

THE NEW COVENANT AND NEW COVENANT THEOLOGY

Larry D. Pettegrew*
Former Professor of Theology

On a spectrum of continuity and discontinuity, New Covenant Theology lies between Covenant Theology and Progressive Dispensationalism and shows a number of improvements over Covenant Theology in such matters as emphasizing exegetical and biblical theology as a basis for systematic theology. Jeremiah 31:31-34 and several other passages state provisions of the New Covenant in the OT. The NT mentions the New Covenant in Luke 22:20, 1 Cor 11:25, and 2 Cor 3:6, among other places, indicating that the death of Christ marked the inauguration of the New Covenant. Traditional Covenant Theology sees the New Covenant as merely an updating of the Old Covenant and sees it as fulfilled in the church. New Covenant Theology sees the New Covenant as something new and not just a redoing of the Mosaic Covenant, but still thinks the New Covenant is being fulfilled in the church. Though some Dispensationalists disagree, most Dispensationalists understand that the New Covenant was inaugurated with the death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Christ and the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. Dispensationalism sees the New Covenant as something new, but in agreement with early Christian tradition, furnishes a fuller explanation of the New Covenant in regard to Israel's future regathering and restoration. Covenant Theology and New Covenant Theology agree that the OT is to be read through the lens of the NT, but Dispensationalism is alone in insisting that the OT should be given its full weight in light of historical-grammatical principles of hermeneutics.

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New Covenant Theology (NCT) is a branch of Reformed theology that

*After delivering his Faculty Lecture at The Master's Seminary early in 2007, Professor Pettegrew accepted the position of Executive Vice-President of Shepherds Theological Seminary, Cary, North Carolina. He is now serving as a leader at Shepherds, but graciously consented to contribute this essay to *The Master's Seminary Journal* before he assumed his new position.

proclaims that the entire Mosaic Covenant has passed away as a law code, and that Christians are supposed to live under the New Covenant. This is in contrast to many Covenant theologians who assert that the New Covenant is only an updated Old Covenant and that parts of the Mosaic Covenant continue on into the New Covenant era and serve as a standard of ethics for New Testament Christians. In the spectrum of continuity and discontinuity, New Covenant Theology seems to fit in between Covenant Theology and Progressive Dispensationalism.

Continuity

Discontinuity

^{7th}Day Adventism—Theonomy—Covenant Theology—NCT—Progressive Dispen.—Traditional Dispen.—Ultra Dispen.

THINGS TO LIKE ABOUT NCT

There are several things to like about NCT. Without going into detail or referencing Covenant theologians from whom NCT is contrasted, the following twelve points are definite improvements over Covenant Theology.

1. NCT tries to emphasize “exegetical and biblical theology as the source of systematics.”¹ New Covenant theologians, Tom Wells and Fred Zaspel write,

Those of us who are of the Calvinistic theological tradition should be diligently seeking to sort out biblical fact from system or tradition driven conclusions. That is, if there is some belief that we hold to be biblically true and its truth is an essential part of our theological system or heritage, yet we cannot establish its validity on any text of scripture, then we must throw that belief out; perhaps even throw out our theological system; or ignore certain parts of our heritage.²

2. NCT rejects the Covenant of Redemption as a theological covenant. Steve Lehrer explains,

We do not believe that it is wise to refer to God’s plan to save a people in eternity past as a “covenant.” But we do believe that our one God who is three co-equal and co-eternal persons did make a perfect plan that He would save a people from their sins. But if this plan is not called a covenant by the authors of Scripture, we must think twice about describing it by that name ourselves. . . . The danger of calling something a covenant that Scripture does not refer to as a covenant increases the likelihood of making something a cornerstone of our theology that in fact is not an emphasis in Scripture. This of course would lead to an unbalanced and unbiblical theological system.³

¹Tom Wells and Fred Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology* (Frederick, Md.: New Covenant Media, 2002) 2.

²Steve Lehrer and Geoff Volker, “Examining the Imputation of the Active Obedience of Christ: A Study in Calvinistic Sacred Cowism,” *The Journal of New Covenant Theology* II:2 (2004):79.

³Steve Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology: Questions Answered* (Self-Published, 2006).

