

## **NEW COVENANT THEOLOGY COMPARED WITH COVENANTALISM**

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*New Covenant Theology has arisen as an alternative to Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology. It differs from Covenant Theology in denying the covenants of works, grace, and redemption, and in asserting the temporary nature of the Mosaic Law. It differs from Dispensationalism and agrees with Covenant Theology in endorsing a hermeneutical approach to the OT and the NT that abandons the historical-grammatical understanding of certain OT passages. In agreement with Covenant Theology, it also adopts supersessionist views regarding Israel and the church. The eight specific differences between New Covenant Theology (NCT) and Covenant Theology (CT) include NCT's denial of the Covenant of Redemption, its denial of the Covenant of Works, its denial of the Covenant of Grace, its affirmation of the unity of the Mosaic Law, its affirmation of the expiration of the Mosaic Law, its teaching that Christians are under only the Law of Christ, its rejection of infant baptism, and its affirmation that the church began at Pentecost. NCT agrees with CT hermeneutically in accepting the NT logical priority over the OT and a typological interpretation of the two testaments, in holding that the NT church is the only true people of God, and in exhibiting a vagueness about the nature of the future kingdom. NCT shows some improvement over CT, but still has its own shortcomings.*

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The purpose of the following discussion is to examine the relationship between New Covenant Theology (hereafter NCT) and Covenant Theology<sup>1</sup> (hereafter CT). Such an examination is justified for three reasons. First, New Covenant theologians have openly identified NCT as an alternative to the theological systems of Dispensationalism and CT. Thus, a comparison of NCT with either of

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<sup>1</sup>Covenant Theology is also called Federal Theology “because of its emphasis on solidarity in a representative head” (Michael Horton, *God of Promise* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006] 78.)

those two systems is a worthwhile endeavor. Second, at the time of this writing, New Covenant theologians have focused significant effort on showing how their system contrasts with CT. Though also interacting with Dispensationalism, they have devoted most of their attention so far to explaining and defending their system in contrast to CT. Third, some of the key theologians of NCT received their theological training within an environment of CT. Thus, NCT appears primarily to be a movement away from CT.

The following will contrast and compare NCT with CT, focusing on significant differences and similarities between the two theological systems. Since NCT and CT deal primarily with theological issues of continuity and discontinuity, the focus will be mostly on the areas of covenants, law, people of God, and hermeneutics. At times, evaluations of NCT and CT will be offered, although the following treatment is mostly about NCT.

In short, NCT differs from CT on eight key areas of theology. And in most cases where NCT differs with CT, NCT is closer to the biblical witness than CT. This applies especially to NCT's refusal to accept the three foundational covenants of CT and NCT's view on the temporary nature of the Mosaic Law. However, NCT also has serious deficiencies that it shares with CT. Particularly troublesome is NCT's hermeneutical approach to the Old and New Testaments that at times abandons the historical-grammatical context of certain OT passages. Also troubling is NCT's supersessionist views regarding Israel and the church.

### **Covenant Theology Defined**

Establishing a basic understanding of CT as a basis for a comparison of NCT with CT is important. CT is a system of theology that views God's eternal plan of salvation through the outworking of three covenants—the Covenant of Works, Covenant of Grace, and Covenant of Redemption.<sup>2</sup>

Historically, CT was birthed out of the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, particularly by those in the Reformed tradition.<sup>3</sup> Some of the

<sup>2</sup>Some Covenant theologians see only two covenants—the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace. O. Palmer Robertson, for example does not believe there is enough evidence to conclude that there was a pre-creation Covenant of Redemption between the Father and the Son (O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* [Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980] 54).

<sup>3</sup>“Covenant Theology itself is generally to be identified with the Reformed tradition” (Morton H. Smith, “The Church and Covenant Theology,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 21/1 [March 1978]:47). Though Covenant Theology and Reformed Theology are not synonymous, apparently most Covenant theologians affirm Reformed Theology. Willem VanGemeren believes that with Gisbertus Voetius (1588-1676), “‘Covenant Theology’ becomes ‘the system’ or framework of Reformed Theology” (Willem VanGemeren, “Systems of Continuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*, ed. John S. Feinberg [Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1988] 45).

Reformers, Zwingli especially, began to emphasize the importance of “covenant” in the plan of God. In the early seventeenth century, the system of CT began to take shape. CT found a mature form in the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1647, which is often viewed as a primary expression of CT.

### **Covenant of Works**

According to CT, three covenants are the overarching framework for understanding God’s purposes in salvation and the explicit covenants mentioned in Scripture.<sup>4</sup> The first is the Covenant of Works.<sup>5</sup> According to the Westminster Confession: “The first covenant made with man was a Covenant of Works, wherein life was promised to Adam, and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, the Covenant of Works was made with Adam before the Fall. According to M. E. Osterhaven, the Covenant of Works consisted of three things: “(1) a promise of eternal life upon the condition of perfect obedience throughout a probationary period; (2) the threat of death upon disobedience; and (3) the sacrament of the tree of life.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Covenant of Grace**

According to CT, Adam, the federal head of the human race, failed the Covenant of Works. As a result, God then instituted another covenant—the Covenant of Grace. This allegedly is a covenant made between God and the elect after the Fall in which salvation is given to those who trust in Christ by faith. In regard to this Covenant of Grace, the Westminster Confession of Faith states,

Man by his fall having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace: wherein he freely offered unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto life, his Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Horton states, “A broad consensus emerged in this Reformed (federal) theology with respect to the existence in Scripture of three distinct covenants: the Covenant of Redemption (*pactum salutis*), the Covenant of Creation (*foederus naturae*), and the Covenant of Grace (*foederus gratiae*). The other covenants in Scripture (Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic) are all grouped under these broader arrangements” (Horton, *God of Promise* 78).

