

NEW COVENANT THEOLOGY AND THE OLD TESTAMENT COVENANTS

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Though New Covenant Theology (NCT) has positive aspects such as an insistence on a biblically based theology, several aspects of the system are not so positive. For example, in pursuing a middle course between Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology, its theologians rely on a strained view of Dispensationalism and adopt an interpretive methodology called supersessionism. A noteworthy omission in NCT's listing of covenants is the Davidic. To a degree, NCT agrees with Dispensationalism on the Noahic and Abrahamic Covenants, but the system fails to grasp the thematic continuity of the OT covenants. Instead, NCT stresses discontinuity as the defining characteristic of a covenant because of the biblical contrast of the Old and New Covenants, and follows a redemption, fulfillment, and kingdom hermeneutic rather than a literal, normal, or plain hermeneutic. NCT and Dispensationalism agree on the centrality of the Abrahamic Covenant in the theology of the OT, but NCT sees one kind of fulfillment of that covenant's land promises in the days of Joshua. It understands the spiritual aspects of the Abrahamic Covenant as ultimately fulfilled in the Messiah and the possession of the promised land as ultimately fulfilled in a spiritual rest. The system holds that the gospel was not clearly revealed before the coming of Christ. The system takes the Old Covenant as fulfilling the physical parts of the Abrahamic Covenant and the New Covenant as fulfilling the spiritual parts. NCT holds that the Israelites redeemed from Egypt were physically redeemed, but not spiritually redeemed because the Mosaic Covenant was based on works. This leads to the strange position that OT saints were not saved until after the death and resurrection of Christ. NCT thinks that the Davidic Covenant was fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Christ and fails to allow for the NT teaching of a future kingdom. With all its positive features, NCT misses vital points featured in the OT covenants.

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Introduction

Majoring on negatives is never a pleasant or satisfying approach to

disagreements. Being overly negative is counterproductive and works against the unity of believers and their mutual edification. Especially when fellow believers are in view, to focus first on areas of agreement is a joy—and, when it comes to New Covenant Theology (NCT), the system has much with which to agree. Proponents of NCT herald the significance of covenants to a proper understanding of the OT and emphasize adhering only to those covenants that Scripture itself specifically identifies.¹ Such an approach immediately separates NCT from the theologians who, for example, find a covenant of works in the white spaces of the biblical text.² In keeping with NCT's concentration on a biblically-based theology, its advocates stress the role of context in Scripture interpretation.³ As the old dictum goes, any text apart from its context is a pretext for a proof text. Context is the touchstone against which every interpretation must be judged.

Respect for the underpinnings of NCT is not grudgingly given. Those who engage its adherents in dialogue quickly appreciate not having to slog through the mire of a philosophically based theology. In his critique of NCT, Richard Barcellos confirms this observation as he lists a number of positives that evangelical theologians should appreciate about NCT: a high view of Scripture, respect for divine sovereignty, diligence to comprehend biblical covenants, engaging the issues of continuity and discontinuity between OT and NT, an insistence that theology be grounded in exegesis, and an endeavor to fathom the implications of “the redemptive-historical effects of Christ's death” for NT theology.⁴

Lest the reader think at this point that little basis exists for devoting The Master's Seminary (TMS) Faculty Lecture Series to NCT, all is not a beautiful mountain meadow filled with brilliant white daisies and sunshine. Theological perfection will not be found this side of heaven—either in a TMS meadow or in that of NCT. Occasional interpretive blight mars the pastoral scene. What is the source of disagreement that incites further discussion and examination? First of all, NCT theologians openly reject both Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology⁵ in their

¹Steve Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology: Questions Answered* (n.p.: Steve Lehrer, 2006) 37, 41.

²For a Reformed theologian's arguments against a covenant of works in Scripture, see Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 119-21.

³Geoff Volker and Steve Lehrer, “Did Paul Misinterpret the Old Testament? Examining Paul's Use of the Old Testament in Romans 9:23-29,” *Journal of New Covenant Theology* 2/2 (Summer 2004):61.

⁴Richard C. Barcellos, *In Defense of the Decalogue: A Critique of New Covenant Theology* (Enumclaw, Wash.: Winepress Publishing, 2001) 12-13.

⁵Reisinger's characterization of the Dispensationalism and Covenantalism is exaggerated and inaccurate: “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” (John G. Reisinger, *Abraham's Four Seeds* [Frederick, Md.: New Covenant Media, 1998] 19).

search for a middle path between the two—assuming that such a path exists. In their opinion, the two theologies’ “basic presuppositions are either assumed or wrongly deduced from their theological system.”⁶ Thus, relying on a strained view of Dispensationalism, NCT initiated the ongoing skirmish.