3. NCT rejects the Covenant of Works as a foundational theological covenant. According to Lehrer, “NCT, however, disagrees with those who hold to a Covenant of Works with Adam.”⁴

4. NCT rejects the Covenant of Grace as a theological covenant.⁵

5. NCT “views the Ten Commandments as the essence of the Old Covenant and not the essence of all of God’s law.”⁶

6. NCT believes that “the Old Covenant is obsolete and will disappear. . . . Hebrews 8:13.”⁷

7. NCT recognizes the relative newness of Covenant Theology. “Covenant Theology was unknown until Ulrich Zwingli called it into service against the Anabaptists.”⁸

8. NCT appreciates the contributions of the Anabaptists. “Whether anyone noticed or not, they [the Anabaptists] adopted the Reformation slogan *sola scriptura* and took it more seriously than their opponents, but traditional ways of doing theology won the day.”⁹

9. NCT rejects the typical Covenant Theological (and others) view that divides the Mosaic Law into three distinct parts, some of which have been abrogated, and some of which the New Covenant Christian is obligated to obey. Wells and Zaspel write, “The popular hermeneutical attempt to divide Moses’ law into so many parts and then interpret NT statements of the passing of law accordingly is simplistic, and it cannot be maintained exegetically.”¹⁰ “It is the Mosaic code as a whole and in all its parts that has passed away, and the apostolic declarations to that end must therefore be seen to embrace even the Decalogue.”¹¹

10. NCT recognizes the difficulty for Covenant Theologians to differ from

⁴Ibid., 37.

⁵Wells and Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology* 45.

⁶Geoff Volker and Mike Adams, “Defining New Covenant Theology. Online at: http://www.geocities.com/pvrosman/New_Covenant_Theology_Defined.html, accessed 7/2/07.

⁷Ibid. See also Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology* 181ff. and 186.

⁸Wells and Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology* 2.

⁹Ibid., 30.

¹⁰Ibid., 150.

¹¹Ibid., 152. See also *ibid.*, 185.

the Reformation creeds. “What I want to say [in this chapter] may be summarized in two short sentences:

1. Our creeds and confessions are one immense barrier to unity.
2. There is no easy or obvious way to cross this divide.”¹²

11. NCT elevates the person and law of Christ, that is, the New Covenant, over the Mosaic Law. “Which is the higher revelation of the character of God, the Ten commandments or the person, work and teaching of Jesus Christ? Most Christians, we think, will agree on the answer. We’ve tried to go a step further and work out its implications according to the NT Scriptures.”¹³

12. NCT rejects the typical covenant theological view that the New Covenant is simply a renewed Old Covenant.¹⁴

It would seem, therefore, that NCT has exposed and corrected some of the major errors of Covenant Theology, and for that one can be thankful to NCT. In fact, one might think that NCT has cut out the heart of Covenant Theology by rejecting the three basic theological covenants of Covenant Theology. But this would be somewhat of an exaggeration in that other essential Covenant Theological matters are embraced by NCT.

This article will focus on the role of the New Covenant in New Covenant Theology. Specifically, the goal of this essay is threefold: (1) To identify the differences between NCT, Covenant Theology, and Dispensationalism in the interpretation of the New Covenant as it is found in Scripture. These differences will be found in two key questions: Is the New Covenant a renewed Old Covenant or the New Covenant? And is Israel really Israel, or is Israel the church? (2) What are the key differences in these three systems in doing theology, especially in the relation of the Old Testament to the New Testament? (3) In regard to understanding the New Covenant, what are the differences in the hermeneutical systems in these three systems?

THE NEW COVENANT

Before considering the differences between NCT, Covenant Theology, and Dispensationalism in the interpretation of the New Covenant, the main features of the

¹²Ibid., 259.

¹³Ibid., 2.

¹⁴Ibid., 46ff.

New Covenant as stated in Scripture need to be summarized.

The New Covenant in the Old Testament

The phrase, “New Covenant,” is only found in one passage in the OT, Jeremiah 31:31-34:

“Behold, days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the LORD, “I will put My law with in them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. They will not teach again each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares the LORD, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”¹⁵

However, the New Covenant is revealed under other names and descriptions throughout the OT prophets. The New Covenant is described as the “everlasting covenant” (Jer 32:40); “new heart” and “new spirit” (Ezek 11:19-20); “covenant of peace” (Ezek 37:26); “a covenant” or “my covenant” (Isa 49:8).

The parties of the Covenant are always God with Israel/Judah, as illustrated in Jer 31:31-40 quoted above. Sometimes the prophets even mention the geography of Israel, or the city of Jerusalem in their descriptions of the recipients of the New Covenant. On the other hand, other nations are not excluded from the NC, and in fact there seems to be some spill over or trickle down benefits of the New Covenant to the Gentiles (Isa 56:7-8). But the Covenant is made with Israel.

The provisions of the New Covenant include a new heart (Ezek 11:19-20); permanent forgiveness of sins (Jer 33:8); the permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit in all believers (Ezek 36:27); the law inside of a believer (Jer 31:33); a consummation of Israel’s relationship with God (Jer 31:33); physical blessings on Israel consisting of gathering of the scattered Israelites to the land, rebuilding of the cities, productivity of the land, increase in herds and flocks, rest, peace, and expressions of joy.

