9:6; Wellum, p. 144). This, for Wellum, marks the distinction between the OT and the NT. Jeremiah is saying that the new covenant will be categorically distinct from the old since the old included unregenerate and the new includes the regenerate only. This is why the new covenant is better and it is also its distinction when compared to the old.

2. A REVERENT CRITIQUE

Though there is much to be lauded in Wellum’s presentation of credobaptism (most prominent, probably, being his emphasis on the success that God has in forming his church), there is some faulty reasoning in his proposal. It is an honor to grapple with the work of such an eminent theologian and I pray that the following is used by God to refine good work into something even better.

2.1 WINNOWING FORK OR HARVEST?

The line of reasoning I want to pick up and examine was intimated above. It has to do with the way Wellum sees the OT and the NT connected. Specifically, my critique is that Wellum’s interpretation of Jeremiah 31 (most specifically, Jeremiah 31:34a: “And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD”) defeats his stated goal. His goal is to avoid a “flattening” of the OT covenants. But his reading of Jeremiah entails, in my view, a reductionistic or flattened view of God’s promise. Principally, Jeremiah’s prophecy is one of *increase*. Wellum’s interpretation, on the other hand, reads it primarily as one of *decrease*. Rather than seeing this as a promise of God’s new work of spiritual revival, Wellum’s view sees this as a promise of God’s removal of the unregenerate. If we read Jeremiah the way Wellum does, what results is not an increase, or a better covenant, but

rather, merely a more exclusive one. It is to see a winnowing fork when Jeremiah promises a harvest.

Jeremiah 31 is an important OT prophecy that is indicative of much OT theology. All of Israel was looking forward to the day when YHWH would expand the borders of Israel so greatly that all people would be under his lordship (Ps. 2). That is what Jeremiah 31 is about (which will be examined in brief below). Wellum’s interpretation of the text, on the other hand, has Jeremiah not primarily promising an increase, but a filtration. Central to Wellum’s thesis is that the change from the old covenant to the new covenant must be significant. Indeed, it must be structural. He says, “one cannot understand the *new* covenant without acknowledging the massive *structural* changes that have taken place. It is simply *not* correct to think of the new covenant as merely a ‘renewed’ version of the old; it brings with it significant change.”³ The significant change, for Wellum, is this: “the change is found in the shift from a *mixed* community to that of a *regenerate* community with the crucial implication that under the new covenant, the covenant sign must only be applied to those who are in that covenant, namely, believers.”⁴ This “significant change,” I argue, pales in comparison to what is intended by Jeremiah.

The logical implication of what Wellum is saying, is that the great change from the OT to the NT, in terms of the covenant prophesied in Jeremiah 31, is that unbelievers will be purged from our midst. Wellum affirms (along with paedobaptists) the goodness of a fully regenerate church. That is his goal. But, in doing this in a credobaptist way he is downplaying Jeremiah’s promise of expansion. This type of understanding of Jeremiah necessitates that the means by which God is actualizing this prophecy, according to Wellum, is not growth but filtration. This is because the difference between the old covenant and the new is not that God will make *more* spiritually dead people live, but that he will *distinguish* between the dead and the alive. The unbelievers are filtered from the covenant community and baptism is a sacramental mechanism to that end. *Only* believers receive the sacrament. What is the benefit of this? It is that unbelievers are not identified with the body of Christ. This is a fair interpretation of Jeremiah 31. It reads the passage as a promise of purging. That is very well possible (cf. Deut. 19:19; 1 Cor. 5:13).⁵ However, I contend that this reading, though possible, is a flattening of a beautiful promise. God is not promising a filtration of the church in which unbelievers will be purged. The promise is actually the opposite—God is promising the growth of the church, through the outpouring of the Spirit of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–11), such that his indwelling produces Christians who have the word

3. Wellum, “Believer’s Baptism,” 152. Emphasis is original unless otherwise noted.

4. Wellum, “Believer’s Baptism,” 146. Cf. Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *God’s Kingdom through God’s Covenants: A Concise Biblical Theology* (Crossway, 2015), 270.

5. These are my references.

of God written on their hearts (Jer. 31:33). The promise is not a regenerate church by means of cleansing, but a regenerate church by means of blessing.

To be sure, Wellum would see Jeremiah 31 as a promise of expansion as well. He is not saying the promise is *only* filtration. My point above is that the exclusive baptism which he is arguing for is actually opposed to his understanding of the promise. He wants to read Jeremiah 31 as a promise of a massive regenerate church, we all do. But, if that promise is exemplified by means of baptismal filtration, it subverts the true power of the promise. The newness of baptism should exemplify the fact that God intends to regenerate *all* his people. This is what Jeremiah said to the people of Israel (more on this below). His promise was for all Israel and circumcision was the sacramental means of anticipating that promise. The “newness” of baptism, for Wellum, is that it is *not* applied to all those in the church: “the covenant sign of baptism must only be applied to those who have come to faith in Christ. It is at this point that we see the crucial discontinuity between the old and new covenant communities, a point the paedobaptist fails to grasp” (Wellum, p. 146). Though paedobaptists might “fail to grasp” his version of discontinuity, it is by no means true that paedobaptists do not have their own version of discontinuity between old and new covenants. Wellum’s version of discontinuity, it should be clear, is that the old covenant sacrament was broadly applied and the new is more stringently applied because now the church is to be pure. The paedobaptist version of discontinuity is that the new covenant sacrament is applied with new effectiveness.

