

A Short Primer on New Covenant Theology Essentials

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In series: New Covenant Theology

The Story of Scripture can be summarized as “Creation to New Creation.” How God brings revelation, history, and humanity from creation to new creation is referred to by many as “Redemptive History.” One of the most complex yet rewarding pursuits in biblical studies is to understand the flow of Redemptive History. What is its structure? How does it progress and develop over time? How is one era related to another? Where do we find unity and continuity? Where do we encounter diversity and discontinuity? What has priority and permanence? What is temporal and passing away? These are not merely questions for the academic theologian. Since there is more material devoted specifically to this issue in the NT than to almost any other single issue, the Bible itself invites every believer to pursue this understanding of the big picture with all its theological and practical implications for life and faith.

Currently there are three main systems of theology within evangelical Christianity which address the subject of Redemptive History: Covenant Theology (CT), Dispensational Theology (DT), and New Covenant Theology (NCT). Whether or not they are conscious of it, all Christians will generally fall into one of these three systems.

Generally speaking, Covenant Theology emphasizes continuity to the expense of discontinuity. Since the Westminster Confession of Faith is structured around CT, it is mostly Presbyterians who adhere to CT, although others do as well (e.g., Reformed Baptists).

Dispensationalism, on the other hand, tends to emphasize discontinuity at the expense of continuity. It is mostly Bible churches that adhere to DT, but it is certainly not limited to them. DT is by far the most popular of the three, due in large part to its adoption early on in the Fundamentalist movement, as well as current popular marketing with fictional books and movies.

New Covenant Theology accommodates both continuity and discontinuity. It is held to by those in the “believer’s church” tradition. NCT is a relatively new label, but it is not a new method of interpretation. The early church fathers, the Anabaptists, as well as other significant figures in church history put the Bible together in a similar way.

There are six key distinctives that make up NCT. Taken individually, these points may fit into CT and/or DT, but taken together they uniquely fit NCT.

1. One Plan of God Centered in Jesus Christ

The first distinctive of NCT is that there is one plan of God throughout the Bible. This plan is centered on and finds fulfillment in Jesus Christ and the new covenant. Ephesians 1:8-10 says, “With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.” CT speaks of this plan in terms of the “covenant of grace.” NCT strives to let *biblical* theology inform *systematic* theology. Exegesis should be the lifeblood of theology. This being the case, NCT does not find exegetical warrant for an over arching covenant of

grace that encompasses all the biblical covenants. This tends to flatten out the Bible. There is both continuity between the covenants and discontinuity. Each covenant must be dealt with in its own context as well as its contribution to the whole. When we recognize this, it becomes clear that there is a sharp contrast between the Old Covenant and the New. DT, on the other hand, tends to chop up the Bible, not seeing the fulfillment that the Messiah brings in continuity with what has gone before.

2. The Old Testament Should be Interpreted in Light of the New Testament

The second distinctive of NCT is its insistence that the OT must be read and interpreted in light of its NT fulfillment in Jesus Christ and the new covenant. Hebrews 1:1-2 says, "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe" (NIV). We take the *progressive* nature of God's revelation with the utmost seriousness. We learn how to interpret the OT from Jesus and his apostles. It is our opinion that the conclusions of CT and DT are a result of beginning with the OT rather than the NT.

3. The Old Covenant was Temporary by Divine Design

The third distinctive of NCT is that the Old Covenant was *temporary* by divine design. God intended for it to be an interim covenant. The NT is emphatic about the fact that those in Christ are no longer under the law (1 Cor. 9:20, 2 Cor. 3, Rom. 6:14, 7:6, Gal. 3:23, 5:18, Heb. 8). Galatians is very clear about this point. The Judaizers needed new watch batteries. They failed to realize what time it was in God's plan. The Bible depicts history as being divided up between this age and the age to come. This present evil age consists of sin, flesh, and death but when the Messiah comes, he would usher in the new age of righteousness, Spirit, and life. Paul sees the old covenant law as part of the old age (Gal. 1:4, Rom. 6:14). The Judaizers were trying to force Gentile believers to observe the old covenant law. Paul insists that its day is over. The law was given after the promise to Abraham and *until* the Messiah came. Galatians 3:19 says, "Why, then, was the law given at all? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come." Verses 24-25 say, "So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian." Here Paul calls the law a guardian (*paidagōgos*). In the first century, this referred to the household slave who was responsible for a child until they reached maturity. Paul's point is the temporal nature of the old covenant. Once we are grown up, we no longer need a guardian. With the coming of Christ, we have grown up. The old covenant law was an intended parenthesis in God's plan and has now been replaced by the New Covenant (Heb. 8). The New Covenant is not merely a renewal, but really is *new* covenant unlike the old one (Jer 31:32).