<sup>5</sup>The Covenant of Works has also been called a covenant of “creation,” “nature,” and “law” (Horton, *God of Promise* 83).

<sup>6</sup>“The Westminster Confession of Faith” (online at [www.reformed.org/documents/wcf\\_with\\_proofs/](http://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf_with_proofs/), accessed 6/5/07).

<sup>7</sup>M. E. Osterhaven, “Covenant Theology,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994) 279.

<sup>8</sup>Chapter VII of “The Westminster Confession of Faith” (online at [www.reformed.org/documents/wcf\\_with\\_proofs/](http://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf_with_proofs/), accessed 6/5/07).

For Covenant theologians, the Covenant of Grace is believed to be manifested in the other covenants of Scripture such as the Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and New Covenants.<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, significant continuity exists between the covenants of Scripture since they are all outworkings of the Covenant of Grace.

### **Covenant of Redemption**

Many Covenant theologians affirm a third covenant—the Covenant of Redemption, a covenant supposedly established in eternity past between the members of the Trinity. As defined by Louis Berkhof, “The covenant of redemption may be defined as *the agreement between the Father, giving the Son as Head and Redeemer of the elect, and the Son, voluntarily taking the place of those whom the Father had given Him.*”<sup>10</sup> Commenting on this Covenant of Redemption, Osterhaven states, “[C]ovenant theology affirms that God the Father and God the Son covenanted together for the redemption of the human race.”<sup>11</sup> According to CT, the Father commissioned the Son to be the Savior, and the Son accepted the commission, agreeing to fulfill all righteousness by obeying the law of God.

Other important beliefs are associated with CT. Covenant theologians traditionally have affirmed Reformed Theology. Thus, they hold a high view of God and Scripture. Also, an important hermeneutical belief of CT is its view of NT priority over the OT, in which the NT has logical priority over the OT. This means that the NT becomes the interpreter and even reinterpreter of the OT. Covenant Theology often describes the OT-NT relationship as one of “type-antitype” and “shadow-reality” in which the new supersedes the old. A major implication of the type-antitype understanding of the testaments is that the nation Israel was a type that has given way to the superior antitype—the Christian church composed of both Jews and Gentiles. According to CT, the true Israel is now the church and the promises to Israel about a land and a temple find a spiritual fulfillment in the church.

Another key belief of CT is infant baptism. If Israel of the OT used circumcision on its children, then the new Israel—the church—should use baptism on its children as well.<sup>12</sup> Also, many Covenant theologians hold that the Mosaic Law, particularly the Ten Commandments, is still in force. Though the ceremonial and civil aspects of the Mosaic Law are no longer binding, the moral law as found in the

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<sup>9</sup>See Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941) 279.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 271 (emphases in the original).

<sup>11</sup>Osterhaven, “Covenant Theology” 280.

<sup>12</sup>“The covenant theologian sees this sign of the covenant continued in the NT in baptism, which carries the same basic meaning as circumcision” (Smith, “The Church and Covenant Theology” 57).

Decalogue is still operative. Thus, the Mosaic Law has a continuing aspect today.<sup>13</sup>

### Comparing NCT with CT

Several New Covenant theologians have a background in both Reformed Theology and CT. Thus, some of them are in full agreement with many aspects of Reformed Theology, such as a high view of Scripture, belief in God's sovereignty, and Calvinism. Therefore, comparisons cannot be comprehensive. Comparing NCT and CT in every area of doctrine would reflect points of agreement that are quite numerous. Rather than being exhaustive, the following will focus on issues such as hermeneutics, law, people of God, covenants, and salvation in the two testaments. Those topics are on which the most significant differences exist.

### Differences Between NCT and CT

NCT breaks with CT on eight key issues:

(1) **NCT does not accept the Covenant of Redemption.** Unlike Covenant theologians, New Covenant theologians hold that the Bible does not teach a Covenant of Redemption, as Steve Lehrer states: "We do not believe that it is wise to refer to God's plan to save a people in eternity past as a 'covenant.'"<sup>14</sup> Jon Zens writes,

But, further, why must the "covenant" concept be called into service to describe the "eternal purpose" of God in Christ? Why not be satisfied with the Biblical delineation? As far as I can tell, the Bible nowhere calls the pre-creation commitments in the Godhead—among themselves or to elect sinners—a "covenant."<sup>15</sup>

New Covenant theologians are not asserting that the persons of the Trinity did not have a plan for salvation before time.<sup>16</sup> But they see no evidence of a specific

<sup>13</sup>VanGemeren states, "The ceremonial laws, civil laws, and the penal code have been abrogated, and the moral law has received further clarification in the person and teaching of Jesus Christ" (Willem A. VanGemeren, "The Law is the Perfection of Righteousness in Jesus Christ," in *The Law, the Gospel, and the Modern Christian: Five Views*, Greg L. Bahnsen, Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., Douglas J. Moo, Wayne G. Strickland, and Willem A. VanGemeren [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993] 37). Knox Chamblin takes issue with the idea that "the moral dimension of the Mosaic Law is safeguarded while the ceremonial and the civil dimensions are jettisoned. In some sense, the entirety of the law remains in force." For Chamblin, the whole law is "preserved," "transformed" and "reshaped" in the hands of Jesus and the apostles (Knox Chamblin, "The Law of Moses and the Law of Christ," in *Continuity and Discontinuity* 200).