For the paedobaptist, the discontinuity between the old covenant and the new covenant promised by Jeremiah can be largely seen in the incomprehensible work of the Spirit of Pentecost. The Spirit which was—for thousands of years—hidden behind thick curtain and threat of death, now dwells in the bosom of each Christian. *This* is the means by which Jeremiah 31 is fulfilled. The church will grow and be regenerate because of the outpouring of the Spirit, which had not yet occurred in Jeremiah’s time. The discontinuity is not to be found in reserving entrance to those with faith only. Rather, the discontinuity is to be found in the fact that something unprecedented has happened. This is God’s promise: “no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me” (Jer. 31:34a). Does it make most sense of this passage to read it in terms of God *removing* unbelievers, or *adding* believers? Since the former would require the removal of beloved family members from the tents of Israelites, to be seen as a positive promise the latter is

required. Paedobaptism, then, is a perfect expression of this promise—all will know God, including (not excluding!) your children. What a promise, indeed.⁶

It is important here to consider the implications of these two versions of discontinuity. One sees God’s promise as moving from expansive to selective, while the other sees it moving from relatively ineffective to effective. When one considers the difference in scope between OT Israel and the church today, the latter is *exactly* what we see. The difference between infinitesimal OT Israel and the global Church today is not that unbelievers have been excluded (indeed, there are more unbelievers in the Church now than then) but that the law is now written on the hearts of those who believe. The tendency toward legalism in the old covenant (e.g., Pharisaism) has been replaced with liberty in the new (Gal. 4:4–5). *This* is the means by which God’s new covenant church has grown so much, no exclusion.

Wellum does not like this paedobaptist version of discontinuity because it does not seem to be new. Since God has already made some Israelites alive, making more alive sounds like more of the same. We will see below that this is not what Jeremiah is saying. For now, suffice it to say Jeremiah is painting a picture of dead Israel being resurrected—a significant change. Furthermore, Wellum’s assumption that “more of the same” intimates something *not* new, is to fail to understand the Old Testament’s portrayal of God’s work. A new work of YHWH does not necessitate something that is in a completely different category than everything he has done before. If this were true, no work of salvation after Abraham (or Adam?)

6. An important attendant question is outside the scope of this paper. However, it will be addressed in brief. The question is this: How does this promise comport with reality? Baptized infants often prove to be *not* saved. The short answer is the Bible’s teaching on apostasy coupled with the distinction between the visible and invisible aspects of the church. Wellum misses the mark at this juncture. He says paedobaptist interpretation of the warning passages in Hebrews fails to “... do justice to *all* the biblical data ...” as if there is some part of the warning passages that they ignore (p. 161). The opposite is the case. Only in terms of a paedobaptist position can one truly understand the blessing language of Hebrews 6:4–6. Those who have “tasted the heavenly gift” and who have “shared in the Holy Spirit” (Heb 6:4) yet are unregenerate are best understood as unregenerate members of the covenant. This interpretation fits nicely with “*all* the biblical data.” To address the issue of apostasy, Wellum, on the other hand, appeals to Thomas R. Schreiner and Ardel B. Caneday, *The Race Set before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance & Assurance* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2001). This book has a serious issue not addressed by Wellum. Namely, the apparent rejection of unconditional election: “the promise of eternal life is conditional” (p. 166); “God’s promise of salvation is conditional” (p. 167). *Contra*, Roy B Zuck, “The Race Set before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 160.638 (2003): 241–43.

would be “new” since they are all salvific works. In the Psalms, it is well known that the term “new song” often refers to one that is written to commemorate a new victory God has given his people. Whether these are military victories⁷ or “the new acts of redemption and deliverance which Yahweh is about to perform,”⁸ they are all victorious works of God. And the most *recent* is the *newest*. In a similar way, Jeremiah is showing that “the barrier of willful disobedience will be overcome by a *new* inclination to follow the Lord wholeheartedly.”⁹ The newness of Jeremiah’s prophecy is that dead Israel will be alive, not that those who are dead will be excluded.

A consistent paedobaptist position, as we have just seen, does indeed provide a discontinuity from the old to the new covenant (the difference being spiritual death and spiritual life). At the same time, Wellum’s position is prone to suffer under his own criticism. Since “more” spiritual regeneration is not “new,” it stands to reason that “exclusive” regeneration is not either. The mere removal of the unregenerate does not adequately indicate a new covenant under Wellum’s rubric. This is because he wants to see God doing something categorically distinct in the new covenant. However, in his interpretation, God is *not* doing something new. God has been and always will regenerate the elect-dead. He is not, in Wellum’s system, *doing* anything new. Rather, God is merely continuing to do what he always did, without applying secondary benefits to those who are not elect. If anything, God is doing *less* under Wellum’s interpretation. But if Wellum’s peculiar view were correct, such a covenant, while theoretically qualifying as a new covenant, would definitely not be an improvement, especially in the eyes of Israel (more on this below).

7. Tremper Longman, “Psalm 98: A Divine Warrior Hymn,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 27 (1984): 269; Tremper Longman, “The Divine Warrior: The New Testament Use of an Old Testament Motif,” *Westminster Theological Seminary* 44 (1982): 290–307.

8. Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, vol. 20 of *Word Biblical Commentary* (Word, Incorporated, 1998), p. 513.

9. Hetty Lalleman, *Jeremiah and Lamentations: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 21 of *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*, ed. David G. Firth (Inter-Varsity Press, 2013), p. 60 (emphasis mine).

10. William Lee Holladay, *Jeremiah*, ed. Paul D. Hanson, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), p. 197.

11. This is a classic point made as long ago as 1649 which Wellum does not address. See George Gillespie, *A Treatise of Miscellany Questions Wherein Many Usefull Questions and Cases of Conscience Are Discussed and Resolved* (Edinburgh: Printed by Gedeon Lithgow, Published by Patrik Gillespie, 1649), pp. 4–5.

12. I am not accusing Wellum of being literalistic. I am saying that his interpretation moves too close to that extreme. A more balanced approach would allow the language more freedom to express spiritual realities without going against the grain of other passages (see quote from Mark Herzer below).

Another unwanted implication of Wellum’s interpretation is that God is to be seen, in the words of Holladay, as drawing “up a fresh contract without the defects of the old, implying in turn that he could improve on the old one, that he had learned something from the failure of the old.”¹⁰ Wellum’s insistence that God’s new covenant must be distinct in the terms he stipulates, tends to see the old as “bad” rather than a not yet completely unfolded good. The type of distinction he requires, while trying to do justice to NT teaching on the new covenant, implicitly denigrates the old. Paedobaptist continuity, on the other hand, can full well recognize that God’s old covenant was perfectly gracious, and also that it is more fully realized (and therefore realized in a *new* way; see above) in the new covenant.

Yet another problem in Wellum’s interpretation is seen in its tendency to press the image of the passage beyond what the text may bear.¹¹ No interpretation of this text can be mechanically literal. Jeremiah says that no one will “teach his neighbor” about the Lord because “they all shall know me” (Jer. 31:34). This does not mean, as a literalist might imagine, that there will no longer be teachers of the Word, or that one day all people will wake up and know God without ever hearing about him from another human. That would be to press the passage beyond its scope. The implication of Wellum’s interpretation is that there will not be *any* unregenerate people in the church. Though possible, this interpretation is too literal. Jeremiah is not saying that there will be zero unregenerate people in the church any more than he is saying there will be zero teachers.¹² Rather, Jeremiah is indicating a time of future renewal in which God’s people will be radically regenerated by his sovereign power. This radical regeneration warrants language of newness because it entails the sprouting of spiritual life from spiritual death.

2.2 JEREMIAH 31

With this appraisal of Wellum’s interpretation of Jeremiah 31 in place, we will now briefly present an alternate interpretation. Jeremiah 31:34 is relatively straightforward if one does not press the language too far: “And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD” (Jer. 31:34a). Clearly, an *increase* in those who are resolutely dedicated to YHWH is indicated here. “From the least of them to the greatest” is a common Hebraic phrase indicating the vast majority of a certain group. Jonah, for example, is clearly indicating a wholesale repentance when the author writes

“And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from *the greatest of them to the least of them* [מְקַטְבֵּי יַעַד וְגָדוֹלָם]” (Jonah 3:5). Jeremiah uses the same phrase in our passage (31:34) with the words flipped and a *lamed* added (לְמִקְטְבֵי יַעַד וְגָדוֹלָם). Jeremiah also repeats this phrase in multiple places (Jer. 6:13; 8:10; 42:1, 8; 44:12). Most instructive is his use in Jeremiah 6:13: “For *from the least to the greatest of them* [מְקַטְבֵּי יַעַד וְגָדוֹלָם] everyone [יְלֵוֹ] is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest, everyone [כָּל־] deals falsely” (Jer. 6:13). Jeremiah is making the same point as Jonah using the same words—*everyone* falls into the category of “the least and the greatest.” When “least” (קָטָן) is combined with “greatest” (גָּדוֹל) the result is often “a polarising expression to include everything (meaning all).”¹³ Without a doubt, that is emphatically the case in Jeremiah’s prophecy.¹⁴

Jeremiah 6:13, then, should inform the way we read Jeremiah 31:34. Jeremiah’s strikingly *new* presentation of the covenant requires no filtration or exclusion. In 6:13, he makes it explicitly clear that *everyone* in Israel is steeped in sin (see previous paragraph). The words he uses to indicate that all Israel is sinful in 6:13 are the same as the ones he uses to indicate that all Israel will be saved by God in 31:34 (יַעַד וְגָדוֹלָם) in both cases, but with a ל preposition added in the latter passage). Despite this reality of Israelite sin, God is going to make it so that *everyone* believes him. It simply does damage to the beauty of Jeremiah’s prophecy to see this promise as the *removal* of those who disbelieve. Indeed, if that were the case, says Jeremiah, none would be left!

At this point we must pay careful attention to the crux of the passage. Jeremiah introduces the mechanism for realizing the promise that all people will know God. Will God make “all” know him by excluding some, or some other way? Jeremiah introduces the answer with a causal כִּי: “For [כִּי] I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more” (Jer. 31:34b).¹⁵ The means by which God will actualize his promise to Israel, then, is atonement. He will, somehow, forget their sins. The picture that Jeremiah is painting is one analogous to Ezekiel 37—dead people will be made alive. Indeed, this is a recurring biblical image (John 5:24–25; Rom. 5:15–16; Eph. 2:1–10; Col. 2:13; Heb. 9:14). The dead man of corporate Israel will be made alive by the sovereign grace of God. It is not the case that Israel will be made half-alive and the remaining dead parts will be removed. Salvation is not the means of purging, but the means by which all will be made alive.

