

What Is New Covenant Theology? – full notes

1. PAUSE! Reflect on speaking about these issues – God’s condescension!

- a) The main article of theology is God Himself, not covenants.
- b) Consider these things soberly, knowing some of them are “hard to understand” (2 Pet. 3:16)

2. What is NCT?

- a) Covenant: Graeme Goldsworthy: “God’s people in God’s place under God’s rule and blessing.” IOW: Scott Swain: “Whereas God exercises sovereign ‘dominion’ over all creatures, God exercises sovereign ‘government’ over creatures made in his image...[covenant is] an instrument of God’s sovereign government, whereby he possesses and moves creatures made in his image **toward the ends** [telos] he has appointed for them.”
 - i. Summarize CoW, CoG, CoR, etc.
- b) Barcellos: “a [non-monolithic] movement within conservative, Evangelical, and Calvinistic Baptist circles, which seeks to steer a middle road between traditional CT [over continuity] and Dispensationalist Theology [over discontinuity].”
 - i. Two main areas of concern: ecclesiology (Israel/Church) and ethics (law/grace/sanctification)
- c) Allure: Heavy emphasis on biblicism
 - i. NCT charges CT and DT of reading theology into the text
 - ii. “commitment to the primacy of biblical theology for theological method, convinced that biblical theology provides the best hermeneutical strategy for allowing Holy Scripture’s distinctive literary forms and redemptive-historical shape to exercise supreme authority over the church’s doctrine and life.” – Swain
 - iii. “in its extreme form, biblicism is the attempt to read Scripture in isolation...from the rest of Scripture and in isolation from the ecumenical creeds and the confessions produced by the various churches...to interpret Scripture as if no one has ever read it before. It attempts to interpret Scripture in isolation from the history of the church and especially the history of interpretation...to interpret Scripture in isolation from systematic theology or apart from one or more of the other departments of theology.” – RSC

3. What are their main tenets?

- a) Blake White
 - i. One plan of God centered in Jesus Christ
 1. “God’s one, eternal plan unfolds in history through a plurality of interrelated covenants, starting with Adam and creation and culminating in Christ and the new covenant.” – Wells
 - ii. The OT should be interpreted in light of the NT
 1. Allure: “Christotelic hermeneutic”/biblical-theological – only that which is prescribed by Christ and the apostles is binding on the Christian as covenant law.
 - iii. The OC was temporary by divine design: including the Decalogue, which is now only for wisdom
 1. OC as prophecy of Christ and as wisdom for the NC people (Rosner, non-NCT)
 - iv. No tripartite division of the law
 1. One indivisible unit. John Reisinger: “The Ten Commandments, as the [Old] covenant document, was given only to the nation Israel.”
 2. Blake White: “all that God commands is moral, in the sense that it would have been immoral for an Israelite to disobey any command of God regardless of its ‘classification.’”
 3. Gary Long: absolute (equivalent of moral) law and covenantal (positive) law – NCTs argue that what CTs call moral is really covenantal
 - v. Allure: We are not under the law of Moses but under the law of Christ (1 Cor. 9:21)
 1. “The law as law-covenant has been abolished, the law is still of value for Christian conduct as

Scripture and as wisdom" – Brian Rosner (non NCT)

2. "[OC is] an obsolete Jewish legal code, from which Christians are exempt" – Rosner
- vi. All in the NC have the Holy Spirit (reason why NCT is strictly a Baptist group)
 1. The church came into being only when Christ inaugurated the NC; OC ppl mixed, not NC

