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What Is New Covenant Theology?

In order to conduct the following study properly, it is only fair to define NCT. I attempt to do that in this chapter, allowing its own writers to speak for themselves. Since I will argue that hermeneutics is of great importance concerning the issues to be discussed, in the next chapter I will introduce readers to some of the principles of interpretation utilized in this book and chart our course of study, indicating what will be discussed and why.

What is New Covenant Theology?

In *IDOTD*, the following was asserted:

The critique in no way pretends to be exhaustive. It reflects my own limited, and certainly fallible, understanding of New Covenant Theology. Frankly, it is somewhat difficult to critique New Covenant Theology for at least three reasons. *First*, New Covenant Theology is not a monolithic movement. New Covenant theologians differ on some of the nuances involved with defining New Covenant Theology. *Second*, New Covenant Theology is a relatively new school of thought. Though there is much in print on New Covenant Theology, there is no definitive work, as of yet.... Because of these things, a critique can become quickly outdated.¹

¹ Richard C. Barcellos, *In Defense of the Decalogue: A Critique of New Covenant Theology* (Enumclaw, WA: WinePress Publishing, 2001), 7.

The Preface to *New Covenant Theology* by Tom Wells and Fred Zaspel, published in 2002, agrees with this assessment. After quoting my words above, the authors say:

This analysis is right on target. It is too soon to know how these difficulties will be reconciled, but if NCT proves to be a viable understanding of the Scriptures, the work could well extend into the period beyond our lifetimes.²

Recently, NCT advocate Gary D. Long says of NCT:

[NCT] as a theological system in America...is a recent development³ having different explanations, especially due to diverse—sometimes, sad to say, even heterodox—writings on the Internet which lack the discipline of biblical hermeneutics. The time has come for those who hold to the need for NCT to unify, explain and demonstrate what it is as a developing theological system exegetically based on sound principles of biblical interpretation.⁴

I appreciate Long's assessment. NCT is a recent, developing system.⁵ Neither is it a monolithic movement. Because there is no agreed-upon creedal document subscribed by NCT advocates, it is hard for outsiders to offer critique. John Reisinger has even gone so far as to say, "Currently, New Covenant Theology has no clearly defined hermeneutic."⁶ Elsewhere, he says, "I have yet to discover what a 'true new covenant theologian' is."⁷ Though there is probably some rhetorical overkill in Reisinger's statements, his words reveal that even NCT advocates realize their formulations are somewhat recent and developing.⁸ This makes what I asserted in 2001, and what the Wells/Zaspel book affirmed in 2002, still applicable.

² Tom Wells and Fred Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology: Description, Definition, Defense* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2002), 4.

³ Kirk M. Wellum agrees with Long at this point. In A. Blake White, *What is New Covenant Theology? An Introduction* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2012), endorsement page iii, Wellum identifies NCT as a "relatively new theological formulation..."

⁴ Gary D. Long, *NCT: Time for a More Accurate Way* (n. p., 2013), 1. The book is available at Amazon.com and CreateSpace.com.

⁵ A. Blake White says, "New Covenant Theology is a developing system of theology...." See White, *What is New Covenant Theology?*, 1.

⁶ John G. Reisinger, *New Covenant Theology and Prophecy* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2012), 7.

⁷ John G. Reisinger, "Foreword," in A. Blake White, *The Law of Christ: A Theological Proposal* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2010), 3, n. 1.

⁸ I don't think developing one's system is necessarily a bad thing. In *IDOTD*,

The safest way to define NCT is to allow their writers to speak for themselves. However, since it is still developing, what one writer sees as a crucial element of the system, another might not. For example, in *IDOTD*, I asserted that “One key text for New Covenant Theology is found in Matthew 5:17–20.”⁹ John Reisinger takes issue with my claim:

