

INTRODUCTION TO NEW COVENANT THEOLOGY

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New Covenant Theology (NCT) is a relatively new system which, though not yet well defined, attempts to combine strengths of Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology and to eliminate the weak points of the two. Its founders have come from Reformed Baptist circles who reacted against key tenets of Covenant Theology in rejecting such doctrines as the Covenant of Redemption, the Covenant of Works, and the Covenant of Grace. The movement has a strong emphasis on study of the Scripture in attempting to derive a biblically based theology. For the most part, NCT's origins have been local churches rather than academic circles. Though its growth continues to be substantial, it has come about mostly through the channel of the Internet rather than works published through major evangelical publishing houses. Leaders of NCT include John Zens, John G. Reisinger, Fred G. Zaspel, Tom Wells, and Steve Lehrer. Among various programs promoting NCT are Providence Theological Seminary, Sound of Grace Ministries, The John Bunyan Conference, and In-Depth Studies. The progress of NCT's growth is most obvious in the number of churches that have adopted the movement's approach to Scripture, but the impact on mainstream evangelicalism has been minimal because of a lack of exposure through mainstream publishers, a lack of full endorsement by a noted evangelical scholar, its doctrinal differences from well-known historic documents of Covenant Theology, its newness historically, and its failure to produce a published systematic or biblical theology. NCT's most notable peculiarities include a rejection of Covenant Theology's superstructure, its granting of priority of the NT over the OT, its rejection of OT ethical standards for Christians, and its rejection of infant baptism and the distinction between the visible and invisible church.

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The Hall of Fame Baseball player and "noted philosopher," Yogi Berra,

once said, “When you come to a fork in the road, take it.”¹ In a nutshell this perhaps summarizes the developing theological system known as New Covenant Theology (hereafter NCT). While relatively anonymous within the larger sphere of evangelicalism,² NCT has nonetheless been experiencing slow but steady growth both in numbers and influence since its inception in the late 1970s.³

NCT is described by most of the leaders within the movement as an attempt to “find a middle road” between traditional Covenant Theology and Dispensational Theology. As NCT leader Fred Zaspel notes,

We are not satisfied with the simple “one covenant—two administrations” idea of Covenant Theology. In our judgment this results in a rather “flat” reading of Scripture which fails to appreciate the advance, the distinctively “new” character of this Messianic age. Nor are we satisfied with the over-compartmentalizing tendency of Dispensational Theology.⁴

Another NCT leader, John G. Reisinger states most firmly,

Dispensationalism drives a wedge between the OT and the NT and never the twain shall meet as specific promise (OT) and identical fulfillment (NT); and Covenant Theology flattens the whole Bible out into one covenant where there is no real and vital distinction between either the Old and New Covenants or Israel and the church.⁵

Reisinger also states,

As New Covenant Theologians, we believe that historic Dispensationalism, as a system is not biblical (even though it contains truth and is held by many godly men) simply because its basic presuppositions are either wrongly assumed or wrongly deduced from their theological system. We are also convinced that Covenant Theology, as a system, is just as unscriptural for the same reasons (even though it has truth and many godly exponents). Until recently most people felt that one had to believe one or the other of

¹Yogi Berra (with Dave Kaplan), *When You Come to a Fork in the Road, Take It!* (New York: Hyperion Books, 2002). See also Yogi Berra (with Dave Kaplan), *What Time Is It? You Mean Now?* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 2003).

²As of this time there are no articles in any standard theological reference work detailing NCT. Even the most recent edition of the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Walter A. Elwell, ed., 2d ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997, 2003]) has no reference to the movement.

³“Inception” is used here somewhat loosely. As this article will discuss, NCT is perhaps better described as a convergence of the works of several different individuals that has begun the process of evolving into a coherent and cohesive theological system; however it is fair to say that NCT has yet to arrive at either destination.

⁴Fred G. Zaspel, “A Brief Explanation of ‘New Covenant Theology’” (online at www.biblicalstudies.com/bstudy/hermenutics/nct.htm, accessed 3 Feb 2007).

