

A Brief Explanation of "New Covenant Theology"

Fred G. Zaspel

Introductory Remarks

The question of the relation of the Old and New Testaments is a perennial one. For centuries it has been a subject of on-going "in house" debate and discussion. The reason this question has failed to find a definitive and a more universally satisfactory answer lies in the nature of the case. It is a most complex issue which necessarily involves questions of hermeneutics, eschatology, law-grace, Biblical theology, systematic theology, and so on. The question requires an overall grasp of the entire Biblical revelation, and, therefore, the answers continue to find refinement as our understanding of God's Word progresses. We stand on the shoulders of teachers gone before, as have they all, as we seek to gain a clearer understanding of the unfolding of Biblical redemptive history.

New Covenant Theology (NCT) is but one recent attempt to move forward in this quest. As yet it is less a settled theology than a movement still in the shaping by men who agree that the question has not yet been finally answered by either of the major competing schools of interpretation -- Dispensational Theology and Covenant Theology. There are still disagreements among us on several details, such as the questions of the future of ethnic / national Israel and the millennium. But while we appreciate and borrow from the previous advances made by either side, we are convinced that neither has a corner on the truth. We obviously do not claim to own this corner ourselves, else there would be fuller agreement among us! Thus, NCT is more a movement in progress, in search of more satisfactory answers. We agree among ourselves that many of the traditional answers are not entirely satisfactory, we agree that more study needs to be done, and we agree on at least some proposed solutions to questions which I will highlight below.

Nor do we claim a great deal of originality. As I mentioned above, we borrow from the progress already made from both sides -- in Biblical Theology from men such as Geerhardus Vos and the clarifications made in mainstream contemporary New Testament scholarship by men such as Douglas Moo and D. A. Carson. Nor are we alone in this pursuit -- advances are being recognized by those on all sides of this theological fence, and this friendly in house debate is sure to continue for years to come.

NCT and the More Traditional Systems of Interpretation

Covenant Theology is designed to show the *unity* in God's purpose in human redemption. It is called "covenant" theology not because of an emphasis on the Biblical/historical covenants as such but on certain *theological* covenants -- the covenant of redemption, the covenant of works, and the covenant of grace. The covenant of grace is essentially the promise made in Gen.3:15 of the coming deliverer, and all of history is viewed as a progressive unfolding of this covenant. Thus, the New Covenant, in Covenant Theology, is not understood as a *new* covenant actually; it is rather a new "administration" of the covenant of grace, as was the Mosaic Covenant before it. One covenant with various administrations is the essence of Covenant Theology on this point. Therefore, the Old Covenant is seen as an essentially gracious covenant, not a legal one. Further, with this emphasis on the unity of God's purpose there is a strong tendency in Covenant Theology to carry over the old order into the new: Israel is the church, the law of the Old Covenant is the law of the New, and so on.

Dispensational Theology emphasizes rather the various *differences* in God's dealings with men. A "dispensation" has to do with the various administrations of Divine truth. With new revelation come new responsibilities and/or privileges. This change results in a new "economy" or dispensation. With this emphasis on the various *changes* in God's program, Dispensationalism labors to show the *differences* between the old and new economies or dispensations. For the (traditional) dispensationalist, there are two separate peoples of God running through all history and even eternity, law is a thing of the past and not relevant to the New Covenant believer, and so on.

NCT claims simply to have middle ground between these two. We are not satisfied with the simple "one covenant -- two administrations" idea of Covenant Theology. In our judgment this results in a rather "flat" reading of Scripture which fails to appreciate the advance, the distinctively "new" character of this Messianic age. Nor are we satisfied with the over-compartmentalizing tendency of Dispensational Theology. In our judgment its "no law" and "two equal peoples" notions failed to appreciate the unity of God's nature and purpose. And so we find ourselves somewhere between the two traditional answers. We are happy to see representative scholars from both sides of the discussion moving toward center in their respective discussions of various particular issues involved, and we are more comfortable with the progress they offer. [\(1\)](#)

Specific Issues

Hermeneutics

Probably the simplest way to describe our distinctive hermeneutic is to say that we consider the New Testament to be the apex of God's self-revelation to date. On one level, of course, all sides will agree with this. But we would

argue that traditional Covenant Theology with its generally flat reading of Scripture has failed to appreciate it fully. We would of course argue this on exegetical grounds specifically but also from the general standpoints of the newness of the New Covenant, the heavy "fulfillment" emphasis in the New Testament, ⁽²⁾ the Lordship of Jesus Christ, Jesus' superiority to Moses, our "slavery" to Jesus Christ, the striking contrast between the Old and New Covenants found in the New Testament, and so on. Further, this necessarily brings us into a distinctive emphasis on Biblical theology with its eye to the Christocentric and progressive unfolding of redemptive history. In short, we argue that traditional Covenant Theology has failed to appreciate fully the significant advance that marks this age of New Testament revelation.