The fulfillment of the New Covenant, from an OT perspective, therefore, involves two parties—God, on the one hand, and Israel/Judah, on the other (Ezek 37:15-28) According to the OT, the fulfillment of the New Covenant will take place when Israel is spiritually alive (Ezek 37:1-14); in relationship to the coming of the Messiah when Israel is regathered to the land (Ezek 37:24-28; Jer 3:14-16); and in the Messianic Kingdom (Isa 11:6-10; Jer 32:37-41). Other nations will also receive the trickle down blessings (Isa 19:22-25) as an elaboration of the feature of the Abrahamic Covenant, “in you all the nations of the earth will be blessed” (Gen 12:3).

¹⁵All biblical quotations are from the NASB Update unless otherwise noted.

Of course, there is nothing in the New Covenant passages about the church—Jew and Gentile together in one body on equal footing because the New Testament explains that the church was a mystery in the OT (Eph 3:1-12).

The New Covenant in the New Testament

Some Dispensationalists would argue that the New Covenant is not inaugurated until the beginning of the millennial kingdom. It seems much more likely, however, that the New Covenant was inaugurated with the death of Christ for forgiveness of sins, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. Jesus says that the shedding of His blood is the basis of the New Covenant: “And in the same way *He took* the cup after they had eaten, saying, “This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood” (Luke 22:20). Moreover, the Holy Spirit, a main feature of the New Covenant, comes to begin to fulfill the promise of the New Covenant at Pentecost. In his Pentecost sermon, Peter explains,

“This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses. Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear. . . .” Peter said to them, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself” (Acts 2:32-33; 38-39).

In the epistles, Paul restates the Lord’s teaching about the blood of the New Covenant to the church at Corinth: “In the same way He took the cup also after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me’ (1 Cor 11:25). Paul also identifies himself and his fellow ministers as “servants of a new covenant” (2 Cor 3:6).

The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews also tries to convince the Christian Jews that through the New Covenant, they had a better mediator than Moses in Jesus Christ (Heb 8:6; cf. Exod 20:18-21). He also plainly explains that the New Covenant has replaced the Old Covenant (Heb 8:7-13). In fact, we know exactly when the Old Covenant, the Mosaic Covenant, came to an end. God clearly indicated that it was no longer in existence at the crucifixion when the great veil in the Jerusalem temple was torn in two from top to bottom (Matt 27:51). Really, the NT is a manual on how to live as a Christian under the New Covenant.

THE NEW COVENANT AND THE THEOLOGICAL SYSTEMS

The discussion about the New Covenant among the systems focuses on two key questions: (1) Is the new covenant a renewed Old Covenant or a New Covenant distinct from the old Mosaic Covenant? (2) Is the “Israel” that is to fulfill the New Covenant really Israel, or is Israel somehow replaced by the church?

Traditional Covenant Theology

An Updated Old Covenant

To answer the first question, many traditional Covenant theologians argue that the New Covenant is really the Old Covenant updated. Without a doubt, the main sponsor of the renewed Old Covenant viewpoint was John Calvin. In his commentary on Jeremiah, Calvin states,

Now, as to the *new* covenant, it is not so called, because it is contrary to the first covenant; for God is never inconsistent with himself, nor is he unlike himself. . . . It then follows, that the first covenant was inviolable; besides, he had already made his covenant with Abraham, and the Law was a confirmation of that covenant. And then the Law depended on that covenant which God made with his servant Abraham, it follows that God could never have made a new, that is, a contrary or a different covenant. . . .

It being new, no doubt refers to what they call the form. . . . But the substance remains the same. By substance I understand the doctrine; for God in the Gospel brings forward nothing but what the Law contains. We hence see that God has so spoken from the beginning, that he has not changed, no not a syllable, with regard to the substance of the doctrine.¹⁶

Also in the *Institutes*, in a section entitled, “The Similarity of the Old and New Testaments,” Calvin argues that the New Covenant is really a renewed Old Covenant. He writes, “Now we can clearly see from what has already been said that all men adopted by God into the company of his people since the beginning of the world were covenanted to him by the same law and by the bond of the same doctrine as obtains among us.”¹⁷ Moreover, “The covenant made with all the patriarchs is so much like ours in substance and reality that the two are actually one and the same. Yet they differ in the mode of dispensation.”¹⁸

For Calvin and his Covenant followers, the Mosaic law, though renewed in the New Covenant, serves as the norm for the Christian’s life today. More specifically, the moral law, given for the New Testament Christian, is given in the Ten Commandments. Question 41 of *The Westminster Shorter Catechism*, 1647, reads: “Wherein is the law summarily comprehended? Ans. The moral law is

¹⁶John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, translated from the Latin and edited by John Owen (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1852; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 126-27.

¹⁷John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol. 1, The Library of Christian Classics, Volume XX, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 2:10:1, 428.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 2:10:2. 429.

summarily comprehended in the ten commandments.”¹⁹ And the Westminster Confession, perhaps the first major confession of faith to promote systematized Covenant Theology, reads, “The moral law [i.e., the ten commandments] doth forever bind all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof; and that not only in regard of the matter contained in it, but also in respect of the authority of God the Creator who gave it. Neither doth Christ in the gospel any way dissolve, but much strengthen, this obligation.”