⁵John G. Reisinger. *Abraham's Four Seeds* (Frederick, Md.: New Covenant Media, 1998) 19.

these two systems.⁶

This article presents an introduction and overview of NCT. It will examine this movement in the following areas: *The Persona and Personalities of NCT*, *The Programs and Progress of NCT*, and *The Peculiar Positions of NCT*. It will also interact briefly with some of the positions that NCT has carved out and examine briefly whether or not this “third way” has actually been forged.

1. The Persona and Personalities of NCT

Though examining the persona before the personalities responsible for the movement may seem to be a reversal of the investigative process, understanding the persona and the sphere in which NCT is evolving will make the role of individual personalities much more coherent.

A. The Persona of NCT

To begin, at its theological core NCT began within the Reformed Baptist movement. Although NCT rejects the key distinctive of the Reformed Baptist position, namely the cardinal features of Covenant Theology, all the foundational or first-generation contributors to NCT and many who have since identified with it have their roots in Reformed Baptist circles. It is a reactionary movement against the key aspects of Covenant Theology, that is, the Covenant of Redemption, the Covenant of Works, and the Covenant of Grace. Seemingly, it also is a reaction against a real or perceived dilution of traditional Baptist distinctives that the adoption of Covenant Theology has brought into Reformed Baptist circles, such as the adoption of Covenant Theology’s positions on a “visible” and “invisible” church. Reisinger calls this a “theological creation that allows a congregation to deliberately and consciously include both believers and known unbelievers in its membership.”⁷

On a positive note, NCT is not heterodox or cultic at any level.⁸ Mainstream NCT adherents and organizations must be viewed as fellow Christians operating within the larger sphere of evangelicalism. It is characterized by and large as a movement dedicated to an Acts 17:11 approach to studying the Scripture and

⁶Ibid, ii.

⁷Ibid., 109.

⁸As with all groups or movements, exceptions always occur. Many on the Internet affirm or identify themselves with NCT but have odd or extreme views. For instance, one proponent of NCT states on his Web page concerning Charles H. Spurgeon, “Indeed, this Covenant Theology misuse of law reveals that Spurgeon knew absolutely nothing about the gospel, flowing oratory notwithstanding.” Elsewhere in his site he labels Spurgeon a “false teacher.” Gary Anderson, “Spurgeon: Prince of Law Preachers” (On line at www.newcovenanttheology.com/spurgeon.html, accessed 7/20/2007). In his section on “Dispensationalism,” he also states, “Dispensationalism is no less a false gospel than is Covenant Theology” (on line at www.newcovenanttheology.com/dispensation.html, accessed on 7/20/2007). This kind of thought, fortunately, does not represent mainstream NCT.

developing theology from the text.⁹ By its own claim, it is a movement that seeks to examine the Scripture and develop a biblically based theology. As Volker states, "One must always base his interpretation on the use of Scripture in context and not by imposing his theological system on the text."¹⁰ Douglas Moo, in the foreword to Wells' and Zaspel's book *New Covenant Theology*, acknowledges the same approach by NCT and calls their work "a fine representation of this new biblical theology tradition."¹¹

An additional, and important, aspect of the persona of NCT is that it represents largely a "grassroots" movement centered in the local church. What this means is that NCT is not a movement that began in seminaries or the academy and worked its way "down" into the churches. It began in local churches and has slowly moved its way up in the academic world.

The final, and most important, feature of the persona of NCT is that it is a "theology of the Internet." It is no coincidence that the development and growth of the Internet and the development and growth of NCT have paralleled each other. Though individuals within NCT have produced a large amount of written material, so far it has all been self-published. NCT authors and materials are not represented in the catalogues of any mainstream evangelical publisher. The rather isolated works of different individuals in varied locations, operating for about a 20-year period, simply would not have coalesced into an organized movement without the vehicle of the Internet to bring them together.

B. The Personalities of NCT

Among NCT's many proponents, at least five have been responsible for the creation and initial propagation of NCT. They are individuals whose written contributions to the movement have been foundational and defining. The first four can be viewed as the "fathers" of the movement, and the last represents the new or second generation of NCT.

Jon Zens is not a prime mover at this time within NCT, but he really started the movement. Zens is one of the elders at Word of Life Church in St. Croix Falls, Wisconsin. He has a B.A. from Covenant College and an M.Div. from Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia. He was a pastor in Reformed Baptist churches in Nashville, Tennessee, and Malin, Oregon. He has published his own journal,

⁹Which, of course, is not to say that those of the Covenant Theology and Dispensational theological systems would not affirm the same.