While NCT does believe in a redemptive-historical shift in law, we do not present this text as a key text to support the idea. We usually only refer to this text in relation to that shift when someone else raises it as an objection. To present it as one of our key texts is akin to saying, “One of the key texts for those who believe in free will is Romans 9,” and then proceeding to show how Romans 9 teaches sovereignty and refutes free will. Arminians do not use Romans 9 as a key text. Barcellos’ point is similar to stating that 1 John 2:2 is a key text for those who believe in limited atonement, and then demanding an explanation from them of the phrase *the whole world*. It would seem that Barcellos has chosen texts that he himself wants to discuss, and then has stated that he is using those particular texts because they are important texts to NCT. While it is legitimate for him to feel that a given text is important in this discussion, it is not fair to put words in our mouth and then refute them. If the phrase “One key text for New Covenant Theology” means “this is a key text that NCT must explain,” then Barcellos has made a fair request. If he means that the text he identifies is one that New Covenant theologians use as a key text, then he has misrepresented NCT.

Matthew 5:17–20 is important to this discussion because Covenant theologians make it a key text in their refutation of NCT. Again, I acknowledge that NCT must explain that text, as well as any other salient text, but that does not mean that we make it a foundational text for our view.¹⁰

This was published in 2008. The Wells/Zaspel book was published in 2002. Its full title is *New Covenant Theology: Description, Definition, Defense*. Four of its fifteen chapters, written by Fred Zaspel, treat Matthew 5:17–20 (the discussion is more extensive than those verses alone). *IDOTD* is not referenced in those chapters. Zaspel himself says of Matthew 5:17–

for example, I purposefully stayed clear of various doctrinal formulations found in my confession of faith (2LCF) that I was still “developing” in my own thinking. Where I have landed on those issues is not relatively new ground, however. Also, to be fair, some of the tenets of NCT predate its designation.

⁹ Barcellos, *IDOTD*, 12.

¹⁰ John G. Reisinger, *In Defense of Jesus, the New Lawgiver* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2008), 59–60.

20, “Indeed, the whole NT theology of law grows out of this pivotal statement of Jesus.”¹¹ In the Foreword to that book, Douglas J. Moo says, “... Zaspel concentrates on a careful exegesis of key New Testament texts — especially the pivotal Matthew 5:17–20.”¹² Most of what Zaspel wrote on Matthew 5 was written prior to *IDOTD*.¹³ Since that is the case, he was not responding to my book simply because I brought up that text. This would mean that what I said about this passage in *IDOTD* was accurate, at least as Zaspel sees NCT. Interestingly, Gary Long’s list of “NCT Characteristics” published in 2013, what he identifies as “some of the major NCT characteristics,”¹⁴ includes the following: “The Law of God is both absolute and covenantal (Matt. 5:17–20)”¹⁵ and “The law of Christ is not to be equated with the Decalogue.”¹⁶ He then cites Matthew 5 three times in support. It is clear that Long sees Matthew 5 as important for NCT. In addition, John Reisinger wrote a whole book on the Sermon on the Mount, first published in 1989.¹⁷ Maybe I assumed more than I ought to have in light of that book by Reisinger, but it seems clear to me that the Wells/Zaspel book and Long’s book both view Matthew 5 as important to the system of thought advocated by NCT.

This brief caveat was included to highlight that defining NCT is not easy, especially for an outsider. Indeed, as Gary Long asserts, NCT “is a recent development having different explanations.”¹⁸ Though I will attempt to state a working definition of NCT, I fully realize some might take issue with aspects of it.

If I understand NCT correctly, the chapter titles of A. Blake White’s *What is New Covenant Theology?* may go some way toward a working definition. NCT is a developing system of doctrine which advocates the following:

Chapter 1: One Plan of God Centered in Jesus Christ

Chapter 2: The Old Testament Should Be Interpreted in Light of the New Testament

¹¹ Wells and Zaspel, *NCT*, 78.

¹² *Ibid.*, xiii.

¹³ This has been confirmed to me through personal correspondence with Fred Zaspel.

¹⁴ Long, *NCT*, 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁷ John G. Reisinger, *But I Say Unto You* (Southbridge, MA: Crown Publications, Inc., 1989).