<sup>14</sup>Steve Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology: Questions Answered* (n.p.: Steve Lehrer, 2006) 37.

<sup>15</sup>Jon Zens, "Is There a 'Covenant of Grace?'" (online at [www.searchingtogether.org/articles/zens/covenant.htm](http://www.searchingtogether.org/articles/zens/covenant.htm), accessed 6/4/07).

<sup>16</sup>See Article 4, "God's Decree," The New Covenant Confession of Faith (online at [www.ncbf.net/PDF/confession.pdf](http://www.ncbf.net/PDF/confession.pdf), accessed 6/4/07).

Covenant of Redemption.

(2) **NCT does not accept the Covenant of Works.** Departing from CT, New Covenant theologians reject the idea of a Covenant of Works. Lehrer writes,

NCT, however, disagrees with those who hold to a Covenant of Works with Adam.<sup>17</sup>

NCT does not believe that it is wise to refer to God's relationship with Adam as a "covenant." NCT holds that God gave Adam a command with a promise of punishment if broken. And because this situation is not called a covenant by the authors of Scripture, we must think twice about describing it by that name ourselves.<sup>18</sup>

(3) **NCT does not accept the Covenant of Grace.** Also, New Covenant theologians do not believe in a Covenant of Grace. Jon Zens states, "But, it must be asked, where is 'covenant of grace' revealed in the Bible?"<sup>19</sup> Tom Wells declares,

Nevertheless, it now seems clear that a mistake has been made in speaking of this purpose as "the Covenant of Grace." We may agree in asserting the unity of God's purpose through the ages, but the selection of the word "covenant" to describe this unity has lent itself to important misunderstanding.<sup>20</sup>

New Covenant theologians are not denying the importance of grace in salvation history, but they do not believe in a specific Covenant of Grace.

In offering an evaluation of points 1-3 above, this writer believes that NCT is correct in not accepting and affirming the three covenants of CT. New Covenant theologians have rightly pointed out that CT has confused matters with its talk of a Covenant of Redemption, a Covenant of Works, and a Covenant of Grace. Three reasons support this positive assessment of NCT on this matter.

First, NCT is correct that the three covenants of CT are not found or rooted in the Bible. They are the product of CT's system, but they do not arise from Scripture. For example, commenting on the concept of an alleged Covenant of Redemption, O. Palmer Robertson, a Covenant theologian himself, states, "To speak concretely of an intertrinitarian 'covenant' with terms and conditions between Father and Son mutually endorsed before the foundation of the world is to extend the bounds

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<sup>17</sup>Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology*, 40.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 41. Also, Article 20, "The Law of God," in the New Covenant Confession of Faith states, "There is no record in Scripture of God making a Covenant of Works with Adam" (online at [www.ncbf.net/PDF/confession.pdf](http://www.ncbf.net/PDF/confession.pdf), accessed 6/4/07).

<sup>19</sup>Zens, "Is There a 'Covenant of Grace?'" (online at [www.searchingtogether.org/articles/zens/covenant.htm](http://www.searchingtogether.org/articles/zens/covenant.htm), accessed 6/4/07).

<sup>20</sup>Tom Wells and Fred G. Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology: Description, Definition, Defense* (Frederick, Md.: New Covenant Media, 2002) 45.

of scriptural evidence beyond propriety.”<sup>21</sup> The same is true for the Covenant of Works and Covenant of Grace which find little support in Scripture.<sup>22</sup>

John Reisinger, who may be considered the father of NCT, rightly states that the covenants of CT are the children of CT’s theological system and are not the products of exegesis. In addressing a group of Reformed ministers who adopted CT, he said,

We agree that the Bible is structured around *two* covenants. However, the two covenants that you keep talking about, namely, a covenant of works with Adam in the garden of Eden and a covenant of grace made with Adam immediately after the fall, have no textual basis in the Word of God. They are both theological covenants and not biblical covenants. They are the children of one’s theological system. Their mother is Covenant Theology and their father is logic applied to that system. Neither of these two covenants had their origin in Scripture texts and biblical exegesis. Both of them were invented by theology as the necessary consequences of a theological system.<sup>23</sup>

Second, as New Covenant theologians have pointed out, the term “covenant” is strategic in the Bible.<sup>24</sup> *Berith* is explicitly used to describe the Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, New, and other covenants. These are actual biblical covenants that have been cut in history. It is unwise to add three covenants that God does not designate as covenants. What makes matters particularly confusing is that CT is asking Christians to understand the actual biblical covenants of Scripture through the lens of the covenants of CT. For example, CT views the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and New Covenants as outworkings of the alleged Covenant of Grace. This approach, though—as NCT has shown—flattens out the meaning of the actual biblical covenants<sup>25</sup> and emphasizes a continuity that is not supported by Scripture.

<sup>21</sup>Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* 54.

<sup>22</sup>Horton states that the concept of a Covenant of Works is even more “controversial” than the idea of a Covenant of Redemption within contemporary Reformed Theology (*God of Promise*, 83). He also points to “a growing tide of sentiment against the covenant of works” (*ibid.*, 86).

<sup>23</sup>John Reisinger, *Abraham’s Four Seeds*. (Frederick, Md.; New Covenant Media, 1998) 129.

<sup>24</sup>Jon Zens emphasizes the importance of using biblical terms in their biblical meaning: “If, as Dr. Gordon Clark suggests, ‘a Christian theologian should use Biblical terms in their Biblical meaning,’ is it valid to take the covenant concept and employ it as a theological catch-all without careful regard for how the word ‘covenant’ is employed in Scripture?” (Jon Zens, “A Study of the Presuppositions of Covenant and Dispensational Theology” [online at [www.gospelpedlar.com/articles/Bible/prediscov.html](http://www.gospelpedlar.com/articles/Bible/prediscov.html)], accessed 6/4/07).