Law vs. Grace

For classical Dispensationalism the principle of grace in the New Covenant replaces the Old Covenant principle of law. Within Covenant Theology there seem to be some differences, with some following Luther in seeing law and grace as parallel tracks running through history and others recognizing that the words "law" and "grace" characterize two periods in the development of God's plan of redemption. NCT also recognizes that law and grace are sometimes names for the two periods covered by the Old and New Covenants, but we would look at the two words as also defining two emphases, not the replacement of law by grace. We would see a greater emphasis on grace under the New Covenant and generally a more legal character to the Old Covenant. In short, we would argue that law remains (contra Dispensational Theology), but with signification alteration (contra Covenant Theology). There are varying degrees of general agreement with this on all sides, of course, but these points of emphasis tend to distinguish NCT.

The Decalogue

Covenant Theology argues that the decalogue *is* the eternal, unchanging moral law of God. It defined duty before Moses, "outside" Moses in the nations surrounding Israel, and it continues to define universal duty after Moses. It is a rule which remains unchanged and unchangeable. Further, all ten words are of a "moral" rather than a ceremonial or civil character. Other Old Testament laws -- civil and ceremonial laws -- may come or go or be altered with further revelation. But moral law remains constant, and the decalogue *is* that moral law. Thus, Jesus issued no new moral demands, and when the New Testament speaks of "abolishing" Mosaic law, it has civil or ceremonial aspects of that law in view, not the decalogue. The decalogue is the eternal, unchanging moral law of God.

NCT argues that these presuppositions are exegetically unwarranted. First, it cannot be shown that the decalogue is purely "moral" in character. If pushed, we would argue that the Sabbath has more a ceremonial character to it. Second, neither can it be demonstrated that this supposed three-fold division of Mosaic law -- moral, civil, ceremonial -- is a legitimate hermeneutical tool for the understanding of the "abolition" passages of the New Testament. Third, some of the New Testament passages which speak of the passing away of the Old Covenant speak specifically in reference to the decalogue (eg., 2 Cor. 3). And so in our judgment, the

presuppositions of Covenant Theology on this point are just too simplistic. An answer must be found which can take in all the relevant exegetical detail.

The Sabbath

For many, the whole issue comes to the question of the Sabbath and whether it is an abiding demand. We would argue that Covenant Theology's shift of the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday is exegetically unwarranted and that it further renders its "unchangeableness of the decalogue" argument null and void. We would affirm rather that the Sabbath had a prophetic function in its anticipation of the gospel rest enjoyed by all who are in Christ, both now and in eternity (eg., Heb.4). This is a point of Biblical Theology which Covenant Theologians have largely overlooked, although there is nothing about it that is inherently inconsistent with their position. However, while Covenant Theology would argue the Puritan position that the Sabbath day is to be kept distinctively holy in this gospel age, NCT would argue that this aspect of the Sabbath marks the Old Covenant (eg., Exodus 31; Col. 2:16-17) and emphasize rather the position of Luther and Calvin that the Sabbath finds its fulfillment in Christ (Col. 2:17).

Miscellany

Much of this is more a matter of differing emphases than of differing theology -- it is, after all, an "in house" debate. And there are other (lesser) questions which the discussion generates, such as the role of law in preaching the gospel, the role of law / grace in sanctification, the role of Divine law in human government, the relation of Christ to Moses, the role of creeds, and so on. All these questions find answers of differing emphasis even within each respective theological camp, and finding that right emphasis is the pursuit of those on all sides who are concerned with discovering a more precise understanding of God's revelation in Scripture.

1. Examples would include "Progressive Dispensationalists" (eg., Saucy, Bock, Blaising) on the one side and Vern Poythress on the other (see his *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses*, pp.).

2. See my *The Theology of Fulfillment* (Hatfield, PA: IBRI, 1993).