Biblical Christians ought to agree that God’s purpose in all His works is to bring glory to Himself. Whatever God has done in history, whether He has accomplished it directly or whether He has chosen to permit it through the agency of others, He has done in order that His perfections might be put on display, recognized, and acknowledged by His moral creatures. This point is not the dividing line between dispensationalism and its alternatives.

Biblical Christians should also agree that God is greatly glorified through the plan of redemption. That this plan was part of God’s purpose from eternity past is clear in Scripture. For example, the apostle Peter speaks of Christ as a lamb who was “foreknown before the foundation of the world” (1 Pet. 1:19-20). God always intended to glorify Himself by redeeming humans through the cross-work of Christ.

All saved individuals of all times and places hold a great deal in common. Their commonality is one consideration that undergirds passages like Hebrews 11. The life of faith is essentially the same life, at whatever period in the history of redemption. Indeed, if the life of faith is not essentially the same in both Testaments, and in every part of each Testament, then the argument of the entire book of Hebrews simply collapses.

Notwithstanding the impression that some dispensationalists have left, individuals at all times are saved in precisely the same way: by grace, through faith (though the content of saving faith becomes more specific as God’s revelation grows increasingly complete). Those who are saved also share a common hope or expectation. They desire a better and heavenly country. They look forward to a city that has foundations, whose builder and maker is God. They become aliens and wanderers on earth. Their worldly loyalties are set aside in favor of citizenship in a city that God has prepared but that they know only through His promise. Because they lay hold of that promise in faith, God is not ashamed to be called their God.

Genuine unity exists among all followers of the true and living God. In some real and important sense, all of the saved of all ages constitute a single great company. Whatever name we might apply to that company, we agree that by His plan of redemption God places Himself magnificently on
display so that we can admire many of His perfections. God brings glory to Himself through the salvation of human beings.

If this were the entire story, we might all be covenant theologians. If the only way in which God planned to bring glory to Himself was through the salvation of individual humans, and if the great company of these saved persons were the only unity upon which God’s program reckoned, then dispensationalism would have scant reason to exist. Individual salvation, however, is not the only level at which God is working, planning, and bringing glory to Himself.

For dispensationalism, the problem with covenant theology is not that it affirms a covenant of redemption. Unless we wish to deny that God has a plan (a denial that is strictly forbidden by texts such as 1 Pet. 1:19-20), then we must suppose that the three persons of the Godhead enjoyed some agreement among themselves in eternity past as to what the Son would do in order to redeem sinful humans. As long as we are discussing only the salvation of particular sinners, some version of a covenant of redemption is theologically permissible in order to explain the unfolding of God’s plan for individual redemption. The only hesitation that a dispensationalist might express would be over the word covenant. Is every purpose of the Triune God covenantal in nature? But more on this point in a moment.

Even a covenant of grace is not objectionable per se, though there are better and worse ways of articulating this covenant. In the better articulations, the covenant of grace simply means that God promises salvation to the believing sinner, based not upon the sinner’s merit, but entirely upon God’s grace. Again, it is not clear why this offer of salvation should be regarded as covenantal in nature. Nevertheless, if a weakened notion of covenant is accepted, this articulation of the covenant of grace is not particularly objectionable—as long as we are thinking only of God’s purpose to glorify Himself through individual salvation.

God’s entire plan, however, involves more than individual salvation. To say that God always planned to glorify Himself by redeeming sinners is to imply that God always planned to glorify Himself by permitting the fall. God could not redeem sinners unless there were sinners to be redeemed. At minimum, God knew in eternity past that the fall would occur if He created the world—and He chose to create it anyway. Human sin was essential to God’s plan for self-glorification.

Of course, covenant theology attempts to deal with the fall by positing yet another theological covenant—the covenant of works. Dispensationalists agree that God certainly articulated a moral requirement for Adam, and they also agree that this moral requirement constituted Adam’s probation. Their difficulty is in finding biblical warrant for casting this moral require-