Traditional Covenant Theologians, such as the nineteenth-century Princeton professors, followed Calvin’s interpretation.²⁰ And so have contemporary Covenant Theologians. William Van Gemeren states, The New Covenant “is the same in substance as the old covenant (the Mosaic administration), but different in form”²¹, and “The law is not replaced by the Spirit in the eschatological age. The Spirit opens people up to the law and transforms them to live by a higher ethics.”²² Robert Reymond adds, “Revelation defines that likeness to God according to which Christians’ lives are to be patterned concretely in terms of conformity to his perceptive will for them—the moral law or Ten commandments (Exod 20:1-17; Deut 5:6-21). That is to say, it is the Decalogue which is the ethical norm for the Christian’s covenant way of life.”²³ Interestingly enough, some New Perspective theologians have also stressed this rather extreme continuity between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant.²⁴

Fulfilled with the Church

To the second question as to who fulfills the New Covenant, traditional Covenant Theology answers that though the New Covenant was made with Israel, it is ultimately fulfilled with the church. William E. Cox writes, “The contention of

¹⁹“The Westminster Shorter Confession,” 1647, in *Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3, ed. Philip Schaff (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1877; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977) 684.

²⁰E.g., A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (Carlisle, Pa.: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1983; reprint of 1879 edition), 368-71.

²¹William Van Gemeren, in *The Law, the Gospel, and the Modern Christians, Five Views*, ed. Wayne G. Strickland, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) 36.

²²*Ibid.*, 45.

²³Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 770.

²⁴James D. G. Dunn writes, “For it is important to recall that the hope which Paul saw as thus fulfilled in the Spirit was not hope for another law or a different Torah. . . . Contrary to popular opinion, the promise of a new covenant in Jeremiah is not of a new or different law. The promise is plain: “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts” (Jer. 31:33). Likewise the new heart and spirit promised in Ezekiel has in view a more effective keeping of the law . . .” (*The Theology of Paul the Apostle* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998] 645). See also the very helpful book, Femi Adeyemi, *The New Covenant Torah in Jeremiah and the Law of Christ*, Studies in Biblical Literature, ed. Hemchand Gossai, vol. 94 (New York: Peter Lang, 2006) 7-10.

this writer is that the new covenant was established at the first coming of Christ, and that it was established with the church—which is the fullness of which Israel was only a type (compare Eph. 1:23).”²⁵ David Wilkerson proclaims, “However, this New Covenant was meant not for natural Israel, not then, not now, nor in some millennial period. It is meant for spiritual Israel. . . .”²⁶ Samuel Waldron adds, “You may be asking: Does not Jeremiah 31 say that the New Covenant was to be made with the house of Israel and the house of Judah? How can it be, then, that the New Covenant is fulfilled in the mainly Gentile Church? The simple answer to that question is that the Church is Israel.”²⁷

In fact, the way the New Covenant relates to the church is one of Covenant Theology’s arguments for the church being new Israel. O. Palmer Robertson writes:

When Jeremiah specifically indicates that the new covenant will be made “with the house of Judah and with the house of Israel,” this perspective must be kept in mind. If the new covenant people of God are the actualized realization of a typological form, and the new covenant now is in effect, those constituting the people of God in the present circumstances must be recognized as the ‘Israel of God.’ As a unified people, the participants of the new covenant today are Israel.”²⁸

What Robertson seems to be saying is, (1) The Old Testament said that the New Covenant would be fulfilled with Israel. (2) Today, the New Covenant is being fulfilled with the church. (3) Therefore, the church must be a renewed Israel.

One would think that the more biblical and logical conclusion in point three above would be that this proves that the ultimate fulfillment of the promises of the New Covenant has not yet occurred, and there will be a future fulfillment of this Covenant with Israel. So to summarize: Most Covenant Theologians believe that the New Covenant is really the Old Covenant updated; and all Covenant Theologians believe that the church replaces Israel in fulfillment of the New Covenant.

New Covenant Theology

NCT places a great stress on the New Covenant, as one would expect, given the name of the system. Lehrer explains,

²⁵William E. Cox, *The New Covenant Israel* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1963) 35.

²⁶David Wilkerson, *Israel and the New Covenant* (Lindale, Tex.: Wilkerson Trust Publication, 2000) 13.

²⁷Samuel E. Waldron, with Richard C. Barcellos, *A Reformed Baptist Manifesto: The New Covenant Constitution of the Church* (Palmdale, Calif.: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2004) 21.

²⁸O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980) 289.