¹⁰Geoff Volker, "Foreword" to *New Covenant Theology: Questions Answered*, by Steve Lehrer (by the author, 2006) 14.

¹¹Douglas J. Moo, "Foreword," in *New Covenant Theology*, by Tom Wells and Fred Zaspel (Frederick, Md.: New Covenant Media, 2002) xiii.

formerly called *Baptist Reformation Review* and now called *Searching Together*.¹² His major contribution to NCT was an article in his journal, “Is There a Covenant of Grace,”¹³ written in 1977. It was Zens who appears to have coined the term “New Covenant Theology” in 1981 in a compilation of articles from his journal, where he stated, “[I]t is my prayer that we will seek only the glory of Christ as we work towards a New Covenant Theology.”¹⁴ Zens has published over 100 articles and several books; however, except for two articles, all were published in his journal. This is not a criticism of Zens, but an observation of a tendency common to NCT.

The next and probably the most significant and influential individual in NCT, is John G. Reisinger. Reisinger describes himself as evangelist and Bible conference speaker. He graduated from Lancaster Bible College and studied at Bucknell University. He founded and operates *Sound of Grace Ministries* (online at www.soundofgrace.org) and New Covenant Media, the main publishing outlet for NCT materials. Both ministries operate under the auspices of the Grace New Covenant Church of Walkersville, Maryland. Reisinger is a prolific author and speaker, and in many respects has been the “face” of NCT for about 20 years. His book, *Abraham’s Four Seeds*,¹⁵ is a seminal work for NCT. Two other important works of Reisinger are his exposition of the Sermon on the Mount, *But I Say Unto You*,¹⁶ and his discussion of the Ten Commandments, *Tablets of Stone*.¹⁷ Reisinger, now 83, resides in Rochester, New York, with much of his direct-ministry oversight having been passed to others.

Fred G. Zaspel serves as the pastor of the Cornerstone Church of Skippack, Pennsylvania, and is now probably the most widely acknowledged leader within NCT. For many years he was pastor at the Word of Life Baptist Church in Pottsville, Pennsylvania (his brother, Paul Zaspel is now the pastor). Zaspel has studied widely, at Bob Jones University, Denver Seminary, Valley Baptist Theological Seminary, and has his Th. M. from Biblical Theological Seminary in Hatfield, Pennsylvania. He has two M.A. degrees along with his Th.M. and is a Ph.D. candidate. His Th.M. thesis at Biblical Seminary¹⁸ in 1994 formed the basis of several chapters in his major contribution to NCT literature, *New Covenant Theology: Description, Definition,*

¹²The name change from *Baptist Reformation Review* to *Searching Together* occurred in 1981 with Volume 11, No. 3. The publication maintained continuity by continuing the same number sequence.

¹³Jon Zens, “Is There a Covenant of Grace?” *Baptist Reformation Review* 7/3 (1977):45–53.

¹⁴John Zens, *Studies in Theology and Ethics* (Malin, Ore.: BREM, 1981), 1.

¹⁵See note 5.

¹⁶John G. Reisinger, *But I Say Unto You* (Southbridge, Mass.: Crowne Books, 1989).

¹⁷Reisinger, *Tablets of Stone* (Southbridge, Mass.: Crowne Publications, 1989).

¹⁸Fred G. Zaspel, “The Status of Mosaic Law in This Messianic Age: A Theological and Exegetical Analysis of Matthew 5:17-20” (unpublished Th.M. Thesis, Biblical Theological Seminary, Hatfield, Pa., 1994).

Defense, which he co-authored with Tom Wells.¹⁹ Zaspel was also the author of a pivotal article, "Divine Law: A New Covenant Perspective."²⁰ This article, along with the books by Reisinger, were the impetus for the most significant published response so far to NCT and its view of the OT law from a Reformed Baptist leader.²¹ Zaspel speaks regularly at NCT conferences, is active in Internet discussion groups, and is very influential in NCT circles.

Tom Wells, the co-author of *New Covenant Theology: Description, Definition, Defense* with Zaspel, has been a pastor at The King's Chapel in West Chester, Ohio, for 28 years. Though having a lower profile than the others mentioned, he is highly respected within the movement, has authored several books, and is a regular conference speaker for NCT events.