Wellum sees this passage as indicating that Israel will be purified and no longer mixed because God’s living

work will be distinguished from the counterfeit work of Satan. God will indeed make the dead alive. That much we agree on. However, contra Wellum, Jeremiah prophesies something new *not* because it can be distinguished from the counterfeit; this is clearly not our experience and the reason Hebrews 6:4–6 was written (to explain apostasy). Rather, God’s work will be new because his people will be radically regenerated. When compared to the dismal reality of Jeremiah 6:14, the promise of 31:34 is groundbreakingly new. Israel was spiritually dead. Now, God says, they will be spiritually alive. This is a corporate promise. God is not promising something to a select few. His promise is for *all* Israel; Jeremiah is emphatic on this point. The picture, then, is one of a dead man coming alive. This is as new and distinct as possible. Jeremiah could not paint a more distinct picture between the old covenant and the new—it is the difference between death and life.

When we put ourselves in Israel’s sandals and imagine what it would be like to receive this promise, it is literally incomprehensible that God would be speaking about excluding children who do not believe. That would be more of a threat than a promise. Familial integrity was of utmost importance to Israel.¹⁶ For this promise to be a promise, it must mean what it says: “They shall *all* know me, from the *least* of them to the *greatest*.” Surely, this word “least” (קָטָן) would conjure thoughts of children for the Israelites. Indeed, this word is often used to refer to small children.¹⁷ One could translate this passage this way: “all shall know me, from the youngest to the oldest.” The new covenant, then, is one in which even children will know the Lord. According to Jeremiah, the proper posture of a new covenant believer is not one in which we scrutinize our children’s faith in order to determine if

13. Ludwig Koehler et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), p. 1093.

14. Gerald L. Keown, *Jeremiah 26–52*, vol. 27 of *Word Biblical Commentary* (Word, Incorporated, 1995), 135; Holladay, *Jeremiah 2*, 2:198–99.

15. This is the same use earlier in Jeremiah 31:18. For the causal use of כִּי see, Ronald J. Williams and John C. Beckman, *Williams’ Hebrew Syntax*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), pp. 156–58; Bruce K. Waltke and Michael Patrick O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, Ind: Eisenbrauns, 1990), p. 665; Friedrich Wilhelm Gesenius, *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, ed. E. Kautzsch and Sir Arthur Ernest Cowley, 2d English ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), p. 492.

16. Carol Meyers, “The Family in Early Israel,” in *Families in Ancient Israel, Family, Religion, and Culture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), pp. 50–51; Joseph Blenkinsopp, “The Family in First Temple Israel,” in *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches. Family, Religion, and Culture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), pp. 48–103.

17. Koehler et al., *HALOT*, pp. 1092–93.

it is genuine, withholding the sacrament of baptism until it can be proven. Rather, the posture should be a believing one where we assume, until proven otherwise, that God has kept his promise to save them. God is promising a lavishing of redemptive work *for all*, not a selective work for some.

2.3 NEW TESTAMENT

With these contrasting interpretations of Jeremiah 31 in place, we are now in a position to see which fits best with the rest of Scripture and current ecclesiastical reality. Wellum's desire to see a fully regenerate church is not just contradicted by our experience of the church today and in church history (see next section). It also goes against the grain of Scripture's presentation of the church. In his paper entitled "The Church: The Covenant Community" Mark Herzer articulates the radically *impure* nature of the early church:

We read of the schism in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:10ff.), the growing heresy in Galatia (Gal. 1:7), the influence of Hymenaeus and Philetus in Ephesus under Timothy's ministry (2 Tim. 2:17), the strife in Philippi (Phil. 1:2ff.), the weird heresies in Colossae (Col 2.16ff.), the growing defection among Hebrew Christians the writer of Hebrews mentions (Heb. 3:12; 4:1; 6:6ff.; 10:39, etc.), the "Gnostic" type of influence in the church to whom John writes (1 John 4:2–3), false teachers against whom Jude and Peter warn (Jude 12; 2 Pet. 2:1ff.), etc. All these churches had problems, lots of them. To top it off, very few churches (only Smyrna and Philadelphia) escaped strong rebukes from the Lord of the Church Himself when He addressed the seven churches in Asia Minor. The phenomena, the sheer existence of these problems, teach us something of the nature of the early church. She was never pure and this mixed body was always weak and fraught with problems, from within and from without.¹⁸

Wellum's desire to read Jeremiah as the promise of a purified church simply does not accord with what the NT describes.

18. Mark Herzer, unpublished paper. This paper was presented at Greenville Seminary's 2005 Spring Conference. The PDF from which this quote was taken can be found at https://web.archive.org/web/20131114031040/http://www.gpts.edu/resources/Covenant_Community.pdf

19. For a survey of these interpretations from the early church to today, see Michael James McClymond, *The Devil's Redemption: A New History and Interpretation of Christian Universalism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2018).

20. For an argument against universalism, see: Robert D. Golding, "Making Sense of Hell," *Themelios* 46.1 (2021): 145–62.