We are often asked why, as a ministry, we have chosen to highlight NCT. . . . We believe that our emphasis on the New Covenant is a reflection of God's Word. The reason why we highlight the New Covenant is because the Scriptures highlight it. . . . The centrality of the New Covenant cannot be overemphasized. It is a way of speaking about all that the Lord accomplished. We believe that the way in which you understand the New Covenant affects both how you understand a myriad of important doctrines in Scripture and how you live as a Christian in a fallen world.²⁹

A New Covenant

Moreover, for NCT, the New Covenant really is a New Covenant, not the old Mosaic Covenant redone.³⁰ Still, there is a fine line here. For NCT, this does not mean that the Old Covenant is abolished. Rather the Old Covenant transmutes into the New. David Wells writes, "Does that mean that the Decalogue is abolished? Not at all. It just means that the fulfillment of Jeremiah 31:33 is a fulfillment that involves a transformation from the Ten Commandments as written in the OT to the teaching of Jesus and his writing disciples. The caterpillar has been transformed. He now looks *very* different."³¹

At any rate, as a result of this transformation, the Ten Commandments are no longer a rule of life for a child of God in NCT. In Zaspel's words,

[T]he church is not at all obliged to follow the old law in its older form. We are required to follow the law only as it comes to us through the grid of Jesus Christ, the law's Lord and fulfiller. It does not belong to any hermeneutical system to dictate beforehand what part of Moses remains and what does not—which parts are 'moral' and which are not. Neither must we displace the law altogether because of another hermeneutic.³²

Even the idea of dividing the Mosaic Covenant into three parts and claiming that one part still remains is rejected. "To argue that not the moral (i.e., Decalogue) but only the civil and/or ceremonial aspects of Moses are passed, when Paul says that it is in fact the Old Covenant itself, 'written and engraved in stones' that has passed away, misses Paul's point. It is Moses *en toto* that he says has gone (2 Cor. 3)."³³

Thus, instead of the Mosaic law, the rule of life under the New Covenant is the "law of Christ." "NCT embraces the law of Christ," writes Lehrer, "which is the law that is applicable to believers today. The law of Christ includes the commands

²⁹Steve Lehrer, "Editor's Introduction," *The Journal of New Covenant Theology* 1:1 (2003):3.

³⁰See, for example, Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology* 170.

³¹Wells and Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology* 184.

³²*Ibid.*, 130.

³³*Ibid.*, 151.

given by Christ and His Apostles. There are many, many laws in the New Covenant Scriptures. . . .”³⁴

Fulfilled with the Church

Though making some significant steps forward, NCT takes a step back toward Covenant Theology and teaches that the New Covenant is ultimately fulfilled with the church rather than with the nation of Israel. New Covenant Theologians admit that Jer 31:31 teaches that the New Covenant was originally made with Israel. According to Lehrer, “If you read the verses that surround this text. . . , it is crystal clear that this New Covenant, in its Old Testament context, is promised to the geopolitical nation of Israel at some point in the future.”³⁵ Nonetheless, “Israel in the Old Covenant era was a temporary, unbelieving picture of the true people of God, the church. There always existed a small remnant of believers within unbelieving Israel.”³⁶ Thus, in both Covenant Theology and NCT, the church replaces Israel, and God has no special future for the nation other than as individual Jews become a part of the church.

NCT does have a somewhat different view of OT Israel from standard Covenant Theology. NCT, much more than Covenant Theology, minimizes the significance of OT Israel. The nation of Israel, at best, was only “an unbelieving type or picture of the true people of God, the church. . . . Israel was not the church in the Old Testament. . . .”³⁷ Many Covenant Theologians would insist that Israel in the OT was the church. But for NCT, except for “a tiny remnant,” OT Israelites “are in hell because of unbelief.”³⁸

Dispensationalism

Dispensationalism is not a monolithic theology. There are differences of opinions within Dispensationalism on many items, and some Dispensationalists have taught not only that the New Covenant of Jer 31:31 has not yet been inaugurated, but also that the New Covenant really is the Old Covenant redone.³⁹ But this would

³⁴Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology* 112.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 170.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 20.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 66.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 34.

³⁹John R. Master, “The New Covenant,” in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, eds. Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master (Chicago: Moody, 1994) 97. Master writes, “In Jeremiah’s prophecy, what ‘law’ would be in their minds and on their hearts? Contextually would not Jeremiah’s readers have thought of the commands of God given through Moses? Is there any indication that new commands are demanded or even implied. The term *my law* is the Hebrew word *torati*, which to Jeremiah’s audience, would have signaled the instruction God had given to His people through Moses and the prophets. The difference

probably be a minority view. Most Dispensationalists teach that the New Covenant was indeed inaugurated in connection with the death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Christ and with the coming of the Spirit in His New Covenant ministries on the day of Pentecost. Moreover, the New Covenant really is new.⁴⁰

A New Covenant

One might think, therefore, that Dispensationalists are in agreement with New Covenant Theologians who also teach that the New Covenant really is new. Though this is true to some extent, some disagreement with NCT also exists as to how the New Covenant should be defined and explained.