Representing what might be called the "second generation" of NCT, Steve Lehrer is one the pastors at New Covenant Bible Fellowship in Tempe, Arizona. He has an M.A. in Theology from Westminster Seminary in Escondido, California. Along with Geoff Volker and Michael Feather, his ministry has produced the most recent literature and has an extensive presence on the Internet. For several years, Lehrer was the editor of *The Journal of New Covenant Theology*, which was published in printed form from 2003 to 2005 and then was transferred to an online publication. His recent book, *New Covenant Theology: Questions Answered*,²² has been a major work within NCT. His church and ministry also produced *The New Covenant Statement of Faith*,²³ a 20-page document which is the first real detailed positional statement to give at least an outline of a systematic theology from an NCT perspective.²⁴

A number of other important individuals function within NCT, but these five are the most notable, at least in terms of public ministry

¹⁹Tom Wells and Fred Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology: Description, Definition, Defense* (Frederick, Md.: New Covenant Media, 2002).

²⁰Fred G. Zaspel, "Divine Law: A New Covenant Perspective," *Reformation and Revival* 6/3 (Summer 1997):145–69. At one time *Reformation and Revival* journal, operated by John H. Armstrong, was a leading outlet for NCT thought, but Armstrong's theological perspective continued to evolve and his journal no longer reflects NCT thought.

²¹Richard C. Barcellos, *In Defense of the Decalogue: A Critique of New Covenant Theology*. (Enumclaw, Wash/: WinePress, 2001).

²²Steve Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology: Questions Answered* (by the author, 2006).

²³The Elders of New Covenant Bible Fellowship, "The New Covenant Confession of Faith" (online at <http://www.ncbf.net/PDF/confession.pdf>, accessed 2/3/2007).

²⁴Some within NCT have criticized the work of Lehrer and his associates for some of its doctrinal positions, however.

II. The Programs and Progress of NCT

NCT, because of its persona, has been somewhat slow to develop, and its influence, although growing, is not widespread. All of its written works have been through its ministry-based publishing efforts and on the Internet through organizational Web pages. However, many churches have begun to adopt the tenets of NCT, and NCT groups have several organized programs that are reaching into the larger evangelical world. Four of these programs are particularly noteworthy.

A. NCT Programs

The most recent and, for the growth of the movement, perhaps the most important is Providence Theological Seminary. Located in Colorado Springs, it is a new school with the following purpose:

The doctrinal reason for PTS can be summed up in the three phrases: New Covenant Theology (NCT); the Doctrines of Grace; and Baptist Ecclesiology. The latter two areas are taught in other Christian institutions of higher learning. But the first area of emphasis, NCT, is not widely and openly taught in the American evangelical educational system. Not to be detached from holiness of life, the focus of NCT is upon Christ as revealed in the whole counsel of God inscripturated in the 66 books of the Holy Bible. Instruction is grounded upon the exegetical, biblical-theological and systematic teaching of principles of biblical interpretation (hermeneutic). The hermeneutic is based upon the way that the Lord Jesus and the writers of the New Covenant Scriptures understood and explained the fulfillment of the final revelation of God's eternal redemptive purpose. In brief, this is what is meant by the term New Covenant Theology.²⁵

The president of the faculty, Gary D. Long, received his Th.D. from Dallas Seminary in historical theology (1972) and has been an important theological writer for NCT. The school is small and lists only three faculty members, but it represents the first attempt to train pastors within the framework of an NCT perspective.

Sound of Grace Ministries (online at www.soundofgrace.com/) is the Internet window into the ministries and works of John G. Reisinger and others. The New Covenant Media Bookstore and other resources are located at this site, along with a schedule of other conferences. The Sound of Grace Web page provides links to a vast amount of free and high quality audio and written resources as well as links to likeminded ministries. Also published and available at this site is the *Sound of Grace* e-journal.