On the other hand, the positive biblical presentation of the church is one in which God's promises are consistently for "all" people (ostensibly including children) and this is to be done through expansive—rather than filtrating—means. When we read of Peter's sermonic interpretation of Joel 2, we see the promise fulfilled not in the sense of God separating those filled with the Spirit from those who have not been similarly filled. Rather, God says "I will pour out my Spirit upon *all* flesh" (Joel 2:28b, Acts 2:17b, emphasis mine). The biblical-theological arc of God's promises are always expansive. This is why so many—since the ancient church until today—have struggled to read Paul as a non-universalist.¹⁹ So much in his corpus sounds like God's promises are for every individual (Rom. 5:18–19; 11:32; 1 Cor. 3:11–15, 15:22–24, 28; 2 Cor. 5:14, 19; Eph. 1:9–10; Phil. 2:9; Col. 1:19–20, 27–28; 1 Tim. 2:3–6; 4:10 Tit. 2:11). This is not limited to Paul. Much in the NT sounds this way (Matt. 18:14; Luke 16:16; John 3:16–17; 4:42; 12:32, 47; 17:2; Heb. 2:9; 1 John 2:2; 4:14; 2 Pet. 3:9). I am not arguing for universalism.²⁰ The point I am trying to make is that the fact that there have been universalist exegetes for millennia is an indication that the promises in the Bible are often sweeping. When God says that he will pour out his Spirit on *all* flesh, almost all exegetes understand this to be a promise of radical increase—hence the hope of the promise. To read these passages as if God were promising to exclude those who have not been blessed by his Spirit, is to misread the promise as a threat.

Again, Wellum sees an increase in Jeremiah 31 too. The point is that his sacramentology does not best comport with this aspect (i.e., the expansive aspect) of his exegesis. If his exegesis demands radical increase, his sacramentology should follow. His interpretation essentially requires him to pick one or the other—do I practice baptism with an eye toward the purity of the church, or its expansion? Pedobaptism, on the other hand, is capable of anticipating God's expansive work by baptizing *all* who are born into the covenant while *also* vying for a pure church by means of delaying communion until a profession is made, as well as practicing church discipline. A paedobaptist church can just as readily strive for church purity by excommunicating those who fail to maintain their confession. Though entailing the oft-painful process of church discipline, a faithful exercising of the keys of the kingdom best comports with the NT reality of an impure church (in terms of the visible aspect of the church; see Herzer's quote above). Further, it helps us (rather easily) understand the otherwise enigmatic warning passages of Hebrews, to which we briefly turn next.

2.3.1 HEBREWS 8–10

Wellum's desire to read Hebrews 8–10 as an indication that Jeremiah 31 has been fully realized leads to another problem. He says, "Hebrews establishes the reality of the new covenant in the church without any hint that the full establishment of a regenerate community is yet future." (Wellum, p. 154). If that is the case, an explanation for the reality of unbelievers in essentially every local church (something Wellum would presumably acknowledge) makes it difficult to square Hebrews with our current experience. If there is no significant sense in which Jeremiah 31 is to be realized in the future (i.e., inaugurated eschatology), why then is the church *not* regenerate as Wellum says it should be? Any mention of the incongruity between reality and his interpretation of Hebrews 8–10 and Jeremiah 31 is missing in his chapter. To be sure, Wellum would not agree that the church is not fully regenerate today. He would say that the unregenerate are simply not in the church. The point is that this is unrealistic. The sad fact of the matter is that there *are* baptized and confessing people in church every Sunday, who are nevertheless unregenerate. To be a baptized confessor of Christ is as "in the church" as one can get in human estimation. To say otherwise is to divorce oneself from the reality of the church. That is, Wellum's refusal to include unregenerate, baptized, professors in the church is to say that what we experience in church (i.e., worshipping alongside unregenerate professors of faith) is not the *true* experience of the church since the true church only comprises the regenerate. In this way, our perception of life in the church is *always* flawed (if we presume someone is saved who is not) and we are, perhaps ironically, perennially distant from the reality of Jeremiah 31. If the true church is only regenerate, yet our experience of the church always contains the unregenerate, then we never participate fully in the true church, since she is perennially deceived. Of course, we can distinguish between the visible and invisible church at this point, but this is a "paedobaptist" distinction for Wellum, one he largely rejects, despite its potential to help him here (Wellum, pp. 156–57).

Just like Israel in the OT, the membership rolls of the church today are comprised of those who are saved and those who are not. There is no escaping this present reality. The church today is mixed because Jeremiah has not yet been *fully* fulfilled. The Spirit of Pentecost surely inaugurated this fulfillment by writing the law of God on the heart of every Christian, but his work is not yet complete. To say otherwise not only flattens the promise of Jeremiah but it flattens our hope. The church is mixed, but one day *will be* fully regenerate.