A Correct Definition

New Covenant Theologians regularly limit their definition of the New Covenant to “the work of Jesus Christ on the cross (Hebrews 8:6-13; 10:11-18.”⁴¹ Wells defines, “*The New Covenant, then, is the bond between God and man, established by the blood (i.e. the sacrificial death) of Christ, under which the church of Jesus Christ has come into being.*”⁴²

Such explanations are good as far as they go, and one could not argue with the essence of these explanations. But they leave out many other features of the New Covenant, not the least that the New Covenant was made with Israel, not the church. From the Dispensational perspective, a fuller explanation of the New Covenant as taught in Scripture might add something like this: “This Covenant, then, has to do with the regeneration, forgiveness, and justification of Israel, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit with His subsequent ministries, Israel’s regathering and restoration to the place of blessing, all founded on the blood of Christ.”⁴³

An Historical Tradition

Though Calvin’s view that the New Covenant is basically the Old Covenant redone has many followers, the view that the New Covenant is really a new and

between the Mosaic covenant and the new covenant did not lie specifically in a difference in commands but rather in the people’s response, which would, under the new covenant, be the work of God in the individual’s life so that each would obey (*torati*). . . . Interestingly, there is no mention of a change in the laws of God, only in their actual obedience to them.”

⁴⁰See Larry D. Pettegrew, *The New Covenant Ministry of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Kregel,, 201) 85-107.

⁴¹Lehrer, “Editor’s Introduction” 3.

⁴²Wells and Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology* 57 (emphasis in the original).

⁴³J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Findlay, Ohio: Dunham, 1958) 118.

different covenant also has a strong tradition in the history of Christian doctrine. The church father, Justin Martyr, in his *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, argues that Christians “do not trust through Moses or through the law. . . . Now, law placed against law has abrogated that which is before it, and a covenant which comes after in like manner has put an end to the previous one, and an eternal and final law—namely, Christ—has been given to us, and the covenant is trustworthy, after which there shall be no law, no commandment, nor ordinance.”⁴⁴ Femi Adeyemi comments,

From the above one could say that Justin Martyr understood that the Old Covenant was a covenant for national Israel only, not for the current church. It could be assumed also that he recognized that the Old Covenant had its own law, both of which have already ended with the Christ event. However, in Justin, with the cessation of the Old Covenant and its Law came the New Covenant and its law through Christ.⁴⁵

Other fathers who also proclaim the newness of the New Covenant include Irenaeus,⁴⁶ Tertullian,⁴⁷ and Augustine.⁴⁸ In the Reformation, Martin Luther insisted that the New Covenant was not the Old Covenant redone and that the entire Mosaic Covenant had passed away, not just the ceremonial law.⁴⁹ So Dispensationalists and New Covenant Theologians would fall in line with this historical tradition that the New Covenant is really new, not an updated Old Covenant.

⁴⁴Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, 11:10-13, The Ante-Nicene Fathers, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson; reprint editor A. Cleveland Coxe; vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973) 199-200.

⁴⁵Femi Adeyemi, *The New Covenant Torah* 23.

⁴⁶See Irenaeus, *Five Books Against Heresies*, book 4, chapters 9-15 especially, in The Ante-Nicene Fathers, eds. Roberts and Donaldson, 472-80. See also Adeyemi, *New Covenant Torah* 23.

⁴⁷See Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, book 5, chapter 11, in The Ante-Nicene Fathers, eds. Roberts and Donaldson, 452-53.

⁴⁸See Augustine, *On the Spirit and the Letter*, especially chapters 31-39, in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Peter Holmes and Robert Ernest Wallis, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 96-99.

⁴⁹Martin Luther, “On the Bondage of the Will,” *Luther’s Works*, vol. 33, Career of the Reformer, III, eds. Philip S. Wateson and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972) 258-59.

A Better Exposition

Moreover, the best exposition of the key OT passage where the covenant is called “new” teaches that the New Covenant is indeed new.⁵⁰ The Hebrew word for “new” means “new,” “fresh,” something “not yet existing.” It is used in the OT for a new garment, a new house, a new wife, a new song, a new king, and a new moon. Other Hebrew words speak of repair, but not the word used here. Neither the Hebrew adjective nor the Greek adjective means “renewed.”⁵¹

Furthermore, the Lord through Jeremiah, adds that the New Covenant would not be like the Old Covenant that He had made with the fathers at the time of the Exodus, the Covenant “which they broke” (Jer 31:32). The adverb, “not,” placed with the comparative phrase, “like the covenant,” “emphatically negates the correspondence or identity of the coming New Covenant with the Sinaitic Covenant that had existed before.”⁵² Besides, Israel’s ongoing disobedience of the Old Covenant brought curses to them instead of blessings (cf. Deut 29) and eventually led to the abrogation of the Old Covenant with Israel (cf. Matt 27:51; Heb 8:13). It is highly unlikely, therefore, that the New Covenant is a renewed Old Covenant, or that the Mosaic law, which is at the heart of the Mosaic Covenant, is at the heart of New Covenant Christian ethics. Of course, the New Covenant as taught by Christ and His apostles, is often similar to the Mosaic law.

