

Where is Theology Going?

An Overview of New Covenant Theology

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INTRODUCTION

Many people falsely believe that Systematic Theology dates back to Augustine in the fourth century. The system of theology, called “Covenant Theology”, most often thought of as dating back that far. However, the history of theological systems is a relatively new theological study. It is only in the last four to five hundred years of development that the studies of theological systems have developed. The “church” has had to deal with different theological issues throughout history. Early in church history, the church battled over the Deity and Humanity of Christ, then the Trinity, and many other issues. During the Reformation,¹ many debated theology issues, such as salvation, and with the writing of Calvin’s Institutes, came the systematizing of many theological issues.

During the Reformation, there was a struggle between the State Church and a group called the “Anabaptists”. One reformer, Ulrich Zwingli, found himself defending the state church over the Anabaptists, even though he agreed with them on the issue of baptism. For centuries prior, many believed that baptism washed away sin, until the Anabaptist movement. Zwingli did not want to side with the Anabaptists, because of their belief in a separation of church and state. Put in a position to defend a view of infant baptism, he developed a new hermeneutic that eventually became a theological system, known as “Covenant Theology”. The new hermeneutic involved interpreting the Bible as a whole, with a common thread throughout both the Old Testament and New Testament. The common thread was a covenant of grace.²

A covenant of grace allowed Zwingli and other reformers who followed to replace circumcision with baptism as a sign of the covenant. Thus, avoiding the ties to the Anabaptist and not separating from the State Church, while making a change to the common thought of baptism. This new approach allowed Zwingli and others to reconcile their positions on baptism and other issues with the Bible.

A few hundred years later, some men meeting at the Niagara Falls Bible Conferences started to work on the issues of Eschatology. Out of these conferences was formalized the view of Premillennialism. Then with the work of John Darby and C. I. Scofield, came the formulation of the theological system known as Dispensationalism. In the 1960’s Charles Ryrie clarified the position to a great extent. Currently, some professors at Dallas Theological Seminary are working on another attempt to clarify Dispensationalism, called Progressive Dispensationalism.

Over most of the last century, there have been primarily two theology systems, Covenant Theology and Dispensational Theology. There has been much work in the area of Dispensationalism and now it seems that the same work is going on for those in Covenant Theology. In the later half of the 20th century, some have coined the term “New Covenant Theology”. This paper will give an overview of New Covenant Theology (NCT), its definition and its view of three key areas where proponents of New Covenant Theology see separation

between the previous two systems of theology (Covenant and Dispensational): hermeneutics, Israel and the church and law verse grace.

WHAT IS NEW COVENANT THEOLOGY

New Covenant Theology sees God's relationship with man as being administered through differing covenants that God makes with man. A definition of a covenant that New Covenant Theology accepts is a sovereignly administered bond, in which God enters into a covenantal relationship with man that is either a bond in blood or a bond of life and death³. Most of the proponents of New Covenant Theology are coming from Covenant Theology. New Covenant Theology makes great strides away from Covenant Theology and lands somewhere closer to Dispensational Theology. This may be the reason why John Reisinger, an early proponent of New Covenant Theology, states that it is far easier for a Dispensationalist to agree with New Covenant Theology than a Covenant Theologian⁴.

There is no short definition of New Covenant Theology. It must be seen that New Covenant Theology is a movement with much a work in progress and although there has been much work completed it lacks the consensus necessary to clearly define itself. It is more in a stage of describing itself than defining itself.

Tom Wells gives five appeals⁵ of New Covenant Theology that assist to describe it. The first appeal is that the New Testament holds logical priority over the Old Testament in determining theological issues. The second appeal is that there is a far-reaching implication of our slavery to Jesus Christ. There is frequent use of master/slave language in discussing the relation of Christ to His people. The third appeal is that it is following the highest revelation of the moral character of God. Jesus' person reveals the moral character of God, where His work and teaching reveal the moral revelation from God. The fourth appeal is the impact of Biblical Theology, which assumes that the biblical author has his own presuppositions (theology) that he brings to the text as well as the fact that the time in which the writer lives will affect what he writes. The last appeal is the view of New Covenant Theology throughout church history.

There are three major points of distinction that help to define New Covenant Theology. The first distinctive of New Covenant Theology is its hermeneutical approach. Second, is the amount of continuity/discontinuity between Israel and the church. The third difference is its position on law versus grace. Describing and detailing these three topics is necessary to obtain an overview of New Covenant Theology.

Hermeneutic

In summarizing New Covenant Theology, Thomas Schreiner, who himself holds views very similar to New Covenant Theology, states:

NCT argues that the scriptures should be interpreted in light of their eschatological fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Whether we are speaking of OT sacrifices, the Passover, the temple, or the Mosaic law, all of these OT practices and institutions must be understood in light of the newness that has dawned with Jesus the Christ. At first glance such a hermeneutical principle may seem to be uncontroversial, but NCT seems to occupy a place between dispensationalism and covenant theology. ... The difference between NCT and Covenant Theology is

quite clear since the latter sees the Sabbath as normative for today. Wells and Zaspel concentrate particularly on the role of the Mosaic Law, and in this sense they are closer to Dispensationalism. Still, the hermeneutical principle, if applied consistently, would likely lead to different eschatological conclusions from what we see in Dispensationalism.⁶

An important view of the New Covenant Theology hermeneutic is, as mentioned above, that the New Testament has logical priority over the Old Testament. In this way, the New Testament is the hermeneutical manual for understanding the Old Testament as it applies today. In this view, they hold that the Old Testament may have more than one fulfillment, first in Old Testament Israel and again in the New Testament to the church. “Old Testament writers often see the promises as fulfilled to the literal nation of Israel while New Testament writers find their fulfillment in the church.”⁷ This is not to say that the text itself has multiple meaning.