<sup>25</sup>“It is my contention that viewing the covenant of works/covenant of grace as the primary covenants in Scripture has had the effect of *dehistoricizing* the covenants revealed in the Bible as ‘cut.’ This occurs because the covenant of grace is a post-fall, yet *a-historical* covenant, which is said to be variously administrated in the *historical* covenants. . . . In this system, then, it is impossible to do justice to the ‘covenants of promise’ (Eph. 2:12; Rom. 9:4) which were ‘cut’ *in history*, because they are all flattened out, being contemplated as ‘various administrations of the one covenant of grace’” (Jon Zens,

For example, Scripture teaches significant discontinuities between the Mosaic and the New Covenants. The Mosaic Covenant was a conditional temporary covenant based on Israel's faithfulness to God (see Jer 31:31-32).<sup>26</sup> The NT indicates that the Mosaic Covenant came to an end with the death of Christ (see Eph 2:15 and Col 2:14). The New Covenant, which replaces the now "obsolete" Mosaic Covenant (see Heb 8:13), is an unconditional, eternal covenant of God. It is specifically "not like the covenant which I made with their fathers" (Heb 8:9). Yet, CT wants to emphasize too much continuity between the Mosaic Covenant and the New Covenant claiming that both are the outworkings of an alleged Covenant of Grace.<sup>27</sup>

Third, New Covenant theologians have rightly pointed out that an understanding of biblical covenants should be based on the actual covenants of the Bible.<sup>28</sup> Their interpretation of these covenants is in error at times, but at least NCT starts with the actual covenants of the Bible and not alleged covenants that are not referred to as covenants in Scripture.

In sum, NCT is correct in not accepting the covenants of CT. Ockham's Razor may apply to this issue, which is, "Don't multiply hypotheses needlessly." In this case CT has cluttered God's plan with covenants that can only be found in the white spaces of scripture.

**(4) NCT views the Mosaic Law as a unit that cannot be divided.** The issue of a Christian's relation to the Mosaic Law's is a major point of disagreement between CT and NCT. Steve Lehrer states, "Law has been the hill upon which many swords have been drawn between NCT and Covenant Theology."<sup>29</sup>

Covenant theologians often make a functional distinction between the moral, civil, and ceremonial aspects of the Mosaic Law. Though many Covenant theologians do not view the ceremonial and civil elements of the Mosaic Law as binding on the present-day believer, some of them believe that the Decalogue or moral regulations of the Mosaic Law are currently binding.

NCT, though, views the Mosaic Law as a unit that cannot be divided. Thus, NCT rejects a functional distinction between moral, civil, and ceremonial aspects of the Mosaic Law. As Lehrer puts it,

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"A Study of the Presuppositions of Covenant and Dispensational Theology" [online at [www.gospelpedlar.com/articles/Bible/prediscov.html](http://www.gospelpedlar.com/articles/Bible/prediscov.html), accessed 6/4/07]]. See also Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology* 38.

<sup>26</sup>Jeremiah 31:31-32 indicates the need for a New Covenant since the people of Israel broke the Mosaic Covenant.

<sup>27</sup>In addition, Galatians 3 contrasts the Abrahamic Covenant with Mosaic Covenant.

<sup>28</sup>See Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology* 37, 41.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 24.

Covenant Theologians divide the Mosaic Law into moral, civil, and ceremonial laws and consider the moral laws binding but the civil and ceremonial laws as having been fulfilled in Christ and no longer binding on believers today. But I don't believe this understanding is supported by Scripture. . . . It seems to me that dividing the Mosaic Law into different kinds of laws to arrive at an answer concerning which laws believers must obey today is misguided.<sup>30</sup>

On this matter, NCT is more correct than CT. Although the Mosaic Law can be analyzed by looking at its ceremonial, civil, and moral elements, the Mosaic Law is a unit that cannot be divided. The Bible does not warrant believing that some parts of the Mosaic Law are for today while others are not. The NT emphasizes the unity of the law as James and Paul have written:

James 2:10: "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all."

Galatians 5:3: "And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law."

D. A. Carson has argued that Scripture does not support the tri-fold distinction in law, which is often stressed in CT: "Although this tripartite distinction is old, its use as a basis for explaining the relationship between the testaments is not demonstrably derived from the NT and probably does not antedate Aquinas."<sup>31</sup>

**(5) NCT affirms that the Mosaic Law as a unit has been fulfilled and is no longer operative for Christians today.** NCT emphasizes that the Mosaic Law in its entirety has been fulfilled and is no longer binding. That includes the Sabbath command. Steve Lehrer states, "The Old Covenant has passed away and none of the commands of the Mosaic Law are binding on believers today, including the command to keep the Sabbath holy."<sup>32</sup> Geoff Volker writes,

I understand that the Mosaic Law is tied to the Old Covenant and that the Old Covenant came to an end at the cross (Luke 23:45, Hebrews 8:7-13, Galatians 4:21-31). Therefore, since the Old Covenant has come to an end the law of that covenant, the Mosaic Law, has

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 185 n. 46. "Covenant Theologians typically divide the Mosaic Law into moral, civil, and ceremonial categories. Then they say that Christ has fulfilled the civil and ceremonial elements of the Mosaic Law but not the moral laws. I don't believe that there is a biblical basis for dividing the Mosaic Law into different categories of laws" (ibid., 134 n. 39).