Fulfilled with Israel

Dispensationalists are agreed that the New Covenant will be ultimately fulfilled with Israel in the millennial kingdom.⁵³ Jeremiah states that the New Covenant will be made with the House of Israel and the House of Judah (Jer 31:31). “House of Israel” occurs 147 times in the OT and “House of Judah” occurs 35 times. The two terms are found together nine times, eight of these in Jeremiah. All of these texts speak specifically of national Israel. Since it is plainly stated that the New Covenant is made with Israel, one might expect that its ultimate fulfillment would be made with Israel.

Many other texts throughout the OT point toward the fulfillment of the New Covenant with a future Israel. The prophet Hosea, for example, writes, “For the sons of Israel will remain for many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or sacred

⁵⁰For a helpful exegesis of Jer 31:31-34, see Adeyemi, *New Covenant Tarah* 43-76. His entire work is enlightening.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 47-49.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 49.

⁵³Dispensationalists have often struggled to explain how the church gets into the New Covenant made with Israel. For a discussion of this theological issue see Larry Pettegrew, “The New Covenant,” *The Master's Seminary Journal* 10/2 (Fall 1999):251-70. Also see Larry D. Pettegrew, *The New Covenant Ministry of the Holy Spirit* 28-38.

pillar and without ephod or household idols. Afterward the sons of Israel will return and seek the LORD their God and David their king; and they will come trembling to the LORD and to His goodness in the last days” (Hos 3:3-4).

In addition, the NT teaches that God has not permanently cast off disobedient Israel. Paul says it clearly:

For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery—so that you will not be wise in your own estimation—that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; and so all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, “THE DELIVERER WILL COME FROM ZION, HE WILL REMOVE UNGODLINESS FROM JACOB. THIS IS MY COVENANT WITH THEM, WHEN I TAKE AWAY THEIR SINS.” From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of *God's* choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable (Rom 11:25-29).

THE NEW COVENANT AND THEOLOGICAL ISSUES

In the ongoing discussions among the systems, the debate has often come down to two basic matters. First, different views have been taken about how theology should be done in determining the order of the Old and New Testaments. The second matter deals with hermeneutics, specifically how does one interpret the OT. The two matters are closely related.

How to Do Theology: The Order of the Testaments

NCT follows the error of classic Covenant Theology of subordinating the Old Covenant to the new. Historically, the Reformers brought the Protestant church out of the long night of Medieval exegetical disaster and reawakened the church to the value of the history and ethics of the OT. They took the OT more seriously and developed their idea of the theological covenant out of OT theology. There was also a renewal of the commitment to literal interpretation and an awareness of the dangers of allegorical interpretation. However, one hermeneutical principle from medieval attitudes toward the clarity of Scripture remained: the subordination of the OT to the NT.

This procedure in doing theology continues to this day to be the method of doing theology in Covenant Theology. Covenant Theologian, Hans K. LaRondelle, for example, argues that the OT Scriptures can be interpreted accurately only by studying the NT. Historic Christianity, he says, has always tried to understand the Old by the New. The Christian interpreter of the OT is once and for all obliged to read the Hebrew Scriptures in the light of the NT as a whole, because the Old is interpreted authoritatively, under divine inspiration, in the NT as God’s continuous

history of salvation. According to LaRondelle, historic Christianity has always confessed that the New Testament is the goal and fulfillment of the Old.⁵⁴

New Covenant theologians agree. Lehrer insists, "Hermeneutical principle #2 is, always read the Old Covenant Scriptures through the lens of the New Covenant Scriptures."⁵⁵ Tom Wells concurs, "The critical point here is this: NT revelation, due to its finality, must be allowed to speak first on every issue that it addresses."⁵⁶

For Covenant and New Covenant Theologians, therefore, doing theology proceeds as follows:⁵⁷

- (1) The formulation of a biblical theology from the NT;
- (2) The formulation of a biblical theology from the OT;
- (3) The production of a systematic theology by harmonizing points 1 and 2.

But there are serious weaknesses in using the NT as a pair of glasses through which to read the OT, as nice as it may sound. By reading the NT back into the OT, Covenant Theologians may in effect minimize the historical-grammatical interpretation of great sections of the OT and produce allegorizations of the OT. New Covenant Theologians admit that the OT says one thing (i.e., "Israel"), but it must mean something else (i.e., "church"), because they have restricted its meaning only to what they think the NT directs the OT to say.