¹⁸ Long, *NCT*, 1.

- Chapter 3: The Old Covenant Was Temporary by Divine Design
- Chapter 4: The Law is a Unit
- Chapter 5: Christians are not Under the Law of Moses, but the 'Law' of Christ
- Chapter 6: All Members of the New Covenant Community are Fully Forgiven and Have the Holy Spirit
- Chapter 7: The Church is the Eschatological Israel.¹⁹

As stated and without explicit elucidation, I agree with all seven points. But, as will be demonstrated below, some of the nuances articulated by NCT adherents in the way these statements are explained is where I will take issue. For example, though I agree that the Old Testament should be understood in light of the New Testament, I maintain that the Old Testament ought to be understood in light of itself as well. Though my hunch is that NCT adherents will agree with me at this point, I have not seen this worked out on a consistent basis in the various books I have read by them.

Gary Long offers the following brief definition of NCT: "*God's eternal purpose progressively revealed in the commandments and promises of the biblical covenants of the OT and fulfilled in the New Covenant of Jesus Christ.*"²⁰ He then offers what he calls its "major themes...summarily described" as follows:

- *God's eternal purpose of redemption*: covenantally revealed and administered through biblical covenants beginning with a pre-fall covenant of obedience with Adam (Rom. 5:12–19; Eph. 2:12)²¹ and a post-fall covenant of promise (Gen. 3:15);
- *Hermeneutics*: consistent interpretation of the OT in light of the NT (Luke 24:27; II Cor. 1:20);

¹⁹ White, *What is New Covenant Theology?*, Table of Contents.

²⁰ Long, *NCT*, 2; emphasis original.

²¹ This is an interesting place to reference Ephesians 2:12. If intentional by Long, it makes that text to include what he calls "a pre-fall covenant of obedience with Adam," which would make that covenant one of the covenants of promise mentioned by Paul. Ephesians 2:12 speaks of "the covenants of promise." Paul says that Gentiles "were at that time [i.e., when they were not Christians] separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world." Long includes the "pre-fall covenant of obedience with Adam" among "the covenants of promise." This seems unwarranted from the Ephesians text and broader considerations. It could be that the reference to Ephesians 2:12 belongs with Long's words "and a post-fall covenant of promise (Genesis 3:15)."

- *The people of God*: all the elect of God throughout time first constituted as the church at Pentecost (Acts 1:4–5), but not before (John 7:39; 17:21–22; Col. 1:26–27; Heb. 11:39–40), as one corporate spiritual body in union with Christ (I Cor. 12:13; Eph. 2:19–21; Col. 1:18, 24); and
- *The law of God*: the two great commandments of God—love of God and neighbor (Matt. 22:36–40)—are innate law known instinctively by man (Rom. 2:14–15) created in God’s image (Gen. 1:27). Upon these two great commandments all of God’s covenantally written laws depend as administered under biblical covenants, which culminate in the New Covenant (NC) law of Christ (I Cor. 9:20–21; Romans 13:8–10; Galatians 6:2; Heb. 8:6; James 2:8; I John 5:3). Innate law is righteous and unchanging. Covenantal law is written, righteous and changeable (Heb. 7:12) worked out in history in accordance with God’s eternal purpose (Eph. 1:11; 3:11; II Tim. 1:9).²²

Some of these major themes of NCT as offered by Long are not agreed upon by other NCT advocates, as will be shown below. What is of interest at this point in our discussion is his suggestion that there are two covenants revealed in the early chapters of Genesis: a pre-fall covenant of obedience with Adam and a post-fall covenant of promise announced in the curse upon the serpent (Genesis 3:15). It is also of interest to note that this is not typical of many NCT writers. Finally, notice Long’s distinction between innate law and covenantal law, which will be discussed below.

These two samples of what constitutes the major tenets of NCT from two of its writers illustrate what some of its advocates admit: NCT is a developing system. One of my intents in this book is to nudge NCT adherents in this admitted development.

²² Long, *NCT*, 2–3.