Secondly, in the area of hermeneutics, NCT has chosen the interpretive methodology of supersessionism,⁷ rather than nonsupersessionism. Dispensational theology constructs its theology on the following hermeneutical assumptions: “(1) the OT is not reinterpreted by the NT; (2) progressive revelation cannot cancel unconditional promises to Israel; (3) Israel is not a type of the church; and (4) OT promises can have a fulfillment with *both* Israel and the church.”⁸ In contrast, supersessionist hermeneutics assumes that

(1) the New Testament has interpretive priority over the Old Testament; (2) national Israel functioned as a type of the New Testament church; and (3) the New Testament indicates that Old Testament prophecies regarding national Israel are being fulfilled with the church.⁹

Evidence for the association of NCT with supersessionism includes NCT’s claim that NT writers employ OT texts “in ways that the prophets never intended.”¹⁰ This is a strange position for someone to take, who assumes the supremacy and integrity of Scripture as the foundation for theology. It is an inherent contradiction to declare that *Scripture* (in the NT) conveys a meaning not intended by *Scripture* (in the OT).¹¹ However, that is exactly the dilemma faced by a hermeneutic that assumes NT priority over the OT. In yet another association with supersessionism, NCT proponents argue that both OT and NT teach the rejection of national Israel as the people of God and that the New Covenant teaching that Jews and Gentiles are one in Christ rules out any future restoration of national Israel as an independent entity

⁶Ibid., ii.

⁷“Supersessionism is the view that the church is the new or true Israel that has permanently replaced or superseded national Israel as the people of God” (Michael J. Vlach, “The Church as Replacement of Israel: An Analysis of Supersessionism” [unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2004], xv).

⁸Ibid., xvii.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Volker and Lehrer, “Did Paul Misinterpret the Old Testament?” 61.

¹¹In response, Lehrer writes: “That is not really what we are saying when we say what we do about the intentions of the prophets. What we mean is that an Old Covenant prophet like Amos might prophesy about the restoration of Israel as in Amos 9, not realizing that the fulfillment of that prophecy would be found in the gentiles coming to faith as we find in Acts 15. The prophets did not always realize how the prophecies they spoke would be fulfilled (1 Peter 1:10-12). But God always had planned the fulfillment of Amos 9 as Acts 15” (online at www.idsblog.org/?p=340, accessed 7/23/07, and personal email correspondence, 2/13/07).

in the divine program.¹²

In light of the clear differences that exist between the hermeneutical and doctrinal stances of TMS and NCT, the issue must be discussed. In spite of all the mutual concord, areas of discord demand greater clarity in the articulation of the respective theological positions. The following presentation focuses on a single aspect of this dialogue: the OT covenants.

General Considerations of OT Covenants

One of the questions often asked about OT covenants is whether they are unilateral (imposed by God alone) or bilateral (entered by mutual agreement between God and man) relationships. Tom Wells and Fred Zaspel insist on the unilateral nature of all biblical covenants: "The point is that a covenant given by God is *imposed* on men. It is entirely from God."¹³ On this point, Dispensationalists and NCT theologians find general agreement. OT covenants are, indeed, mainly unilateral in nature. Strangely, however, Wells assumes that anyone beginning with the OT (before reading the NT) would see but one covenant.¹⁴ It is strange, because he later declares that NCT recognizes "other covenants."¹⁵ However, when it comes to listing those other covenants, it includes only the Noachic and Abrahamic Covenants.¹⁶ Absence of a reference to the Davidic Covenant by NCT writers is the result of viewing it as "simply a continuation of and further revelation of the promises already made in the Abrahamic Covenant. In brief, the Davidic dynasty seems to inherit the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant and follows the story line out further concerning the seed that will bless all nations."¹⁷ This treatment of the Davidic Covenant marks an area of disagreement touched upon later in this essay.

Wells identifies a "mathematical unity" and a "teleological unity" in regard to the OT covenants.¹⁸ The former refers to the progressive nature of the covenants and the latter to the contribution of each covenant to "the fulfillment of redemptive

¹²Compare with Vlach's observations about the theological arguments of supersessionism ("The Church as Replacement of Israel" xvii).

¹³Tom Wells and Fred Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology: Description, Definition, Defense* (Frederick, Md.: New Covenant Media, 2002) 5.

¹⁴Tom Wells, "The Christian Appeal of a New Covenant Theology," in *New Covenant Theology: Description, Definition, Defense* 10.

¹⁵Wells, "The Christian Appeal" 25; idem, "The Relations Between the Biblical Covenants," in *New Covenant Theology: Description, Definition, Defense* 275.

¹⁶Wells, "The Relations Between the Biblical Covenants" 276.

¹⁷Lehrer (Online at www.idsblog.org/?p=340, accessed on 7/24/07, and personal email correspondence [2/13/07]).

¹⁸Wells, "The Relations Between the Biblical Covenants" 276.

history.”¹⁹ He also specifies that the Abrahamic Covenant offers an overview of redemptive history:

From the NT we can see that the Abrahamic Covenant spoke of two distinct peoples, Israel and the church, that would experience two kinds of redemptive histories with two covenants to guide them. They stand in *typological* relation to one another. One would experience a physical and national redemption, starting with deliverance from Egypt and guided by the Old or Mosaic Covenant. The other would experience a spiritual, transnational redemption, starting with deliverance from sin and guided by the New Covenant.²⁰

With this approach to the OT covenants, biblical Dispensationalism finds much in common with NCT—especially in what appears (at least at first blush) to be adherence to distinct identities for Israel and the church. Unlike Covenant Theology, NCT does not absolutely equate Israel and the church.