New Covenant Theologians in effect "undo, or replace the results that would have been obtained in performing a true biblical theology of the OT."⁵⁸ In doing theology, the OT is almost an afterthought in this procedure. In actuality, the NT is used like the "presidential power of veto"⁵⁹ over legitimate exegetical results in OT passages. Consequently, a true OT biblical theology that serves to form the production of systematic theology is nonexistent. The systematic theology is "one-legged."⁶⁰

The proper approach for doing theology is as follows:

⁵⁴Hans K. LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University, 1983) 19. Unfortunately, the "historic Christianity" that he is referring to in this case is the medieval method of interpretation. See further, Larry D. Pettegrew, "The Perspicuity of Scripture," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 15/2 (Fall 2004):216-25.

⁵⁵Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology* 177.

⁵⁶Wells and Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology* 7.

⁵⁷See the helpful study by Mike Stallard, "Literal Hermeneutics, Theological Method, and the Essence of Dispensationalism" (unpublished paper, Pre-Trib Research Center, 1998) 13-16. The paper is available online at www.pre-trib.org/article-view.php?id=196, accessed 7/3/07. The following discussion is adapted from this paper.

⁵⁸Ibid., 15.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Ibid.

- (1) The formulation of a biblical theology from the OT;
- (2) The formulation of a biblical theology from the NT;
- (3) The production of a systematic theology by harmonizing all biblical inputs to theology.

And why is this better? For at least three reasons. First, because this is the nature of progressive revelation. In progressive revelation, revelation builds upon previous revelation. Second, because this process enables the interpreter to read the OT with a consistent grammatical-historical hermeneutic. And third, because in this procedure, there is really no priority of one testament over another except in a chronological order of progressive revelation. In the end, it is superior to be able to insist that an OT text must not be stripped of its original meaning in its context, found through historical-grammatical interpretation and biblical theology. Both the NT and the OT should be treated as perspicuous, not just the NT.

How to Do Hermeneutics: The Interpretation of the Old Testament

Interpreting the OT through the lens of the New Testament leads New Covenant Theologians to use non-historical-grammatical hermeneutics in interpreting important OT passages. This propensity to dismiss what the OT says spreads to passages that are not necessarily related to the New Covenant. Lehrer writes, for example, “The words ‘atonement’ and ‘forgiven’ are repeated many times. If you were simply to read the Old Testament accounts without considering the New Testament teachings, you would certainly come to the conclusion that true spiritual atonement and divine forgiveness were acquired by that priestly work.”⁶¹ Lehrer continues, “The problem still remains that God said that the animal sacrifices actually atoned for sin when they did not. . . . Consequently, God could say that the animal sacrifices actually atoned for sin when they did not because he wanted to teach us spiritual truth through this Old Covenant picture.”⁶² It certainly sounds as though Lehrer is suggesting that God said something that was not true. A system that depends on that kind of hermeneutic would seem to be inferior to a system that consistently interprets OT passages with historical-grammatical hermeneutics.

Such an inadequate hermeneutic of the OT impacts specifically New Covenant Theology’s understanding of the New Covenant. As noted above, new Covenant Theologians recognize that Jer 31:31 “is promised to the geo-political nation of Israel at some point in the future.”⁶³ As Lehrer comments, “The Israelites would have read Jeremiah 31 and thought that the New Covenant restoration was exclusively for them. But when God interprets His own word He tells us that this is

⁶¹Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology* 52.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 61.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 170.

simply not the case.”⁶⁴ A confusing hermeneutic such as this leads to a confusing biblical theology, and consequently to an inadequate systematic theology.

The consistent use of the historical-grammatical hermeneutic leads to an understanding that the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New Covenants made with Israel were declared to be everlasting and irrevocable. Moreover, the NT clearly teaches that a gracious and faithful God has not cast off Israel even though the nation was often disobedient and unbelieving. In regard to the covenant-keeping God, Scripture says, “What then? If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it? May it never be! Rather, let God be found true, though every man be found a liar . . .” (Rom 3:3-4; cf. 11:25-29).

CONCLUSION

The interpretations of the New Covenant presented by Covenant Theology, NCT, and Dispensationalism can be summarized in chart form as follows:

| SYSTEM | Covenant Theology | New Covenant Theology | Dispensationalism |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| New Covenant new? | NO | YES | YES |
| Is Israel really Israel? | NO | NO | YES |
| Maintains OT integrity? | NO | NO | YES |
| Consistent historical-grammatical interpretation of the OT? | NO | NO | YES |

New Covenant Theologians have taken a large step in recognizing that the New Covenant is really a new covenant—that Christians live under the commandments of the law of Christ, as the NT states it (1 Cor 9:19-21). New Covenant Theologians’ spiritual maturity and honest desire to interpret the Scriptures accurately is obvious in their literature. However, replacement of Israel by the church in New Covenant passages is biblically unwarranted, and represents extreme continuity in the continuity/discontinuity debate. Hopefully, since NCT is still in development, the

⁶⁴Ibid., 175.

New Covenant Theologians will yet improve their system, first, by seriously reexamining their theological procedure of reading the OT through the grid of the NT, and second, by reevaluating their hermeneutics that lead them to abandon the historical-grammatical method of interpreting the OT.