<sup>31</sup>D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 143.

<sup>32</sup>Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology* 181.

also come to an end (Ephesians 2:14-16).<sup>33</sup>

Important to this understanding is NCT's interpretation of Matthew 5:17-18. New Covenant theologians say Jesus brought the Mosaic Law to an end by eschatologically fulfilling it. For NCT, the Mosaic Law ended at the cross, as Lehrer states,

This covenant [Old or Mosaic Covenant] is brought to an end and is fulfilled at the cross.<sup>34</sup>

The Mosaic Law has passed away with the coming of Christ and the New Covenant. God no longer requires people to follow the Mosaic Law.<sup>35</sup>

On this point, NCT is more correct than CT. The era of the Mosaic Law has come to an end. The biblical witness affirms this on multiple occasions:

For you are not under law, but under grace (Rom 6:14).

But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law (Gal 5:18).

For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes (Rom 10:4).

For when the priesthood is changed, of necessity there takes place a change of law also (Heb 7:12).

When He said, "A new covenant," He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear (Heb 8:13).

**(6) NCT teaches that Christians today are under only the Law of Christ.**

Unlike CT which stresses that Christians today are under the Decalogue, NCT teaches that Christians are solely under the Law of Christ which consists of the commands and principles found in the NT.<sup>36</sup> Lehrer states, "NCT embraces the law of Christ, which is the law that is applicable to believers today. The law of Christ includes the commands given by Christ and His Apostles."<sup>37</sup> The New Covenant Confession of Faith declares, "The church is made up of both Jew and Gentiles and is not regulated by the Mosaic Law, but by the Law of Christ."<sup>38</sup>

Again, NCT offers a significant advance over CT on this issue. In 1 Cor

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<sup>33</sup>Geoff Volker, "Foreword," in *New Covenant Theology* 14. "[T]he Mosaic era is 'done away' with the establishing of the New Covenant (2 Cor. 3:11, 13)" (Zens, "Is There a 'Covenant of Grace?'" ).

<sup>34</sup>Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology* 19.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>36</sup>This is not to say that Covenant theologians do not also believe that Christians are under the Law of Christ. For them, though, the Law of Christ is a reapplication of the Law of Moses.

<sup>37</sup>Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology* 112.

<sup>38</sup>Article 24, "The Church," The New Covenant Confession of Faith (online at [www.ncbf.net/PDF/confession.pdf](http://www.ncbf.net/PDF/confession.pdf), accessed 6/4/07).

9:20-21 Paul explicitly states that he is not under the Mosaic Law, but instead is under the Law of Christ:

And to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law, *though not being myself under the Law*, that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God *but under the law of Christ*, that I might win those who are without law. (emphasis added)

This view that the Christian is not under the Mosaic Law has led to the charge of lawlessness or antinomianism by some.<sup>39</sup> Many Dispensationalists, too, have faced this charge for their view that the NT Christian is not under the Mosaic Law but under the Law of Christ. Now New Covenant theologians are facing this accusation as well. The charge is baseless, however. It is not as though New Covenant theologians (and Dispensationalists) are saying that Christians are not bound to any law—they are. But there is a new law for the New Covenant era—the Law of Christ, which consists of the commands, principles, and precepts of the NT. Thus, it cannot rightfully be claimed that New Covenant theologians are antinomians.

(7) **NCT rejects infant baptism.** Another point of difference between CT and NCT relates to NCT's rejection of infant baptism. CT sees so much continuity between the OT and the NT that infant baptism is viewed as the parallel to circumcision. NCT disagrees with this. As Lehrer notes: "Infant baptism . . . and New Covenant Theology are incompatible because they are based on fundamentally different views of how the Old Covenant relates to the New Covenant."<sup>40</sup> John Reisinger states,

[I]f Covenant Theology can exegetically establish its view of Abraham and his seed from the Scriptures, then . . . the Baptist view of baptism is proven to be a denial of the major covenant promise given to Christian parents. Baptists are literally guilty of heresy if Covenant Theology is correct.<sup>41</sup>

This is another area in which NCT is an advance on traditional CT. The Bible does not support the concept of infant baptism. No evidences for infant baptism appear in the NT, nor do any instructions that indicate that baptism of infants is warranted.

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<sup>39</sup>R. Scott Clark states that "NCT tends toward antinomianism" ("Theses on Covenant Theology" [online at [www.wscal.edu/clark/covtheses.php](http://www.wscal.edu/clark/covtheses.php), accessed 6/4/07]).

<sup>40</sup>Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology* 211. See also 212 and 214.

<sup>41</sup>Reisinger, *Abraham's Four Seeds* 5.

**(8) NCT affirms that the church began at Pentecost and that Israel was not the church in the Old Testament.** CT holds that the church began in the OT and that Israel was the church of the OT.<sup>42</sup> NCT rejects both these points, claiming that the church began at Pentecost and that Israel was not the church in the OT:

While there has always been a people of God, the church in the New Covenant era has a unique historical beginning at Pentecost.<sup>43</sup>

Covenant Theology looks at Israel as the church in the Old Testament. This system of theology sees continuity between Israel and the church in that they are both part of the one people of God. . . . Covenant Theology views the people of God in the Old Testament being widened in the New Covenant era to include Gentiles as well. It also sees the future for Israel that is predicted in the Old Testament as being fulfilled in the church today. Then there is the view of NCT. . . . Israel was not the church in the Old Testament. . . .<sup>44</sup>

NCT does not view Old Covenant Israel as the church. We make a distinction between Old Covenant Israel and the church.<sup>45</sup>

This view of NCT has strong biblical support. Israel was not the church of the OT. Jesus presented the church as future during his earthly ministry. In Matthew 16:18 He declared: "And I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church."