An exquisite balance between inter-covenantal continuities and discontinuities distinguishes the OT revelation concerning the biblical covenants. Each covenant develops a thematic element of the Abrahamic Covenant (representing continuity) while adding distinctly new associations (representing discontinuity). Consider the following chart’s diagrammatic depiction of the thematic continuity of the OT covenants:²¹

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid., 277.

²¹William D. Barrick, “The Mosaic Covenant,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 10/2 (Fall 1999):218. John H. Walton (*Covenant: God’s Purpose, God’s Plan* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994] 179) speaks of “the continuity of the covenant under the umbrella of its revelatory purpose. The phases (Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic) are linked together in a developmental pattern.” In addition, “None of these covenants replaces the one before it—each supplements what has come before” (ibid., 49). See also Michael A. Grisanti, “The Davidic Covenant,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 10/2 (Fall 1999):245-50.

Thematic Progression in Israelite Covenants ²²						
	<i>ABRAHAMIC</i>	<i>MOSAIC</i>	<i>PRIESTLY</i> ²³	<i>DEUTERONOMIC</i>	<i>DAVIDIC</i>	<i>NEW</i>
T H E M E S	NATION	NATION		Nation	Nation	NATION
	SEED				SEED	
	LAND	Land		LAND	Land	
	BLESSING (Spiritual)	BLESSING (Spiritual & Material)	Blessing (Spiritual & Material)	BLESSING (Material)	BLESSING (Material)	BLESSING (Spiritual)
	KINGDOM	Kingdom	Kingdom		KINGDOM	Kingdom
SCRIP- TURE	Gen 12:1-3; 15:1-21; 17:3-14; 22:14-19	Exod 19–24	Num 25:10-13; 1 Sam 2:35; Ezek 44:10-15; Mal 2:4	Deut 27–30	2 Sam 7:8-16	Jer 31:27-40

Wells stresses that NCT offers the Christian community a return to “the central concern with Old/New Covenants that we have seen in much of church history and a way out of that dead end that seems to largely ignore the discontinuity that characterizes the transition from Moses to Christ.”²⁴ NCT’s stress on discontinuity for the defining characteristic of a covenant²⁵ is built upon the biblical contrast set up between the Old and New Covenants. However, that focus can lead (and in some cases does lead) to an excessive discontinuity between the OT and NT, especially in over-emphasizing physical salvation (in contrast to spiritual salvation) under the Old Covenant.

According to Gary D. Long, NCT aims at “A biblical theology that develops its hermeneutic from a redemptive history approach to understanding the fulfillment of God’s eternal kingdom purpose on earth.”²⁶ In other words, NCT attempts to develop its hermeneutic from prior theological (redemption, fulfillment, and kingdom) assumptions. The very first point that Long makes is that such a

²²Uppercase themes (e.g., NATION) are secondary features within their pericopes; lowercase themes (e.g., Nation) are secondary features within their pericopes.

²³See Irvin A. Busenitz, “Introduction to the Biblical Covenants: The Noahic Covenant and the Priestly Covenant,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 10/2 (Fall 1999):186-89.

²⁴Wells, “The Christian Appeal” 32.

²⁵“Scripture uses the term [*covenant*], almost without exception, to illustrate discontinuity” (Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology: Questions Answered* 38).

²⁶Gary D. Long, “Some Implications: Theological Implications,” in “New Covenant Non-Premillennialism—Part 2” (online at www.soundofgrace.com/v7/n9/g1part2.htm, accessed 7/25/07).

hermeneutical approach will “[p]rovide the basis for an alternate way to interpret the Bible” and that hermeneutic will be developed “from the New Testament interpretation of the Old with Christ at its center”²⁷—viz., NT priority over the OT.²⁸ As Long explains it,

Dispensational theology’s hermeneutical principle of “literal, normal, or plain interpretation” which sees God having two distinct purposes and two distinct, chronological aspects of the New Covenant—one for the church and one for Israel—is not based upon a theology expressed in the Bible itself. Biblical theology supports one eternal redemptive purpose and one New Covenant church in history consisting of saved Jews and Gentiles (Rom. 9-11). It is based upon one New Covenant (Heb. 8) inaugurated by Christ at His first advent and is to be consummated by Him at His second advent.²⁹

In fact, the result of such an approach is that a truly biblical theology (by Long’s definition) rejects the concept of a national Israel and the church continuing as two distinct entities for God’s program in this age even before engaging the biblical text interpretively. Any hermeneutic that begins with the assumption that the NT fulfillment alters OT fulfillment must beware of implying that the NT contradicts or revises the OT. The NT complements the OT, contributes to the teachings of the OT, and explains the OT in context. Rightly interpreting the NT in its context reveals that the NT says what the OT says within the OT’s context.³⁰

Abrahamic Covenant³¹

NCT and biblical Dispensationalism agree on the centrality of the Abrahamic Covenant to biblical covenants and to the theology of the OT. However, Lehrer, speaking on behalf of NCT, declares that the land promises of the Abrahamic Covenant were already fulfilled historically “by the time of the conquest of the Land

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸A distinct difference exists between claiming that the NT is God’s commentary on the OT and making that commentary the hermeneutic. God does interpret the OT accurately in the NT, but does not interpret all of the OT. Both OT and NT must be approached with the identical hermeneutic, not two different hermeneutics.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Since this essay is limited to the OT covenants, it cannot examine this issue in greater detail. As Lehrer suggests, further discussion should respond to NCT exegesis of texts “where the New Testament writers seem to take Old Testament quotes in surprising directions” (Lehrer [online at www.idsblog.org/?p=340, accessed 7/24/07, and personal email correspondence, 2/13/07]).