The fact that this has not yet happened helps us make sense, among other things, of the continual apostasy and infamous failure of so many prominent Christian leaders today. They do (or did) have legitimate spiritual blessings but they are merely members of the external covenant, which is the means by which they are blessed like, in the words of Phillip Henry, "warts and moles" which are fed by the same body and "covered over by the same skin" as "true parts or members of the body" which are the "hands, arms, [and] legs."²¹ But the reality of apostasy does not dash our hope. We can turn to Jeremiah 31 and pray for the day when those who are in the church, yet are unregenerate, will have the law of God written on their hearts. To see Jeremiah 31 as already completely fulfilled is to see those unregenerate people in the pews as relatively spiritually static and, therefore, lost. This is not the hope of Jeremiah 31. To see Jeremiah 31 as already completely fulfilled is to sell the prophet short and to hope for less than is our inheritance as the people of God. To the contrary, the prophet promises more—much more. It is the hope of Jeremiah to say that God will one day make warts and moles into hands and feet, for this was our story too.

3. CONCLUSION

Whether credobaptist or paedobaptist, we all wait for the day when the church will consist solely of the regenerate. Until that time, we should all look to God's mighty right arm to make it happen. Jeremiah tells us that the same hand of God that wrote the Ten Commandments will write his law on all his people's hearts. The picture is one of God's hand renewing dead hearts, not excluding them. To hope in the promise of Jeremiah is to hope that *all* of our children will be saved. We should see them as part of the harvest, not as part of the work of the winnowing fork. The sacrament of baptism should embody that *hope*. In the words of B.B. Warfield, "no one, however rich his manifestation of Christian graces, is baptized on the basis of infallible knowledge of his relation to Christ. All baptism is inevitably administered on the basis, not of knowledge, but of presumption."²² To presume upon the reality of Jeremiah's prophecy is to baptize our children into the covenant in the expectant hope that they shall know God, "from the least of them to the greatest" (Jer. 31:34b).■

21. Philip Henry, *Christ All in All: What Christ Is Made to Believers* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Reformation Heritage Books, 2016), p. 42.

22. B.B. Warfield, "The Polemics of Infant Baptism," in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1930–1932), vol. IX, p. 390.

In Brief: Extract: Thomas M'Crie's Statement of the Difference, Brief View of the Evidence for the Exercise of Civil Authority about Religion (1871), pp. 123–126.

It was formerly stated that one way in which a divine right, or the warrant of any duty is established, is by approved examples in Scripture. The word of God contains examples to persons in every character and station of life. In particular, it exhibits examples of godly magistrates. *But where do we read, in all the book of God, of approved magistrates who confined themselves, in their official capacity, to civil matters, and the secular interests of mankind, and who did not employ their authority for the advancement of religion?* We have a large account of the conduct of Moses and Joshua, David and Solomon, Asa and Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah and Josiah. Who will deny that their actions are recorded as an example to rulers? But they are commended chiefly for the warm zeal and activity, which they displayed in their station, in settling or reforming religion, providing for the instruction of their subjects, and the due administration of divine ordinances. No magistrate, who consults the Bible, will ever imagine that religious matters are excluded from his province. This notion must have been imbibed from some very different source.

At those times in which God was about to effect an establishment of religion, or a general reformation of its interests, among his ancient people, he raised up and employed magistrates, to cooperate in this work with those to whom the immediate charge of religious administrations was committed. When he first established his ordinances among Israel as a nation, he not only employed Aaron the priest, but Moses the King in Jeshurun; and afterwards Joshua and Eleazer, David and Abiathar, Solomon and Zadok, Hezekiah and Azariah, Zerubbabel and Joshua. When deprived of their native princes, and under the dominion of a foreign power, the Lord stirred up the Persian monarchs to favor the cause of his people, and not merely to tolerate, but to encourage them by public edicts, and by granting them positive assistance for building the house of God, and maintaining his worship. And although, for special and wise reasons (which we may afterwards notice), he was pleased at first to spread the gospel among the nations, not only without the assistance of civil rulers, but in the face of their most determined opposition; yet, among the blessings promised to the church in the New Testament times, as a testimony of his distinguished favor, are the countenance and aid of earthly powers, expressed with evident allusion to what had formerly taken place. *The sons of strangers shall build up thy walls, and their kings shall minister unto thee . . . Thou shalt also suck the milk of the Gentiles, and shalt suck the breast of kings* (Isa. 60:10–16).

It is not pleaded, that all the actions of rulers among the Jews are imitable by Christian magistrates, or that the latter

have exactly the same power which was allotted to and exercised by the former. Even in ascertaining the power which belonged to Jewish magistrates as such, we must distinguish what they did in the proper exercise of their magisterial office, from those things which they performed in a different character. For example, Moses acted not only as an ordinary magistrate, but also as a prophet, and extraordinary messenger, in the establishment of religion in the wilderness. David, too, sustained the character, and discharged the office not only of a king, but also of a prophet and inspired penman, in the composition of the psalms, and in the arrangement of the public worship of God in the sanctuary.

The power which was exercised by Jewish rulers was also warranted, in many cases, by judicial laws, which were peculiar to the nation of Israel; founded upon that singular constitution given unto them by God, and bearing a necessary reference to the system of ceremonial and sacrificial worship which was erected among them, but, now abolished. Presbyterians, who have defended the power of Christian magistrates from these examples, have not pleaded an absolute parity, and have made more accurate distinctions on this head than are to be found in the writings of the advocates of the modern scheme, who usually confound the characters in which Jewish rulers acted, represent their power as wholly ecclesiastical, and extending to almost every thing, with the view of making it appear totally inapplicable to the Christian dispensation.