On the eight points of difference mentioned above, NCT offers a significant advance over CT. NCT is correct that the three foundational covenants of CT do not find support in Scripture. Plus, NCT offers a view of the temporary nature of the Mosaic Law that is more biblical than what CT proposes. NCT is also correct in its rejection of infant baptism and its belief that the church began with the Pentecost event described in Acts 2.

### **Similarities Between NCT and CT**

Significant points of similarity between CT and NCT need to be highlighted at this point. The points of agreement are in areas of hermeneutics, people of God, and kingdom.

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<sup>42</sup>According to Smith, "Thus it is to the Abrahamic covenant that we look to see the beginnings of the Church as a formal organization" (Smith, "The Church and Covenant Theology" 55).

<sup>43</sup>Article 24, "The Church," *The New Covenant Confession of Faith* (online at [www.ncbf.net/PDF/confession.pdf](http://www.ncbf.net/PDF/confession.pdf), accessed 6/4/07).

<sup>44</sup>Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology* 66. See also *ibid.*, 79.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, 147.

(1) **Hermeneutics.** In regard to the hermeneutical relationship between the two testaments, NCT and CT share two common assumptions: the NT has a logical priority over the OT, and typological interpretation is a proper hermeneutical approach for interpreting the testaments.

*Logical priority of the NT over the OT*

CT and NCT share the view that the OT must be understood primarily through the lens of the NT. That approach goes beyond the idea of progressive revelation to holding that the NT actually jettisons the original historical-grammatical sense of certain OT passages. Thus, according to NCT and CT, at times the NT overrides or supersedes the original authorial intent of the OT authors. This is particularly true of OT passages that teach the restoration of the nation Israel. Such is the view of Covenant theologian, Anthony Hoekema: "I agree . . . that the Old Testament must be interpreted in light of the New Testament and that a totally and exclusively literal interpretation of Old Testament prophecy is not justified."<sup>46</sup> This is also the view of Louis Berkhof, another Covenant theologian:

It is very doubtful, however, whether Scripture warrants the expectation that Israel will finally be re-established as a nation, and will as a nation turn to the Lord. Some Old Testament prophecies seem to predict this, but these should be read in light of the New Testament.<sup>47</sup>

The view of NT priority is also the perspective of New Covenant theologians. Wells and Zaspel assert,

[I]t has seemed to some of us that if the New Testament is the apex of God's revelation, then we ought to read the earlier parts of Scripture in its light.<sup>48</sup>

The critical point here is this: NT revelation, due to its finality, must be allowed to speak first on every issue that it addresses.<sup>49</sup>

[T]he NT holds logical priority over the rest in determining theological questions upon which it speaks.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>Anthony A. Hoekema, "Amillennialism," in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, ed. Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1977) 55.

<sup>47</sup>Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* 699.

<sup>48</sup>Wells and Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology* 1.

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 8.

The view of testament priority in which the NT becomes the starting point for understanding OT texts is problematic. Though acknowledging the varied applications that the NT writers make in using the OT, one is not justified in jettisoning the authorial intent of the OT writers. The approach of NCT and CT, at times, casts doubt on the integrity of some OT texts. It also casts doubt on the perspicuity of the OT. If the NT reinterprets the OT or seriously modifies its promises and covenants, in what sense were the original OT revelations actually revelations to the original readers?<sup>51</sup> What about the original authorial intent of the OT writers? David L. Turner rightly states, "If NT reinterpretation reverses, cancels, or seriously modifies OT promises to Israel, one wonders how to define the word 'progressive.' God's faithfulness to His promises to Israel must also be explained."<sup>52</sup> Turner also points out that this approach comes close to violating NT statements that uphold the truth claims of the OT: "It appears exceedingly doubtful that the NT reinterprets the OT. . . . This comes perilously close to conflicting with such NT passages as Matt 5:18 and John 10:35b."<sup>53</sup>

Walter C. Kaiser is correct when he points out that Christians "misjudge the revelation of God if we have a theory of interpretation which says the most recent revelation of God is to be preferred or substituted for that which came earlier."<sup>54</sup> In fact, this belief that the NT must be the guide for interpreting the OT comes dangerously close to the view of a canon within the canon. Kaiser states,

But why would a rule be imposed on the revelation of God that demands that the Old Testament passages may not become the basis for giving primary direction on any doctrines or truths that have relevancy for New Testament times? This is only to argue in the end for a canon within a canon.<sup>55</sup>

*Typological interpretation as a proper approach for interpreting the testaments*

Both CT and NCT adopt what is sometimes called "typological interpretation." Typological interpretation is a hermeneutical approach that views the

<sup>51</sup>In response to George Ladd's declaration that the New Testament reinterprets the Old Testament, Paul Feinberg asks relevant questions: "If Ladd is correct that the NT reinterprets the OT, his hermeneutic does raise some serious questions. How can the integrity of the OT text be maintained? In what sense can the OT really be called a *revelation* in its original meaning?" (Paul Feinberg, "Hermeneutics of Discontinuity," in *Continuity and Discontinuity* 116 [emphasis in the original]).

<sup>52</sup>David L. Turner, "The Continuity of Scripture and Eschatology: Key Hermeneutical Issues," *Grace Theological Journal* 6/2 (1985):281.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, 282.