³¹See Keith H. Essex, “The Abrahamic Covenant,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 10/2 (Fall 1999):191-212.

of Canaan under Joshua.”³² Genesis 15:21 mentions the Canaanites and the Jebusites among the peoples whose lands the Israelites would possess. According to the OT, the Israelites did not fully possess the lands of the Canaanites and Jebusites during the lifetime of Joshua. Joshua himself interpreted the Genesis 15 promise as requiring the driving out of all these inhabitants (Josh 3:10). Judges 1:21 reveals that such did not happen prior to Joshua’s death. Indeed, the Israelites continued to live in the midst of all the peoples God listed in Genesis 15 (see Judg 3:5). It wasn’t until the time of David that the Jebusites were finally evicted from their stronghold at Zion (2 Sam 5:7-9).

Though the Levites and Ezra in Neh 9:8 seem to state that God had fulfilled the promise made to Abraham in Gen 15:18-21, the context and the remainder of Scripture must be brought to bear on that statement. By context, the emphasis is on God’s faithfulness to His people. Also, by context, Ezra and the Levites state that, in spite of the divine faithfulness, the unfaithfulness (disobedience) of the Israelites resulted in non-fulfillment (Neh 9:26).³³ Therefore, NCT’s claim for fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant in the days of Joshua does not survive exegetical scrutiny.

In another matter related to the Abrahamic Covenant, Lehrer sees no necessity for belief in order for one to be a recipient of the covenant’s blessings, since blessing materialized merely through being born into the physical line of Abraham.³⁴ Likewise, when God told Abraham that He would be his God and the God of his descendants (Gen 17:7-8), it “was not a saving relationship in which the Israelites were spiritually redeemed (Heb 3:19), but the entire nation was physically redeemed and chosen to be the recipients of God’s love in a way that no one else was at that time.”³⁵ That is a common claim of NCT. For NCT, Israel was primarily a nation of unbelieving people with whom God had dealings that marked them as special. However, being special had nothing to do with spirituality or being spiritually redeemed.

As far as NCT is concerned, spiritual aspects of the Abrahamic Covenant deal with the ultimate fulfillment of the seed in the Messiah and the possession of the

³²Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology: Questions Answered* 32. In harmony with Lehrer’s focus on fulfillment of the biblical covenants’ promises, he, in fact, would prefer that NCT theology be called “fulfillment theology” rather than “replacement theology”; idem, “Commonly Asked Questions About New Covenant Theology,” *Journal of New Covenant Theology* 1/1 (2003):10. However, Volker and Lehrer identify the apostle Paul as a “Replacement Theologian” (“Did Paul Misinterpret the Old Testament?” 70).

³³See Jeffrey L. Townsend, “Fulfillment of the Land Promise in the Old Testament,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, vol. 142 (Oct 1985):331. This entire journal article is a superb example of a careful exegesis of the OT texts with regard to the Abrahamic Covenant’s land promise.

³⁴Lehrer, “Commonly Asked Questions About New Covenant Theology,” *Journal of New Covenant Theology* 2/1 (Winter 2004):5.

³⁵Ibid., 7.

land is fulfilled in an ultimate spiritual rest, not a physical rest.³⁶ Abraham's spiritual descendants enter into a special relationship with God in which He "promises to love them forever and to never punish them."³⁷ Seeking to clarify the position on salvation in the OT, Lehrer writes, "NCT simply makes the point that the Old Covenant did not save, not that there was no salvation before the Old Covenant era. We say that the Gospel was not as clearly revealed in the eras before Christ, not that there was no revelation of the Gospel."³⁸

Indeed, a straightforward reading of OT and NT indicates that the truths of the Gospel were not hidden from the Israelites though they did not yet have the NT. Therefore, Volker and Lehrer cloud the issue when they claim that Paul had "been given more light by God as to His plan of salvation than any of the Old Testament prophets."³⁹ Perhaps confusion arises from NCT's view that a necessary dichotomy exists because the OT writers and NT writers "read the terms of the Abrahamic Covenant in two different ways."⁴⁰ OT writers, according to Wells, understand that the fulfillment is for Israel, but NT writers see the fulfillment for the church.⁴¹ As proof he offers Josh 21:43-45 and Heb 11:8-9 and 39-40. "Everything is fulfilled in Joshua;⁴² nothing is fulfilled in Hebrews. Clearly they are reading the evidence from differing perspectives."⁴³ For some NCT theologians, the way out of the dilemma consists of resorting to a typological hermeneutic in the OT—Israel is a type of the church.⁴⁴

On the other hand, as Wells admits, "Typology, however, does not quite exhaust the relation of Israel to the church."⁴⁵ Appealing to Romans 11 and Paul's figure of the olive tree, Wells identifies "an organic relation between the church and God's individually elect people from ancient Israel. We who are believers in Jesus

³⁶Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology: Questions Answered* 36.