But it will not follow from this, that we can draw no argument from the conduct of Jewish rulers, to establish the warrantableness and duty of the Christian magistrates employing their power in support of religion. Some are ready to conclude that the argument is entirely set aside, when it is allowed that there is not an absolute sameness between the two cases. Nothing can, however, be more unfounded than this conclusion. Such a mode of reasoning is of the most dangerous tendency, and, if applied in all the extent to which it will lead, it would cut off the practical use of the greater part of the Old Testament. According to it, no argument could be drawn from the approved examples which it records, of persons of any rank, or in any station, of parents or children, husbands or wives, masters or servants, because many of their actions were peculiar, or clothed with extraordinary circumstances. Upon the same principle, a great part of the New Testament may also be set aside, as to any ordinary or current application. For many things recorded in it were peculiar, and in some respects extraordinary. Persons possessed of apostolical powers, and extraordinary gifts, were employed in all important ecclesiastical transactions—in founding churches, ordaining office-bearers, inflicting censures, pronouncing decrees, and administering all ordinances. It is sometimes difficult to discriminate between what was extraordinary and peculiar to that period, and what belongs to the ordinary power of office-bearers.

Besides those actions of Old Testament rulers, which proceeded upon moral grounds, and which had for their object things which are substantially immutable, such as the support of public worship, and the prevention of blasphemy, profanation of the name of God, and Sabbath-breaking; there is an application of their example in the way of *analogy*, which, while it makes all allowances for the diversity of circumstances, and change of dispensation, proceeds upon a general resemblance in certain common principles and ends. Although there is a great difference between the government of the church under the Old and the New Testament, yet the writers in defense of Presbyterian government do argue from the Old Testament in behalf of courts of judicature, with their subordination. Even as to positive institutions of worship, this mode of reasoning must be admitted, unless we become wholly Anabaptistical. There is a difference in various respects between circumcision and baptism; yet we reason from the circumcision of infants under the Old Testament to the baptism of them under the New, although we have no explicit command or example for the practice in the New Testament.

The apostle argues for the support of a gospel ministry from that which was given to the Levitical priesthood; but his argument did not imply that they should be supported exactly in the same way (1 Cor. 9:13–14). The priestly and prophetic offices were extraordinary and typical, in a sense in which the regal among the Jews was not; yet we do not scruple to illustrate the office, and enforce the duties of ministers of the gospel, from those of the priests and prophets, especially in their actions with reference to the public state of religion, and in advancing reformation. The judgments inflicted upon the Israelites in the wilderness were in many respects peculiar, yet the apostle holds them out as monitory ensamples to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 10). The prayer of Elijah was extraordinary, yet the apostle James urges it as exemplary to Christians (chap. 5:16–18). And shall we suppose that the actions of Jewish magistrates form a single exception, and that they were so peculiar, that we cannot reason from them in the way of example or analogy?

We cannot propose here to enter particularly upon the consideration of the Jewish constitution. Extremes on both hands are to be guarded against. Those who maintain that it was altogether peculiar and inimitable do err, as well as those who hold that it is in all respects a model for Christian nations. The golden mean is to be studied on this, as in many other subjects, although the discovery of it may cost more trouble than the readier expedient of an extreme.

It was a constitution immediately framed by God, adapted to the state of that nation, to the system of religious ordinances established among them, and to the designs of providence in preserving them as a separate people. But, although taken as a whole, it was certainly singular, and not to be paralleled or

exemplified in any other nation, several of the consideration mentioned serve to show, that it is entitled to the particular regard of all nations who are favored with divine revelation. In it we have the example of a system of legislation, adapted to the state of a people who were favored with the true religion. Every thing in it was subordinated to this important concern. The laws expressly recognized religion, provided for the maintenance of its ordinances, and the rulers were taken solemnly bound to support them in their station. Thus, those principles which are founded in the light of nature, and by which all nations are obligated to regulate themselves, in framing their constitution and conducting their administrations—so as to promote the honor of God, and to accord with, secure, and advance religion, the highest of all interests—were recognized and sanctioned by Jehovah himself, and applied to the true religion revealed from heaven. In this respect the Jewish constitution is exemplary to Christian nations.¹

With respect to the particular laws by which the Jews were governed, the common sentiment of sound divines, and the best writers on the laws of nations, is, that although the judicial law is not binding as such upon Christian nations, so that they should be bound to regulate all their laws according unto it, yet it demands distinguished attention, and is to be regarded as a pattern, in those laws which proceeded upon moral grounds. In it there was nothing inconsistent with the principles of equity and religion.

God gave unto Israel “right judgments and true laws, good statutes and commandments.” All just laws among men are deductions from the moral law, applied to human affairs. But in the judicial law, the conclusions were deduced and ap-

1. “As it was once a peculiar duty of the Jewish nation, so it is peculiarly incumbent upon every civil state whereinto Christianity is introduced, to study and bring to pass—that civil government among them, in all the appurtenances of its constitution and administration, run in an agreeableness to the *word of God*; be subservient unto the spiritual kingdom of *Jesus Christ*, and to the interests of the true religion and reformation of the Church: As otherwise they cannot truly prosper in their civil concerns, nor be enriched by the blessings of the gospel.