Perhaps the key ministry for NCT as far as reaching into the evangelical world has been The John Bunyan Conference (online at www.bunyanconf.com/). This is an annual Bible conference which has been in operation for 23 years. The conference has a number of NCT leaders as speakers, but it often has other noted

²⁵Providence Theological Seminary, "Programs and Purpose" (online at www.ptsc.org/ptsc/generalinfo.htm, accessed 5/10/2007).

evangelical scholars who do not embrace NCT. In the past, conference speakers have included S. Lewis Johnson, D. A. Carson, Douglas Moo, Jerry Bridges, Russell Moore, and Bruce Ware. The conference was begun by John Reisinger and in 1994 Fred Zaspel became the host.

Begun as a campus ministry at Arizona State University in 1983, In-Depth Studies (online at www.ids.org) is something of an umbrella ministry operated by Steve Lehrer, Geoff Volker, and Michael Feather. The website has articles, audio files, and information about their NCT-based ministry (conferences, publications, etc.). This represents the most sophisticated Internet presence for an NCT ministry. Along with the features already mentioned, it has interactive study programs, a regular blog, and a SKYPE live teaching feature. This ministry operates in conjunction with New Covenant Bible Fellowship Church of Tempe, Arizona.

B. *NCT Progress*

The progress of NCT can be seen in the number of churches that are counted as adherents or partners.

Reisinger's *Sound of Grace* ministry lists a church, "provided it believes and teaches the necessity of the New Birth, Believer's Baptism and the Doctrines of Grace as understood within the Reformed Baptist tradition and does not unkindly disparage those churches and brethren who have fellowship with *Sound of Grace* or who promote New Covenant Theology."²⁶ His ministry lists over 100 churches in the United States, Great Britain, Canada, and Australia. Lehrer's ministry counts about five churches affiliated with them and additional ministries in nine European and Eastern European countries, all of whom embrace NCT.

Despite the emergence of a seminary dedicated to NCT, the overall progress of NCT into the mainstream of evangelicalism has been significantly hindered by several factors alluded to above. Those factors include:

- A lack of publications by mainstream evangelical publishers. The tendency for NCT writers thus far has been either to self-publish (individually or in their small publishing ventures) or to make materials available on the Internet. A lack of distribution by large publishing houses often causes their materials to go unnoticed and thus not widely interacted with. College, university, and seminary libraries frequently do not have NCT materials in their collections. For example, only 12 schools list Reisinger's *Abraham's Four Seeds* in their collection. Only 19 schools list having the Wells and Zaspel book, *New Covenant Theology*. Only 3 schools list having Lehrer's, *New Covenant Theology: Questions and Answers*. To give a comparative example, George Eldon Ladd's *A Theology of the New*

²⁶Sound of Grace Church Directory (online at www.soundofgrace.com/directory.htm, accessed 1/20/2007). All the churches listed do not necessarily embrace NCT, but a large percentage of them do.

Testament,²⁷ is currently held by 718 different academic libraries.²⁸

- A lack of any noted evangelical scholar or leader willing to affirm belief in NCT as a system. Though noted theologians such as D. A. Carson and Douglas Moo have made affirmative statements about some NCT works and spoken at their conferences, no high-profile evangelical leader has publicly embraced NCT as a system.
- Theologically, NCT is obviously acceptable only in a church that is not bound by a confession such as the *Westminster Confession*, the *London Baptist Confession*, or a local doctrinal statement that would affirm Covenant Theology. Also, any church that firmly embraces a Dispensational perspective would not find NCT compatible with its doctrinal statement.
- The relative newness of the system and lack of precedent in church history.
- However, the key issue that has been holding NCT back from advancing further is a lack of a published systematic or biblical theology that at least a significant percentage of NCT adherents would embrace.²⁹ Though a general agreement on the basic concepts of NCT exists, a clearly articulated theology has not been forthcoming. When asked what the *sine qua non* of NCT is, Zaspel replied, "I'm not sure NCT can be reduced to that level."³⁰

NCT proponents have been active and innovative in their use of the Internet and their self-publishing efforts have been impressive, given their resources. The addition of a theological seminary with NCT as a core belief is also immensely beneficial to the movement, as are their conference ministries. The future progress of NCT is likely connected to the development of a completely coherent and cohesive biblical system that has broad support of those currently identified with NCT. A clear, agreed-upon definition of what exactly NCT is (and is not) has, to this point, been elusive.