³⁷Lehrer, "Commonly Asked Questions About New Covenant Theology," *Journal of New Covenant Theology* 2/1 (Winter 2004):8.

³⁸Lehrer (online at www.idsblog.org/?p=340, and personal email correspondence, 2/13/07).

³⁹Volker and Lehrer, "Did Paul Misinterpret the Old Testament?" 76.

⁴⁰Wells, "Description of the New Covenant (Part Two)," in *New Covenant Theology: Description, Definition, Defense* 60.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²But see the discussion of this argument above in the first two paragraphs under "Abrahamic Covenant."

⁴³Wells, "Description of the New Covenant (Part Two)" 61.

⁴⁴Ibid., 62. This observation ought not be construed as an accusation of excessive typology by NCT, however. As a matter of fact, NCT exposes and condemns excessive typology. A good treatment of this issue is found in Michael Feather's contribution to "Commonly Asked Questions About New Covenant Theology," *Journal of New Covenant Theology* 2/2 (Summer 2004):5-9.

⁴⁵Wells, "Description of the New Covenant (Part Two)" 63.

Christ are now part, with them, of the olive tree as it exists today, i.e., the 'invisible' or 'universal' church of God."⁴⁶ In other words, the body of Christ, the universal church of God, is made up of both the believers of the Old Covenant and those of the New. Thus, believing Israel is in the body of Christ today—not just those Jews who convert after the beginning of the NT church, but all those who believed prior to the commencement of the NT church.

NCT argues that inclusion of the Gentiles fulfills Amos 9:11-12, according to Acts 15:12-19.⁴⁷ Note, first of all, that James never says that Amos 9 is "fulfilled." Secondly, James' reasoning is that the gospel should continue to go out to the Gentiles because God included them in His redemptive and kingdom plan according to Amos 9. Amos 9 mentions Gentiles as recipients of God's kingdom blessings, so how could the early church ever take action to exclude them? Fulfillment of Amos 9 is not the question and it certainly is not identified as fulfilled at the Jerusalem council. Unfortunately, Lehrer slightly misrepresents the text when he insists twice that God "inspired Luke to interpret the passage from Amos in the book of Acts."⁴⁸ James is the one interpreting; Luke is merely recording his interpretation.

For NCT, the "Abrahamic Covenant contains both the Old and New Covenants. The Old Covenant is the physical fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise and the New Covenant is the spiritual fulfillment."⁴⁹ Wells lays out this dual fulfillment scenario as a chart in an appendix to *New Covenant Theology: Description, Definition, Defense*.⁵⁰ As the argument goes, "seed" has two different meanings (individual and corporate) in the Abrahamic Covenant of Genesis 12 and 15. Therefore, depending on which meaning one uses, that covenant can be read two different ways. For example, the promise that God would make of Abraham a great nation is fulfilled corporately and historically by Israel in Deut 26:5, but in Rev 5:9 that promise is fulfilled individually in Christ (the seed) and thus corporately in the Church.⁵¹ NCT displays an exegetical weakness at this point. Deuteronomy 26:5 does refer to the commencement of the Abrahamic Covenant's fulfillment, but it is nowhere near the divinely intended fulfillment of the original promise in Gen 12:2. Additionally, the ceremony that Deut 26:1-19 describes is a covenant renewal

⁴⁶Ibid., 65-66.

⁴⁷See n. 11 above; Lehrer, "Commonly Asked Questions About New Covenant Theology," *Journal of New Covenant Theology* 2/1 (Winter 2004):12-15, and 3/1 (Summer 2005):47; idem, *New Covenant Theology: Questions Answered* 218-19.

⁴⁸Lehrer, "Commonly Asked Questions" 2/1 (Winter 2004):13, 15.

⁴⁹Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology: Questions Answered* 36; idem, "Commonly Asked Questions About New Covenant Theology," *Journal of New Covenant Theology* 2/1 (Winter 2004):5; Volker and Lehrer, "Did Paul Misinterpret the Old Testament?" 75.

⁵⁰Wells, "Appendix 4: The Promises of the Abrahamic Covenant," in *New Covenant Theology: Description, Definition, Defense* 285-87.

⁵¹Ibid., 285.

ceremony, which God commanded the Israelites to observe following their entry into the land of promise. This renewal ceremony, intended for continual observance throughout subsequent generations, looks forward to the fulfillment of the promises, not backward on their fulfillment. Therefore, Wells employs the text without regard to its context and function.