4. What are their main scriptural references?

- a) Jer. 31:31-34 – note: "I will put MY law and write IT" – NCT: not that of Moses
 - i. Prophetic idiom: hyperbole "from the least to the greatest" (6:9); so no teachers (54:13 w Jn. 6:45)?
 - ii. Lev. 18:5; Deut. 30 ("all your heart and all your soul" NOT a NC thing only!)
 - iii. Surrounding context of Jer. 31 – Emmanuel principle: Gen. 17:7-8; Ex. 6; David, Rev. 21
 1. Adamic and Abrahamic multiplication language (Jer. 30:19, Gen. 17:7-8)
 - iii. Heb. 8:8-13, 10:16-17—sure the Mosaic administration is done, but the law not unique to him
 - iv. Is God saying He would write a completely new set of laws, not revealed to Adam or Israel ever before, at the coming of Christ? Which law?
 - v. Ex. 31:18 – God authors His law ("finger of God") and imprints it in the heart of His ppl in NC
 1. "Antecedent and subsequent revelation force us to conclude the law of God was written by God on stone and the heart."
 2. "Decalogue first written by God and then written by Moses" (!).
 3. "Change is not from one law to another law, but from stone to hearts."
 4. "If we allow antecedent OT theology to inform the writer, the original audience, and all subsequent hearers, the only plausible answer to the question concerning the identity of the law is that it must be the same law God Himself wrote previously. This is the natural assumption of the text."
- b) 1 Cor. 9:21 – they make a big deal of the Gk. "in-lawed" to Christ
- c) Gal. 6:2 (bear one another...fulfill law of Christ)
- d) Matt. 5:17-20 (not abolish but fulfill)
 - i. 5:21-48 – Reisinger's But I Say Unto You – BIG passage for NCT, arguing that here Christ nullifies Moses and inaugurates His own law that is a higher standard than Moses
- e) Deut. 18:15-19 (greater prophet coming)
- f) Gal. 3:7,9,26-29 (those of faith sons of Abraham, no separations, true sons of Abraham those of faith)
 - i. The whole chapter proves that Abrahamic covenant was not abolished by the breaking of Mosaic because it's always been by faith! By the unilateral promise from God to Abraham! Rom. 10:5-12
- g) Eph. 2:14-15 (abolishing law of commandments)

5. Why does it matter?

- a) New kid on the block: they tend to dismiss this (because sola scriptura after all); claim that the formulation is new but its distinctive tenets are "as old as the New Testament" (Gary Long)
 - i. Can't brush this off! Yes sola scriptura, but if the church for her whole existence has missed this formulation until NCT came along, what does that say of God's ability to preserve His word?
- b) Ecclesiological identity: who are we? How does that inform how we then live?
- c) Hermeneutics: Integrity, unity, and consistency of the entire text of Scripture throughout redemptive history – the very character of God is on the line (Deut. 6:4; 1 Cor. 8:4-6)
 - i. Is the triune work a uniquely NC/NT thing? No! Rom. 8:14; Is. 63:11; 1 Cor. 3:16; Jude 5; Hag. 2:5; 1 Cor. 10:1-4, 12:13; Deut. 6:4; 1 Cor. 8:4-6
 - ii. "The difference between the work of Christ and the Spirit within the old covenant and their work within the new covenant is relative, not absolute; redemptive-historical, not categorical."—Swain
- d) Marcionism: How shall we then live? Is the OT merely an example to follow here and there?
 - i. To be clear: NCTs are not Marcionites; but to see OT as merely wisdom does not yield concrete, objective, unchanging precepts for all Christians in all times and places