4. There is No Tripartite Division of the Law

The fourth distinctive of NCT is that the law (i.e. the old covenant and its law code) is presented as a unit throughout Scripture. CT divides the law up into three parts: moral, civil, and ceremonial. While we see how some commandments could be classified as moral in nature, as opposed to civil or ceremonial, NCT denies this "tripartite" division of the law because the writers of Scripture do not make such distinctions (e.g., skim through Lev. 19 and try to classify the commandments). The law is presented as a unit throughout Scripture. Hebrews 7:11-12 says, "If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood—and indeed the law given to the people established that priesthood—why was there still need for another priest to come, one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron?"

For when the priesthood is changed, the law must be changed also." Notice that the law and the priesthood are bound up together. It is a package deal. If the priesthood changes, then the law changes as well. This threefold division has no biblical basis. CT likes to emphasize that the Ten Commandments are the eternal moral law of God, but the Ten Commandments cannot be extrapolated from the covenant in which they were given. A careful reading of Exodus 19-24 bears this out. Chapter 19 is the historical introduction, and chapter 24 is the covenant ceremony. Chapter 20 consists of the ten words (20:1). Chapters 21-23 consist of the laws (21:1). In chapter 24, Moses calls both the words and the laws the "book of the covenant" (24:3, 7). One cannot have the ten words without the laws that go with them. Chapter 20 belongs with chapters 21-23.

One also must take the Sabbath commandment into account. The other nine commandments do not pose a problem, for the NT repeats them. However, the NT does not reinforce the Sabbath command. Quite the contrary! After the coming of Christ, observing days is akin to returning to paganism (Gal. 4:8-10). Romans 14:5 says that regarding observing special days, each should be fully convinced in their own mind. That is a far cry from "remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy." Paul calls the Sabbath a shadow in Colossians 2:16-17. Again, exegesis must inform our theology.

5. We are not under the Law of Moses, but under the Law of Christ

The fifth distinctive of NCT regards its relation to law. If we are not under the law, does that mean we are lawless? No. We are no longer under the law of Moses, rather we are under the law of Christ. This phrase only occurs once in Scripture: Galatians 6:2, which reads, "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." Probably the most important passage for NCT is 1 Corinthians 9:20-21, which reads, "To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law." This helpful passage summarizes what NCT is all about. Paul is clear that he is not under the law (*nomos* meaning law of Moses), but he is not free from God's law. So we see that God's law is no longer equivalent to the Mosaic law but is now Christ's law. The law of Christ can be defined as those prescriptive principles drawn from the example and teaching of Jesus and his apostles (the central demand being love), which are meant to be worked out in specific situations by the guiding influence and empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

6. All in the New Covenant Community Have the Holy Spirit

The sixth distinctive belief is the nature of the new covenant community. In the New Covenant, unlike the Old, every member is fully forgiven and every member has the Spirit. This is another way of saying they are all *believers*. The prophets looked forward to a day when God would pour out his Spirit from on high (Ezek. 36-37, Joel 2, Isa. 32:15, 44:3). This is one of the major differences between Israel and the church. Not all within Israel had the Spirit. All within the new covenant community do.

NCT does not say that Israel=church as CT does. Neither do we make a radical distinction between Israel and the Church as DT does. Again, Jesus is the hermeneutical key! NCT is consistently Christocentric. The NT depiction is Israel=Jesus=church. Believers are considered the offspring of Abraham (i.e., Israel) by being united to Jesus. Galatians 3:7 says, "Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham." Galatians 3:29 says, "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." Galatians 6:15-16 says, "Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means

anything; what counts is the new creation. Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule—to the Israel of God” (cf. Phil. 3:2-3, Rom. 2:28-29). All of the promises of God are *yes* in Christ Jesus (2 Cor. 1:20).