Regarding the divine promise to bless those who bless Abraham, Wells points to Gen 39:5 for historical fulfillment by Israel and to Matt 10:42 for spiritual fulfillment by the church.⁵² In Gen 39:5 the reference is to divine blessing upon Joseph in Egypt in Potiphar's household. Israel does not yet exist, so how could the text speak of historical fulfillment by Israel? Likewise, Matt 10:42 takes place before the death and resurrection of Christ, so it is not a reference to the church per se. Certainly far better texts could be employed to try to make this point. Once again, NCT attempts to build a case upon an exegetically suspect foundation. Taking a third example (all of these taken consecutively as Wells presents them), NCT sees God's promise to curse those who curse Abraham (Gen 12:3) fulfilled by Israel in Psalm 149 and by the church in Rev 6:9-11.⁵³ These associations are dubious because neither Psalm 149 nor Rev 6:9-11 make any reference to the Abrahamic Covenant or even to the concept of cursing.

Mosaic Covenant

NCT declares that God's redemption of Israel out of Egypt was only physical, not spiritual, since Israelites of that time were unbelievers (Heb 3:19).⁵⁴ Indeed, in the type of statement that instigates doubt about NCT's true position on salvation in the OT, Lehrer emphatically announces that the Israelites "were never recipients of God's special grace even though He 'bore them on eagle's wings.'" ⁵⁵ In an attempt to support his point he explains, "The fact is, the vast majority of Israelites throughout history were physically redeemed but not spiritually redeemed."⁵⁶ According to NCT, the OT context demands physical redemption, since the Mosaic Covenant is based upon works.⁵⁷ NCT adherents compare the Mosaic Covenant's focus on works to Roman Catholicism and its view of a works-based salvation.⁵⁸ Lehrer says it this way:

Notice that according to the sacrificial system laid out for us in the book of Leviticus, if

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Ibid., 286.

⁵⁴Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology: Questions Answered* 46.

⁵⁵Ibid., 47.

⁵⁶Ibid., 53.

⁵⁷Ibid., 49.

⁵⁸Ibid., 50.

you sin you are to do a grocery list of things in order to receive God's forgiveness. This is a works-based arrangement that shows that the Mosaic Covenant is a works-based covenant.⁵⁹

Salvation, according to NCT, was not the immediate purpose of the Mosaic Covenant. "As a part of redemptive history this covenant contributed its part to the ultimate salvation of God's regenerated people, but as an immediate goal *the covenant is virtually silent on this subject!*"⁶⁰ In fact, Wells goes on to declare, "There is not a word directly about eternal life anywhere in the legal code."⁶¹ In the view of NCT, the Mosaic Covenant can only show people their sin, but it does not call them "to seek an eternal remedy."⁶² Since God established the Mosaic Covenant with a "hard-hearted (unbelieving) people,"⁶³ only the New Covenant provides the soteriological content by which anyone might obtain forgiveness of sins. Such statements frustrate those trying hard to understand the true position of NCT concerning salvation in the OT.

NCT's declarations concerning the Mosaic Covenant raise a legitimate question: *How* could an Israelite under the Mosaic Covenant be saved or be forgiven his sins? According to Lehrer, the "reconciliation of both Jews and Gentiles to God is contemporaneous!"⁶⁴ In other words, OT saints obtained salvation only after the death and resurrection of Christ. He insists upon a mere remnant in the OT actually being saved and that only "by the work of Christ that was to be done years later (Rom 3:25)."⁶⁵ Such a viewpoint appears to ignore the Pauline declaration in Acts 26:22-23.

⁵⁹Ibid. Such a viewpoint comes very close to the error that non-Dispensationalists have historically accused Dispensationalists of holding: salvation by works under the Law of Moses (a view based upon a misunderstanding of the old *Scofield Reference Bible* notes). Dispensationalism, however, recognizes but one way of salvation in both testaments (both by grace through faith). See Fred H. Klooster, "The Biblical Method of Salvation: A Case for Continuity," in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1988) 132-33.

⁶⁰Wells, "The Relations Between the Biblical Covenants" 278 (emphasis in the original). See, also, Lehrer, "Commonly Asked Questions About New Covenant Theology," *Journal of New Covenant Theology* 2/2 (Summer 2004):25: "The purpose of the Old Covenant and God's dealings with Old Covenant Israel was not for the salvation of the Israelites of that time."

⁶¹Wells, "The Relations Between the Biblical Covenants" 278. If such teaching is not in the "legal code," what about its presence in the rest of OT revelation?

⁶²Ibid., 279.

⁶³Lehrer, "Commonly Asked Questions About New Covenant Theology," *Journal of New Covenant Theology* 1/1 (2003):17.

⁶⁴Ibid., 12 (emphasis in the original).