III. The Particular Positions of NCT

NCT is not a monolithic system and some expressions of it are less cohesive than others. As previously noted, NCT began as a reaction on the part of some Reformed Baptists against the basic tenets of Covenant Theology, namely the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace. At the same time, the formulators of NCT were not willing to take the other traditional road, namely, Dispensational Theology. Since all of the NCT formulators have come from a background of Covenant Theology (primarily as stated in the Reformed Baptist tradition and the 1689 London Confession), most of their work has been in arguments against the

²⁷George Eldon Ladd. *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973, 1993).

²⁸Based on a search of the OCLC *World Cat* Online database of Library catalogues in the United States, Canada, and Europe, search performed on 7/10/2007.

²⁹See also Barcellos, *Defense* 7-8.

³⁰Fred Zaspel, a telephone conversation with this writer on 9/7/2004.

tenets of that system and the inconsistencies between the traditional Baptist distinctives and Covenant Theology.

NCT has been characterized as being to Covenant Theology what Progressive Dispensationalism is to Traditional or Classic Dispensationalism. However, this assessment is not accurate. Despite its differences with the traditional or classic position, Progressive Dispensationalism still retains a measure of the core Israel-church discontinuity with the resulting ecclesiological and eschatological schemes essentially intact. On the other hand, NCT entirely abandons all the distinctive fundamentals of Covenant Theology, so that no connection remains or is possible.³¹

NCT is not a unified movement, but Wells sums up nicely the main goal of all NCT proponents when he states,

We do have a decided goal, however. It is to join together three things: the logical priority of the NT over the Old, the logical priority of Lord Jesus over his godly predecessors, and the logical priority of the theology of the text over our own theologies and those of others.³²

Following Wells, despite some variation in how different NCT proponents elucidate their views and some differences of opinion on some points; by and large, NCT is characterized by the following.

A. The Rejection of the Superstructure of Covenant Theology

First and foremost, NCT is founded on its central precept that the covenants of Covenant Theology: the Covenant of Redemption, the Covenant of Works, and the Covenant of Grace are unbiblical and are to be rejected. Reisinger states the overall objection, “Covenant Theology flattens the whole Bible out into one covenant where there is no real and vital distinction between either the Old and New Covenants or Israel and the Church.”³³

Many Covenant theologians begin their theological process with the Covenant of Redemption. Regarding this covenant Zens states,

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 God-

³¹Though Progressive Dispensationalism takes some hermeneutical paths that are different from Classic or Traditional Dispensationalism, it still retains the essential features of Dispensationalism. NCT, on the other hand, abandons both the superstructure and most of the key outworkings of Covenant Theology while retaining a common hermeneutical approach as does Covenant Theology.

³²Tom Wells, “The Christian Appeal of a New Covenant Theology,” in *New Covenant Theology* (Frederick, Md.: New Covenant Media, 2002) 22.

³³Reisinger, *Four Seeds* 19.

head—among themselves or to elect sinners—a “covenant.”³⁴

Lehrer also declares, “[W]e do not believe it is wise to refer to God’s plan to save a people in eternity past as a ‘covenant.’”³⁵ Regarding this particular covenantal construct, Lehrer makes the following observation, which becomes the cornerstone of most NCT arguments against Covenant Theology:

The reason we should only use the word “covenant” to describe events in Scripture that are actually called covenants is because of the importance of the word “covenant” in Scripture and the place of prominence the concept has in our theological systems. 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.³⁶

Regarding the Covenant of Works, Lehrer notes, “NCT disagrees with those who hold to a Covenant of Works with Adam.”³⁷ The “New Covenant Confession of Faith,” on which Lehrer collaborated, Article 20 on “The Law of God” states, “There is no record in Scripture of God making a Covenant of Works with Adam.”³⁸

Finally, regarding the pivotal Covenant of Grace, Wells and Zaspel state, “[N]evertheless, it now seems clear that a mistake has been made in speaking of this purpose as ‘the Covenant of Grace.’”³⁹ Also, Zens asks the rhetorical question, “But it must be asked, where is ‘covenant of grace’ revealed in the Bible?”⁴⁰

Regarding the “covenants” of Covenant Theology, Reisinger makes the NCT position absolutely clear when he states,

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 and biblical exegesis. Both of them were invented by theology as the necessary consequences of a theological system.⁴¹

³⁴Zens, “Is There a Covenant of Grace?” 48.