New Covenant Theology would start with authorial intent, understanding that the human authors had their own presuppositions and culture in which they were writing. New Covenant Theology would go further, stating that a biblical theology accepts that God has a divine authorial intent. That is that God’s intentions go beyond the human author’s intention. New Covenant Theology makes clear that this is not a search for some deeper spiritual meaning. Instead, it is an acceptance that God may have a greater intent of a text that the human author did or understood. This approach is consistent with New Covenant Theology’s view of fulfillment theology. New Covenant Theology would see much of the Old Testament as fulfilled in the New Testament as typology, which is in one sense a part of the larger promise/fulfillment motif.

Israel and Church

One of the most difficult points for Covenant Theologians to deal with in New Covenant Theology is the amount of discontinuity between Israel and the church. This difficulty seems to be caused by its implications to the hermeneutic and view of law versus grace. It is on this issue that makes New Covenant Theology closer to Dispensationalism than it is to Covenant Theology. However, there are divergences of views on the future of Israel within New Covenant Theology. Some would see the promises of the Abrahamic covenant having a literal future fulfillment to Israel and other see it fulfilled in the church.

New Covenant Theology sees two people of God that stand in typological relationship to one another. These two peoples of God each have a covenantal relationship with God. It is clearly not the view of one covenant and two administrations. It is two covenants, one old and the other new. Therefore, Israel was never the church of Jesus Christ. The old covenant is not so much set aside or having ending as much as fulfilled in the new covenant. “To speak of two covenants instead of two administrations of one covenant leads one to expect greater differentiation between the covenants than the two-administration language suggests.”⁸

New Covenant Theology sees a distinction between the covenants. The old covenant was conditional and the new covenant cannot be broken. The old covenant law was not put in the minds and written on the hearts of all covenant citizens, where it is in the new covenant. Not all members of the old covenant were believers, but all members of the new covenant are believers. Since, the old covenant contained unbelievers, not all citizens received forgiveness of their sins but all the new covenant citizens received forgiveness of sins. Therefore, “God would form a

people, a new nation, under the new covenant who would not break it, because all of them without exception would know the Lord.”⁹

Law verses Grace

The issue of law verses grace has been a separating factor between Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism. New Covenant Theology is no different. New Covenant Theology seems to end up closer to Dispensationalism than it does Covenant Theology, where many of its proponents find their roots. It may be due to this fact that much of the writings on New Covenant Theology deal with the issues of law verses grace. This issue is perhaps the greatest distinction, in practice, between Covenant Theology and New Covenant Theology.

Many proponents of New Covenant Theology have been accused of antinomianism, because they see two covenants and therefore a fulfillment of the law of Moses. New Covenant Theology believes that there is law in the church. It is the law of Christ. The law of Moses points forward to Jesus Christ. Further, the law of Christ fulfills and even advances the law of Moses (Matthew 5:17-20). The law reaches its “end” (telos) in Jesus Christ (Romans 10:4).

New Covenant Theology “recognizes that law and grace are sometimes names for the two periods covered by the Mosaic and new covenants, but [New Covenant Theology] would look at the two words as also defining two emphases, not the replacement of law by grace. [New Covenant Theology] would see a greater emphasis on grace under the New Covenant.”¹⁰ The ceremonial aspects of the law of Moses are fulfilled in the work of Jesus Christ and therefore, find a new significance. New Covenant Theology would not divide the law into three categories, ceremonial, civil and moral, as a hermetical practice, as some opponents accuse. Categories are useful only to differentiate not as a hermeneutical practice.

New Covenant Theology would find the source of God’s law in His unchanging moral character. God’s law, as an eternal standard, cannot change. Therefore, it could never become any less binding a rule of life. Tom Schreiner notes the distinction in his discussion on the moral norms of the new covenant.

Believers are subject to the law of Christ, and the law of Christ is discerned from the NT. Wells and Zaspel maintain that many of the moral norms of the OT (nine of the ten commandments of the Decalogue) continue to be normative. They are normative, however, because they are part of Christ’s law, not because they hail from the Mosaic law.¹¹

This view is depends on the New Testament to define the law of Christ as to what of the law is applied to believers in the church.

CONCLUSION

New Covenant Theology is currently, more a movement than a theological system. There is more development necessary within the movement -to build more consensuses on issues, in order to formulate a theological system. New Covenant Theology would define the new covenant as, “the bond between God and man, established by the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, under which all who have been effectually called of God in all ages have been formed into the one body of Christ in New Testament times, in order to come under His law during this age and to remain under His authority forever.”¹²

It would seem that Covenant Theology is starting to benefit from the work done in Dispensationalism. Much of the work in the New Covenant Theology movement is a move closer to the distinguishing features of Dispensationalism. Other than the view of eschatology, which many in New Covenant Theology do not take a position; it appears that the recent movement within both Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism, with Progressive Dispensationalism, are lining up very closely together. It would appear that other than the literal unfulfilled prophecies of the Old Testament, there is much agreement forming both the two major theological systems.

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¹ Feinberg, John S., ed. *Continuity and Discontinuity*. Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments. Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1988, pages 37-40.

² Tom Wells and Fred Zaspel, New Covenant Theology (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2002), pages 2-3.

³ Ibid., 4-5.

⁴ This is from a personal conversation with John Reisinger.

⁵ Wells and Zaspel, Ibid., 1-32.

⁶ This quote is from Thomas Schriener in a soon to be released review of Wells and Zaspel's book that will appear in the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Journal.

⁷ Wells and Zaspel, Ibid. 60.

⁸ Ibid. 48.

⁹ Ibid. 50.

¹⁰ Quote from an email conversation with Tom Wells.

¹¹ Schriener, Ibid.

¹² Ibid. 75-76.