⁶⁵Lehrer, "Commonly Asked Questions About New Covenant Theology," *Journal of New Covenant Theology* 2/1 (Winter 2004):23 n. 3. Lehrer's writings lack clarity on this matter of the salvation of OT saints. In a later issue of the same journal he wrote: "The way one gains acceptance from God and avoids

VanGemeren's description of the nature and purpose of the Mosaic Covenant is closer to what is presented in the OT:

The Mosaic covenant is an *administration of law* in that the Lord bound individuals and tribes together into one nation by detailed regulations. The law was God's means of shaping Israel into a "counter-community." Yahweh had consecrated Israel as a witness to the nations by showing them in the law how to mirror his perfections. The legal system of any other people reflects the culture of that people. Through God's law, however, the godly came to know how to reflect God's love, compassion, fidelity, and other perfections.⁶⁶

God gave the Mosaic Law primarily to the godly, not the ungodly.⁶⁷ Israelites obedient to the divine covenant are defined by that covenant as God's "possession" as well as "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod 19:5-6). Such language is not secular nor is it political, ethnic, or non-spiritual—it is spiritual. Consider the fact that God's offer in the Mosaic Law to restore Israel when they repent (Lev 26:40-43) is not for the future alone. It is addressed to Israelites at Sinai to teach them how they should approach God at the time, as well as when they eventually go into exile. The text clearly speaks of a spiritual matter, not a physical matter. Confessing iniquity and repenting are spiritual activities that result in God's spiritual action granting

His eternal wrath is the same throughout Scripture. Acceptance comes from trusting in the promises of God and having God apply the work of Christ on the cross to the individual. So, Abraham, David, and all Old Testament saints were saved by grace through faith, in just the same way believers living in the New Covenant era are saved" ("Commonly Asked Questions About New Covenant Theology," *Journal of New Covenant Theology* 2/2 [Summer 2004]:9). Yet, on the other hand, in the same article he writes, "The content of the gospel preached to Abraham, as far as we know, was simply: 'All peoples of the earth will be blessed through you' (Genesis 12:3)" (ibid., 9-10). So Abraham, without direct revelation concerning Christ's atonement for sin, "trusted in whatever God revealed to Him and the work of Christ was applied to him retroactively" (ibid., 10). What Lehrer assumes is that the Scripture records all revelation given in any period of time to anyone anywhere, be they Abel, Enoch, Abraham, or Joseph. However, that Abel had revelation from God concerning sacrifice is quite clear—a revelation of which the Bible has no record. According to the Dispensationalism taught at TMS, OT and NT believers are all saved by the same grace through the same faith in the same Savior and His atoning work. OT saints looked forward to Christ's atoning work and the NT saint looks back on it—but it is still forgiveness of sins and eternal life as the outcome, based upon the work of Christ.

⁶⁶Willem A. VanGemeren, "The Law Is the Perfection of Righteousness in Jesus Christ: A Reformed Perspective," in *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, Greg L. Bahnsen et al. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 28.

⁶⁷This should not be taken as a contradiction to Rom 2:15, which indicates that God wrote the Law in the hearts of the Gentiles, even though they had not been given custody of the written Law as Israel had. Nor should it be taken as a denial of the work of the Law for convicting unbelievers of sin. God intended Mosaic Law to serve a variety of purposes for both the godly and the ungodly.

forgiveness. Repentance was not omitted from Mosaic Law.⁶⁸

For NCT, however, the nation of Israel “never truly became God’s people in any spiritual and eternal sense whatever. They were never a true ‘*holy nation*,’ nor were they ever the *true* ‘people of God.’”⁶⁹ They argue that, whereas the Old Covenant’s purpose was to point forward to the work of Christ, the New Covenant is all about Christ’s saving of sinners—offering them forgiveness of sins.⁷⁰ The message and purpose of the latter is not the message and purpose of the former. However, this position is a denial of the clear divine declaration in the Law of Moses that “I will also walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people” (Lev 26:12).

Reisinger insists that “every single word like *elect, chosen, loved, redeemed, son* that describes Israel’s relationship to God as a *nation* has a totally different connotation when the identical words are used of the *church’s* relationship to God.”⁷¹ Yet, Psalm 49 clearly teaches redemption by means of a ransom price that no man is capable of paying (vv. 7-8). That redemption deals with living forever (v. 9). God alone gives such a ransom for an individual soul (v. 15). In the same context, it is also clear that life beyond this life and beyond the grave is in view when the psalmist announces that “the upright will rule over them [the unrighteous dead] in the morning” (v. 14). Does this sound like “redeemed” has “a totally different connotation” than when it is used in the NT? Where does the NT obtain its terminology? It obtains it from the OT. Paul did not miss-speak when he reminded Timothy that from his youth he had “known the sacred writings [= OT] which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Jesus Christ” (2 Tim 3:15; cp. Ps 19:7).

Davidic Covenant⁷²

This covenant seems to be largely ignored by NCT, in spite of the fact that a strong argument can be made for it receiving “more attention in the Hebrew Bible than any covenant except the Sinaitic.”⁷³ Reisinger states that he believes that “the

⁶⁸Unfortunately, J. A. Thompson and Elmer A. Martens ignore Leviticus 26 in their discussion of שׁוּב in “שׁוּב,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 5 vols., ed. by Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 4:55-59. All of the prophetic calls for Israel to repent are founded upon this Mosaic Covenant text on repentance.

⁶⁹Reisinger, *Abraham’s Four Seeds* 28 (emphasis in the original).

⁷⁰Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology: Questions Answered* 61.