³⁵Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology* 37.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology* 40.

³⁸The Elders of New Covenant Bible Fellowship, “The New Covenant Confession of Faith” (online at www.ncbf.net/PDF/confession.pdf, accessed 2/3/2007).

³⁹Wells and Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology* 45.

⁴⁰Zens, “Is There a Covenant of Grace?” 52.

⁴¹Reisinger, *Four Seeds* 129 (emphasis in the original).

Whatever NCT is or may yet become, beyond dispute, without this distinctive rejection of the superstructure of Covenant Theology, New Covenant Theology as a theological construct would not exist.

B. The Priority of the New Testament over the Old Testament

Even though NCT rejects the structure of Covenant Theology, it nonetheless retains the basic hermeneutical concept of the system. As previously quoted from Wells, this is “the logical priority of the NT over OT.”⁴² This is the driving force in NCT’s interpretation of Scripture. According to Lehrer the OT is to be read and interpreted “through the lens of the New Covenant Scriptures.”⁴³ For Lehrer and other NCT writers, even the OT context is superseded by the New Covenant Scriptures. As he states,

It seems that to understand the work of Christ (which is the New Covenant) as applying to ethnic Israel because the Old Covenant context demands it, makes a fundamental mistake in biblical interpretation. The mistake is reading the New Testament through the lens of the Old rather than the other way around.⁴⁴

NCT authors have a tendency across the board to utilize the phrase, “New Covenant Scriptures” instead of New Testament, which Lehrer explains in the following manner:

I say New Covenant rather than New Testament Scriptures because the Gospels are a swing period in which Christ is under the Old Covenant, which was still in effect (Galatians 4:4) while simultaneously announcing the New Covenant. Therefore, the New Covenant Scriptures that serve as our sieve are the teaching passages of the epistles. They are no “more inspired” but they serve as the authoritative guide for the life of the believer today. This guidance includes authority over interpreting and applying truths found in the Old Testament Scriptures to our lives today.⁴⁵

This approach is the same as Hyper-Dispensationalists who teach that only certain portions of the NT are applicable for the believer today, as Blaising notes, “They relegate water baptism (and for some the Lord’s Supper) along with much of the Book of Acts and the general epistles to the intervening dispensation rendering them not directly relevant for the church today.”⁴⁶

Wells and Zaspel also affirm the same hermeneutical principle. As they

⁴²Wells, “Appeal” 22.

⁴³Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology* 202.

⁴⁴Ibid., 176.

⁴⁵Ibid., 202.

⁴⁶Craig L. Blaising, “Dispensation, Dispensationalism,” in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003) 345. See also, Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 1989) 523-24.

discuss their formulation of NCT, they first affirm,

The justification for works on NCT seems to be at least fivefold. First, it 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. The point seems self-evident, but for some of us it was nevertheless hard to arrive at.⁴⁷

They also state, "[T]he critical point here is this: NT revelation, due to its finality, must be allowed to speak first on every issue that it addresses. This point, of course, is a logical point."⁴⁸

This hermeneutical model is clearly in keeping with historic Covenantalism and is fundamentally flawed. Lehrer provides an excellent example of this when he states regarding Jer 31:31,

God says that He will make this New Covenant with physical Israel and Judah. If you read the verses that surround this text as I wrote it out above, it is crystal clear that this New Covenant, in its Old Testament context, is promised to the geo-political nation of Israel at some point in the future.⁴⁹

He then goes on to explain that this is not the proper way to interpret the text, but rather it must be remembered that the "New Covenant Scriptures" make it clear that "the promise of the New Covenant in Jeremiah that was made to the *picture* of the People of God is actually fulfilled in the *real* people of God (all believers, both Jews and Gentiles) through the work of Christ on the cross."⁵⁰ Of course, this hermeneutic means that Israel could not possibly have understood *any* significant portion of the OT. Though they may have thought the promises of Jeremiah 31 applied to their nation, that was not true.⁵¹ It also flies in the face of Neh 8:8, where Ezra the scribe presented the portion of the OT to a Jewish audience "so that they understood the reading." If the NCT hermeneutic is true, then Ezra could not possibly have accomplished this; and Nehemiah, in his inspired and inerrant account of the event, only thought that he did.