6. Response

- a) Law and gospel for both Jew and Gentile
 - i. NCT speaks of the law almost as if it was carnal, when we are told the opposite in Rom. 7:14 (it is spiritual – of the Spirit). The fault is not in the law, or the covenant it was given in, but in the covenant *breakers* (Heb. 8:8-11)
 - ii. Decalogue doesn't start with "you shall not," but with "I am the LORD your God who..."
 - iii. Law not antithetical to NC but juxtaposed
 - iv. Rom. 2:14 "The situations of the Jew and of the Gentile, then, are formally but not materially different. Both stand under "law" in some form, are violators of this "law," and therefore stand accountable to its sanctions and penalties." – Guy Waters
 - v. NCT's DT comes out: their view of Moses and Christ must mean that OT saints were saved by works until Christ came and now that has changed to faith. Is love and mercy and grace a uniquely NC thing? Was the OC void of these?
 - vi. "[I]f one asks himself what the material content is of the expression 'bound to the law of Christ' (1 Cor 9:21), the answer will lie in the fact that Christ suo modo represents the law of God and thus the law of Moses. Not only does Christ by his Spirit bring about a new bond to the law in the hearts of believers, whereby the law retains its force as the expression of the will of God in the New Covenant (Jer. 31:33; cf. 2 Cor. 3:3), but Christ also represents the new standard of judgment as to what "has had its day" in the law and what has abiding validity (Col. 2:17). Finally, one should point out the interpretation of the law given by Christ, to which Paul appeals in more than one place (cf. 1 Cor 7:10ff.), which determines the expression of Galatians 6:2 as well ... There can thus be no doubt whatever that the category of the law has not been abrogated with Christ's advent, but rather has been maintained and interpreted in its radical sense ("fulfill"; Matt. 5:17); on the other hand, that the church no longer has to do with the law in any other way than in Christ and thus is *ennomos Christou*." – Ridderbos
 1. "Ephesians 5 is essentially a commentary and application of the Ten Commandments and Paul explicitly quotes the 5th commandment in Ephesians 6:2–3. According to Romans 7:7 the 9th commandment has abiding validity. Galatians 5:15–6:10 is a commentary on and application of the Decalogue to the life of the Christian." – RSC
 - vii. Decalogue is the "royal law" Jas. 2:8-13
 - viii. Reformed and Lutherans are in agreement with the Decalogue as the norm of the Christian life (e.g.: Heidelberg 9 and 10)
 - ix. "the abiding validity of the Ten Commandments as the norm for the Christian life in the New Covenant, is not narrow, Reformed confessionalist, sectarian position...but rather a Patristic, Medieval, and Reformation consensus." – RSC
- b) Threefold use of the Law
 - i. WSC 19.3-7!
 - ii. "In the Pauline vocabulary, to be 'under the law' is to be under the demand of the law to produce personal and perfect obedience." - RSC
 - iii. God does not contradict himself in his self-revelation in Scripture: explains the different ways the law is spoken of (Pentateuch, Mosaic, etc.) – Is God in the OT at odds with Christ in the NT? Is Paul contradicting himself (Rom. 3:31 vs. 6:14)? Is David loving "the ministry of death" when he says he loves the law of the Lord? By no means!
 - iv. Doctrinal formulations presented in shorthand for convenience, not eisegesis
 - v. Pedagogical (expose sin and lead to Christ), civil (restrain society), moral/normative (how the believer ought to live)
 1. Normative: Can we keep it perfectly? Heidelberg 14. Why follow it? Heidelberg 15
- C) Judicial and ceremonial laws were meant to be temporary (Acts 10:9-16 Paul's sheet), not the moral law (Adam was to Matt. 22:37-40 – Long argues that it's the two commandments in that reference that are

“absolute law,” not the Decalogue). Decalogue is the moral law.

- a) Moral: Rom. 1:20, 2:14 (“work of the law..accuses or excuses them”); marriage Matt. 19:3-9; Sabbath Mk. 2:27-28; Ex. 20:8 (“remember”)
- b) NCT allows people to pick and choose from the moral law (4th commandment)

7. Recommended resources

- a) Richard Barcellos' *In Defense of the Decalogue* and *Getting the Garden Right*
- b) *Covenant Theology* edited by Guy Prentiss Waters chapter 26
- c) [Reformation21 article critiquing Brian Rosner's book *Paul and the Law: Keeping the Commandments of God*](#) (New Studies in Biblical Theology)
- d) [Pastor Chad Vegas' biblical theology review of Jeremiah 30-33](#)