⁷¹Reisinger, *Abraham’s Four Seeds* 30.

⁷²See Grisanti, “The Davidic Covenant” 233-50; Thomas H. Cragoe, “The Davidic Covenant,” in *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Analysis of the Movement and Defense of Traditional Dispensationalism*, ed. Ron J. Bigalke, Jr. (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2005) 99-134.

⁷³Jon D. Levenson, “The Davidic Covenant and Its Modern Interpreters,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 41 (1979):205-6.

NT Scriptures clearly establish that the Davidic Covenant was fulfilled in the resurrection and ascension of Christ (Acts 2:22-36). The Davidic throne is not waiting to be set up in the future, but it is already established.”⁷⁴ Long mentions it in his attribution of divided views among Dispensationalists and Covenantalists.⁷⁵ But, if this is true, why does Christ announce that those who follow Him will one day judge “the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt 19:28) as a separate entity in His kingdom (Luke 22:30)? That kingdom and that judging have yet to commence.

In Acts 1:6-8, the disciples asked Jesus, “Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” He did not tell them that they were in error regarding “restoring the kingdom to Israel.” His response merely tells them that it is not for them to know when that will occur—implying that it will. Nor did He say, “Wait a minute, fellows. When I say ‘Israel,’ I really don’t mean Israel. I am referring to the church.” Lest one think that the kingdom was inaugurated on the day of Pentecost (as Reisinger believes⁷⁶), Paul is still looking forward to “the hope of Israel” at the end of Acts (28:20) and proclaiming the coming kingdom to all who will listen (28:23, 31). That is not surprising. Paul spoke of the kingdom as something yet to be inherited (1 Cor 6:9-10), the kingdom that will come at the time of Christ’s judging the living and the dead when He appears in the second advent (2 Tim 4:1). At the end of Paul’s life he was still expecting to be brought “safely to His heavenly kingdom” (2 Tim 4:18), because he had not yet entered it. James (Jas 2:5) and Peter both concur (2 Pet 1:11) with Paul that they had not yet entered that kingdom⁷⁷—a kingdom whose coming John describes in Revelation 12:10.

New Covenant⁷⁸

NCT defines the New Covenant as “the bond between God and man, established by the blood (i.e. sacrificial death) of Christ, under which the church of Jesus Christ has come into being.”⁷⁹

Conclusion

There is much within NCT with which TMS might find agreement—especially in its strong faith in Christ, its high regard for Scripture, its desire

⁷⁴Reisinger, *Abraham’s Four Seeds* 21.

⁷⁵Long, “Chapter 8, Part 1: Summary,” in “New Covenant Non-Premillennialism” (online at www.soundofgrace.com/v7/n8/ncprmlgdLL.htm, accessed 7/26/07).

⁷⁶Reisinger, *Abraham’s Four Seeds* 49.

⁷⁷Contra *ibid.*, 56.

⁷⁸See Larry D. Pettigrew, “The New Covenant,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 10/2 (Fall 1999):251-70 and his presentation of “The New Covenant and NCT” in the current issue.

⁷⁹Wells, “Description of the New Covenant (Part One),” in *New Covenant Theology: Description, Definition, Defense* 57.

to develop a theology based upon the Word of God rather than upon human philosophy, its stand contrary to the theological position of Covenant Theology, and its participation in the ongoing debate over continuity and discontinuity. Many of the observations NCT adherents have made about the Abrahamic Covenant and its centrality are biblical. That covenant's central role as the leading OT covenant theologically cannot be seriously denied. Likewise, NCT engages eagerly in a study of the Mosaic Covenant because of its dominance in the OT and the apparent contrasts between it and the New Covenant. The role of Mosaic Law for NT believers is not just a hot button topic—it is a topic that should be of great interest to all believers. An aspect of the topic requiring clarification is NCT's true beliefs concerning the salvation of OT saints living under Law.

This study must not end without reviewing the differences between what TMS teaches and what NCT espouses. Due to a weakness in both hermeneutics and exegesis, NCT struggles with inconsistencies and ends up doing exactly what its adherents condemn in Covenantalism and Dispensationalism: they make their theology their hermeneutic. By placing total priority on the NT, NCT tends not to treat the OT text in its own context. It is correct that the NT plays a vital role in one's interpretation of the OT, but too often NCT presupposes a discontinuity far more radical than what either testament actually demands. Though accurate in saying that people in both OT and NT times are saved from sin by the same gospel message concerning the atoning work of Christ, NCT theologians too often obscure their stance on the immediate salvation for the OT saint. By focusing almost entirely on the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and New Covenants, NCT devalues the covenant that has some of the strongest ties to God's future program for national Israel: the Davidic Covenant. That is no small oversight. For NCT to continue contributing to the ongoing discussion to which they invite others and to which TMS willingly responds, they must expend time and energy to produce a complete study of the full revelation concerning the Davidic Covenant in the OT.

As fellow believers, brothers in Christ, who accept the full authority of Scripture, we can engage NCT adherents in fruitful conversation. Hopefully, this series of essays will be just the entrée to a fuller feast in the Word.