<sup>54</sup>Walter C. Kaiser Jr., "The Land of Israel and the Future Return (Zechariah 10:6-12)," in *Israel, the Land and the People: An Evangelical Affirmation of God's Promises*, ed. H. Wayne House (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998) 222.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, 219.

connection between the OT and NT on the basis of type/antitype relationships found in the two testaments. This perspective has led both CT and NCT to emphasize (and, from a dispensational viewpoint, overemphasize) the typological connection between Israel and the church. For both CT and NCT, Israel of the OT is the inferior type that gives way to the fuller reality or antitype—the church. Likewise, all the promises of land and physical blessings to national Israel typologically point to the greater spiritual blessings of the church.

Mark W. Karlberg, a Covenant theologian, argues against a future restoration of the nation Israel based on typological interpretation:

If one grants that national Israel in OT revelation was truly a type of the eternal kingdom of Christ, then it seems that, according to the canons of Biblical typology, national Israel can no longer retain any independent status whatever.<sup>56</sup>

According to Karlberg, Israel's special place in the plan of God has been transferred to the Christian church, which is now "the true people of God with the privileges, the responsibilities, and the destiny of Israel."<sup>57</sup> This belief that national Israel is a type of the church means that OT prophecies and promises given to Israel find their typological fulfillment in the church. This rules out a literal fulfillment of those promises with the nation Israel.<sup>58</sup>

This use of typological interpretation is also the view of NCT. Lehrer states,

Then there is the view of NCT, which understands Israel to be an unbelieving type or picture of the true people of God, the church. According to NCT, Israel never was a believing people as a whole. Israel always had a tiny remnant of true believers in her midst. Israel was not the church in the Old Testament, but they did function as a type or picture of the church—the true people of God.<sup>59</sup>

Israel in the Old Covenant era was a temporary, unbelieving picture of the true people of

<sup>56</sup>Mark W. Karlberg, "The Significance of Israel in Biblical Typology," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 31/3 (1988):259.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 263.

<sup>58</sup>Summarizing this view of supersessionists, Glenny states, "Since the Church has replaced Israel in God's program, specific and direct prophecies made to Israel are only fulfilled typologically in the Church—that is, there will be no application of even direct OT prophecies to ethnic, national Israel in the future. . . . Such a fulfillment to Israel would require a move backward in God's program of salvation history and is not necessary since some OT prophecies for Israel are applied to the Church in the NT" (W. Edward Glenny, "Typology: A Summary of the Present Evangelical Discussion," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40/4 [1997]:631-32). Glenny himself is not a supersessionist. Karlberg claims his view is consistent with historic Reformed theology, which views national Israel as having served "a symbolic and typological purpose in redemptive history" ("Legitimate Discontinuities Between the Testaments," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 28/1 [1985]:16).

<sup>59</sup>Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology* 66. See also *ibid.*, 79.

God, the church.<sup>60</sup>

The use of typological hermeneutics by Covenant theologians and New Covenant theologians is problematic. Certainly, progressive revelation exists. And yes, the NT is a more complete revelation than the OT, plus, antitypes that fulfill OT types occur in the NT. In addition, applications of OT passages occur in the NT that go beyond the single intended meaning of the OT authors. Those issues must be taken into account. However, it is highly doubtful that the NT teaches that OT promises will not be fulfilled in agreement with the original intent of OT authors. Though NT authors may offer added applications and significance to OT passages, they do not do so at the expense of the original intent of the texts.

Two questions raise doubts about Israel being a type that has been superseded by the church. First, how can Israel be a type that is transcended by a greater antitype (the church) when the NT itself explicitly reaffirms the OT expectation of a restoration of Israel? Jesus discussed a restoration of the twelve tribes of Israel in Matt 19:28 and Luke 22:30 when He told His apostles that in the regeneration of the earth they would be ruling over the twelve tribes of Israel. Also, after forty days of kingdom instruction from the risen Jesus, the apostles still expected a restoration of the nation Israel (see Acts 1:6). This idea was not corrected by Jesus.<sup>61</sup> Also, Paul reaffirmed that “all Israel shall be saved” (Rom 11:26) and proved this point by quoting New Covenant texts in the OT (see Rom 11:27). In reference to Paul’s use of Isa 59:20, 21 and Jer 31:34 in Rom 11:27, John Murray states, “There should be no question but Paul regards these Old Testament passages as applicable to the restoration of Israel.”<sup>62</sup> The fact that Paul speaks of a future for the nation Israel after the beginning of the church shows that the church cannot be equated with Israel. If the nation Israel was a type that has been superseded, why does the NT still predict the salvation and restoration of Israel?

Second, CT and NCT have not adequately shown how God can make unconditional and eternal promises to a specific people—Israel—and then not fulfill His promises to this people? CT and NCT have no adequate answer to that question. God specifically promised the perpetuity of the nation Israel (Jer 31:35–37). How then can God not fulfill His promises to this people? Claims that “Israel” has now been redefined and that the church is the new Israel are not satisfactory. Jeremiah promises the perpetuity of Israel as a nation.

Upon review, it appears that CT’s and NCT’s understanding of testament

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 20.

<sup>61</sup>Acts 1:6 is significant because it offers a snapshot of what the apostles believed about the restoration of Israel at this crucial point in salvation history. Claims that they had a wrong or incomplete view of Israel’s restoration in Acts 1 are not convincing.