This duty, so incumbent upon the civil state, doth generally fall under these two heads: *First*, the whole people, adjoining themselves to the true Church, should approve themselves to be true members thereof; by serious, several and mutual endeavors to promote the true religion and reformation of the Church—privately, publicly, and universally, in their several places and callings. *Secondly*, this people, considered in their conjunct and *politic* capacity (as thus only the matter is competent unto them) should, by their deed of civil constitution, provide, that their Magistrates be obliged to concur in the same true religion and reformation; and to rule them by laws no way prejudicial, but serviceable thereunto: As, moreover, they ought to obey, encourage and support their Magistrates in that way; and effectually to endeavor their information and reformation, where deficient or corrupt.” Display [*The Present Truth: A Display of the Secession Testimony in the three periods of the rise, state, and maintenance of the Testimony*, 2 vols. (1774)], vol. 1, p. 280.

plied, not only by the fallible and corrupt reason of man (as in ordinary laws), but by unerring wisdom. These respected either the first or second table of the moral law, duties which immediately related to God or man. It is a radical mistake, on this subject, to suppose that the peculiarity of the judicial law did lie solely and properly in its reference to matters of religion, or the first table. It is to be observed also in those laws which related to things civil, or the duties of the second table. There is no more propriety in representing all the judicial laws respecting the first table as peculiar, than there is in representing all those which related to the second table as peculiar. Peculiarities there were in both; but after allowances are made for these, there remain moral grounds for both; and whatever proceeded upon moral grounds in the judicial law, whether it respected things immediately connected with religion, or with justice and civil order, is exemplary, and must be obligatory.²

If this consideration be attended to, it will set aside the force of those arguments which are usually adduced, to prove that Jewish rulers can be no example to Christian magistrates in the exercise of their power about religion. Is it urged that the office of Jewish rulers was *sacred*? This sanctity must have extended to all their official conduct; and if it proves that their acts about religion are in no respect exemplary, it must prove the same as to their acts about civil matters. Is it urged that the office was *typical*? A similar answer may be returned. The Jewish rulers were types of Christ in acts which respected civil matters as well as religious. Is it pleaded that the laws respecting religion, which the Jewish rulers executed, were immediately given by God? This was the

case also with those which respected the administration of common justice.

In fine, is it pleaded that the punishments inflicted by the Jewish law, on account of offenses against the first table of the law, were severe, and enacted on some grounds which were peculiar to the Jewish people? The same thing is true with respect to offenses against the second table. If he that blasphemed God, or profaned the Sabbath was to be stoned to death; the person who smote, or cursed his father or mother, or who proved a stubborn or rebellious son, was to be put to death (Ex. 21:15–17, Deut. 21:18–21). Christian nations are not bound in all cases to inflict the same penalties which were appointed by the judicial law, for offenses against the second table, any more than for such as were committed against the first table. But this does not say that persons guilty of offenses of both kinds are not still proper objects of punishment, to a certain degree, by human laws, or even that they may not, in certain circumstances, become justly obnoxious to the same punishments.

Persons may affect to talk of the difficulty of ascertaining what is moral and exemplary in this matter, from what was peculiar; and, by dwelling on the more intricate cases, may endeavor to lead away the attention of the subject altogether. But why should it be magnified, and represented as insurmountable, any more than others of a similar kind? The peculiarity of the divine government of Israel, or, as it is commonly called the *Theocracy*, consisted in general in two things: in a system of laws which was immediately given unto that people from heaven; and in the exercise of a peculiar providence in supporting and sanctioning that system, by conferring national mercies and inflicting national judgments, often in an immediate and extraordinary way. Now, why are not the difficulties which are started, as to the application of the first of these, urged also as to the application of the last? If we cannot apply what is said in the Old Testament, concerning the duty of the rulers and nation of Israel respecting religion, unto Christian nations and rulers, because the former were under a peculiar law; then we cannot apply what is said in the Old Testament, respecting the judgments denounced against the nation and rulers of Israel, unto Christian nations and their rulers, because the Israelites, as a people, were under a peculiar providence, which constituted a part of their Theocracy. The same distinctions will remove the difficulty in both cases. ■

2. "Although" (says Dr Owen) "the institutions and examples of the Old Testament of the duty of magistrates, in the things and about the worship of God—are not in their whole latitude and extent to be drawn into rules, that should be obligatory on all magistrates, now under the administration of the gospel; and that because the magistrates, were then *custos vindez and administrator legis Judicialis and politæ Mosaicæ*, from which, as most think, we are freed; yet doubtless there is something in those institutions, which being unclothed of their Judaical form, is still binding to all in the like kind, as to some analogy and proportion. Subtract [sic subduct] from those administrations what was proper to, and lies upon the account of the *nation and church* of the Jews; and what remains upon the general notion of a church and nation must be everlastingly binding; and this amounts thus far *at least*, That Judges, Rulers, and Magistrates, which are promised under the New Testament to be given in mercy, and to be singular in usefulness, as the Judges were under the Old, are to take care that the gospel church may, in all its concerns as such, be *supported* and promoted, and the truth propagated, wherewith they are intrusted...." Owen's Sermon on Dan. 7:15, 16. P. 52, 53. [John Owen, *A Sermon Preached To The Parliament, Octob. 13. 1652. A Day of Solemne Humiliation. Concerning the Kingdome of Christ, and The Power of the Civile Magistrate about the things of the Worship of God* (Oxford: Printed by Leonard Lichfield Printer to the University, for Thomas Robinson. Anno Dom. 1652). See *Works*, vol. 8, p. 394].