C. The Rejection of the Old Covenant as Ethically Binding on Christians

Another major concept in NCT is that the Mosaic Law (Old Covenant) has no theological, legal, ethical, or binding influence on the Christian in the New Covenant era. The traditional divisions of the Law into Moral, Civil, and Ceremonial

⁴⁷Wells and Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology* 1.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 7–8.

⁴⁹Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology* 170.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 174 (emphasis in the original).

⁵¹For further analysis of a portion of Jeremiah 31, see Dennis M. Swanson, "The Expansion of Jerusalem in Jeremiah 31:38-40: Never, Already, or Not Yet," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 17/1 (Spring 2006):17-34.

(as understood by Covenant Theology) also have no biblical warrant.

The Mosaic Law was given to an unbelieving people and serves only to condemn. This is also important to recognize. Israel in the OT were, by and large, an unbelieving people. They have no future and no promise, and never did! In many ways Israel only serves as a bad example. As already noted, for NCT Israel is only a “picture of the People of God.”⁵²

Regarding a practical outworking for the Christian life, NCT affirms that the Christian is required to obey only the “Law of Christ,” that is, those issues of conduct that have been detailed in the New Covenant Scriptures. That causes some ethical problems for NCT. Many prohibitions in the OT are not repeated in the NT. The most common example is the prohibition against marrying one’s own sister. Since all states in the United States have specific laws against sibling marriage, NCT affirms that the principle of Romans 13 applies to the Christian, including the requirement to be submissive to the governing authorities. However, if no civil law were in place, as Lehrer is forced to admit, “[I]t seems that if you and your sister are both believers and you live in a country that deems marriage between siblings to be a lawful practice, then your marriage would be holy in God’s sight.”⁵³

D. Other Distinctive Positions of NCT

Along with the rejection of the superstructure of Covenant Theology, several other important features of Covenant Theology are rejected. Infant baptism, Sunday as Sabbath, along with tithing, are viewed as remnants of the Old Covenant system that some Christians have mistakenly carried over into the New Covenant era. Additionally, the concept of the “visible” and “invisible” church, as used by Covenant Theology, is a “theological creation that allows a congregation to deliberately and consciously include both believers and known unbelievers in its membership.”⁵⁴ Lehrer and others in NCT also reject the Doctrine of the Imputation of the Active Obedience of Christ; calling it a “Sacred Cow of Covenant Theology.”⁵⁵ This position is not universally held within NCT, though, and others, such as Gary D. Long and Gregory A. Van Court of the Providence Theological Seminary, have

⁵²Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology* 174. In terms of eschatology, no unified millennial position exists among NCT adherents. Though amillennialism is certainly dominant, premillennialism and postmillennialism are also represented. Long has created what he calls, “New Covenant Non-Premillennialism” (Gary D. Long, *Context: Evangelical Views of the Millennium Examined* [by the author, 2002]). However, NCT has unanimity that there is no future for the nation of Israel as a distinct entity. All OT promises to Israel are fulfilled in the church, the “real” people of God.

⁵³Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology* 155.

⁵⁴Reisinger, *Four Seeds* 109. Sunday as Sabbath and the concept of the “visible and invisible” church also puts NCT at odds with most Reformed Baptists.

⁵⁵Steve Lehrer and Geoff Volker, “The Imputation of the Active Obedience of Christ” (online at www.ids.org/pdf/classic/imputation.pdf, accessed on 5/10/2007).

been critical of Lehrer on this point.⁵⁶

Conclusion

Other articles in this series will examine in closer detail the key aspects of NCT, but it is clear that the movement represents an honest attempt to examine the Scripture and apply it properly to the life of believers. However, although much about NCT is commendable, we can readily affirm much is dubious at best. Even Wells and Zaspel admit that the outworking of NCT has many questions and that “it is too soon to know how these difficulties will be reconciled.”⁵⁷ NCT is attempting to create a “third way” between Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology, but they have not as yet reached that goal and with Yogi Berra are still standing at that fork in the road.

⁵⁶Gregory A. Van Court, “The Obedience of Christ: A Response to Geoff Volker and Steve Lehrer” (online at www.ptsc.org/ptsco/theobedienceofchrist.pdf, accessed on 5/10/2007).

⁵⁷Wells and Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology* 4.