<sup>62</sup>John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968) 99. Murray is referring to ethnic Israel.

priority is related to what R. Kendall Soulen calls “structural supersessionism.” Structural supersessionism occurs when a hermeneutic is adopted that boxes out the ability of the Jewish Scriptures to inform on the issues that they address. With the hermeneutics of CT and NCT, the OT is muted.<sup>63</sup> Since the NT is viewed as the starting point and the lens through which the OT is understood, texts like Jer 31:35-37, which explicitly declare the perpetuity of national Israel’s place in God’s plan, are not given the attention they deserve.<sup>64</sup>

(2) **People of God.** As the discussion on hermeneutics reflects, both CT and NCT view the NT church as the only true people of God. Both affirm that the nation Israel will never again experience a unique identity, role, or mission in the plan of God. NCT does differ from CT in believing that the nation Israel was not the church of the OT. Instead, NCT affirms that Israel was just an unbelieving picture of the people of God.<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, both NCT and CT assert that the church alone is now the true people of God and that the nation Israel will never again possess a unique identity or mission as the people of God.<sup>66</sup>

Thus, both CT and NCT promote supersessionism.<sup>67</sup> Supersessionism is the view that the NT church supersedes, fulfills, or replaces the nation Israel as the people of God. In particular, both CT and NCT promote a form of supersessionism called “economic supersessionism.” According to Soulen, economic supersessionism is the view that “carnal Israel’s history is providentially ordered from the outset to be taken up into the spiritual church.”<sup>68</sup> With this form of supersessionism, national Israel corresponds to Christ’s church in a merely prefigurative and carnal way. Thus, Christ, with His advent, “brings about the obsolescence of carnal Israel and inaugurates the age of the spiritual church.”<sup>69</sup> With economic supersessionism, Israel

<sup>63</sup>See R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 31.

<sup>64</sup>See Walter C. Kaiser Jr., “Evidence From Jeremiah,” in *A Case For Premillennialism: A New Consensus*, eds. Donald K. Campbell and Jeffrey L. Townsend (Chicago: Moody, 1992) 113.

<sup>65</sup>Geoff Volker states, “We who hold to New Covenant Theology understand the Bible to teach that Israel should be viewed as the picture of the promises to Abraham in the Abrahamic Covenant” (“A New Covenant Theology of Israel,” 1 [online at [www.ids.org/pdf/nct/israel.pdf](http://www.ids.org/pdf/nct/israel.pdf), accessed 5/18/07]). He also says, “Israel is an “unbelieving picture of the people of God” (ibid., 2).

<sup>66</sup>Volker also writes, “The Israelites in the New Covenant era have been removed as the people of God . . .” (ibid., 3).

<sup>67</sup>Lehrer shies away from the term “replacement theology” since he does not see the church replacing the nation Israel. He says, “Instead I would rather use the term ‘fulfillment theology.’ Israel was simply a picture of the true people of God, which the church fulfills” (*New Covenant Theology* 203).

<sup>68</sup>Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* 181 n. 6. Soulen himself rejects all forms of supersessionism.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., 29.

is not replaced primarily because of her disobedience, but rather because her role in the history of redemption expired with the coming of Jesus. It is now superseded by the arrival of a new spiritual Israel—the Christian church. This form of supersessionism appears similar to what CT and NCT are affirming.

In sum, CT's and NCT's rejection of national Israel's restoration goes against the biblical witness of both the OT and the NT. Texts such as Matt 19:28; Luke 22:30; Acts 1:6; and Romans 11:25ff. reaffirm the OT expectation of a salvation and restoration of the nation Israel. Further, CT and NCT do not adequately account for OT texts that explicitly promise the perpetuity of Israel as a nation (Jer 31:35–37).<sup>70</sup>

(3) **Kingdom.** The issue of the kingdom is one in which New Covenant theologians and Covenant theologians appear to be similar. Neither side claims that its system necessarily leads to any particular millennial view. It appears that, within both CT and NCT, one could be an amillennialist, postmillennialist, or historic premillennialist. Yet neither CT nor NCT is compatible with dispensational premillennialism and its view that the nation Israel will have a distinct identity and mission in the plan of God that is culminated in a literal millennium. Thus, both NCT and CT appear to offer some latitude on the issue of the millennium.

### Conclusion

NCT has significant areas of disagreement and agreement with CT. NCT differs with CT in that it rejects the covenants of redemption, works, and grace. NCT also views the Mosaic Law as a temporary law that has been fulfilled and superseded by the Law of Christ. NCT also rejects infant baptism and the belief that Israel in the OT was the church. On these areas of disagreement between NCT and CT, it appears that NCT is closer to the biblical witness than is CT.

As for points of agreement, NCT largely shares the same hermeneutic as CT in regard to the testaments. Both hold to logical priority of the NT over the OT and both accept a view of typological interpretation which leads to the view that the nation Israel has been superseded by a greater antitype—the church. Thus, both groups deny a restoration of the nation Israel.

New Covenant theologians are to be commended for their departure from CT on several key areas of doctrine where CT is found wanting. Yet the picture is not

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<sup>70</sup>Verses 35–36 of this passage read: “Thus says the LORD, who gives the sun for light by day, and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, Who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar; The LORD of hosts is His name: ‘If this fixed order departs from before Me,’ declares the LORD, ‘Then the offspring of Israel also shall cease from being a nation before Me forever.’” In this poem made up of two sayings (vv. 35–36 and 37), the Lord declares, what Ernest W. Nicholson has called, “the impossibility of Israel being forsaken forever by God” (Ernest W. Nicholson, *The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah: Chapters 26–52* [Great Britain: Cambridge University, 1975] 72).

as bright as it could be. NCT's hermeneutic in regard to the testaments and its denial of a future for Israel remain problematic. The OT and NT present a much brighter future for the nation Israel than do either CT or NCT.