

## A Detailed Examination of Covenant Theology, New Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism

Matthew 5:17

In our study we have been advocating what we call **New Covenant Theology**. That's a way to describe how Jesus fulfilled Mosaic Law and set it aside to inaugurate a New Agreement between God and sinners. New Covenant Theology is different from **Covenant Theology** which is a systematic set of doctrine or a specific framework for interpreting Scripture. Covenant Theology is usually contrasted with another interpretative framework for Scripture called **Dispensational Theology**. Dispensationalism is currently the most popular scriptural interpretative method in American evangelicalism, and has been so from the latter half of the 19th century. **Covenant Theology** remains the majority view for denominational Protestantism since the time of the Reformation, and it is the system favored by those who are Calvinistic.

### Covenant Theology

It is called Covenant Theology because it is based on three *theological* covenants:

**The Covenant of Redemption** – An agreement between the Father, the Son and the Spirit to bring glory to the Triune God through Creation and Redemption.

**The Covenant of Works** – an agreement between God and Adam, whereby God told Adam as long as he ate from the Tree of Life and refrained from eating the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, Adam would prosper and live forever.

**The Covenant of Grace** - the work of the Trinity to bring about redemption and restoration so that all those who trust God from the fall (both Old Testament and New Testament) are the church of the living God.

If you belong to a Covenant Theology church, there will be little difference between Israel's old worship and the church's worship of today *in terms of principle*. Obey God's law, listen to God's prophets, trust God and repent of your sins, obey the Law, and be blessed. All of history is viewed as a progressive unfolding of the Covenant of Grace. Thus, in Covenant Theology, when Jesus instituted a New Covenant, it was nothing "new," but rather a new administration of the already-in-effect Covenant of Grace.

### Dispensational Theology

Dispensationalist strenuously argue that the national and political terms of all Old Testament covenants with Israel and her national forefathers (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob), particularly those promises associated with the land promise, have to be fulfilled in a "literal" way. That is, Israel must receive her land once again under the rule of Christ, the Davidic King, in the future millennial age. The Old Testament covenants, then, are all unconditional, and it is God himself, in his Messiah, who will bring them to pass. As Elliot Johnson states:

"God does not replace Israel in accomplishing her share when Israel rejects Him. . . . Nor does God reinterpret Israel's share . . . . Nor does God expand those who share in fulfillment of Israel's role temporarily when Israel rejects Him. . . . Rather, God sets aside the nation temporarily and incorporates believing Gentiles along with a believing Jewish remnant to continue the ministry of the Servant until He returns as the Son of David and the Son of

Abraham for judgment and rule. That ministry is based on the provisions of the new covenant received by faith in the provision of Christ. . . . This setting aside of the nation-servant creates the discontinuity in the fulfillment of covenant agreements with Israel."

A brief summary of **Dispensational Theology**:

1. A recognition of and holding to a strict distinction between Israel and the Church.
2. A consistently literal principle of interpretation, particularly when it comes to Bible prophecy.
3. A belief that the purpose of God is His own glory rather than eternal salvation through Christ.

## **New Covenant Theology**

New Covenant Theology shows the centrality of God's **promise and fulfillment** in His Son, Jesus Christ! A New Covenant theologian states: "Dispensationalism cannot get Israel and the church together in any sense whatsoever, and Covenant Theology cannot get them apart" (Reisinger, 19). However, New Covenant *Theology finds the realization of all that the Old Covenant typified in Christ and His New Agreement with sinners*. The Mosaic economy is viewed as a temporal, conditional covenant that has been forever replaced by the glory of the New Covenant (see 2 Cor. 3).

Comparisons of the Three Positions:

New Covenant Theology has a great deal in common with classic Covenant Theology, in particular in how Israel and the Church are viewed. Both Covenant Theology and New Covenant Theology do not see an *absolute distinction* between the Old Testament people of God (Israel) and the Church as Dispensational theologians do. One famous dispensationalist declared, "*The Church and Israel never meet.*" Covenant theologians and New Covenant theologians disagree. Covenant Theology and New Covenant Theology also are very similar in their soteriology (view of "salvation") and eschatology (view of "the end times"). In terms of soteriology, most Covenant theologians and New Covenant theologians believe that God in His sovereign delivers His people through the redemption that is found in Jesus Christ (Mat. 1:21). In terms of eschatology, some Covenant and New Covenant theologians see a literal millennium and some don't, but neither would hold to a future millennium for the reinstatement of Israel as in Dispensationalism.

There is a major point of contention however between Covenant Theology and New Covenant Theology. It has to do with **Law**. In the church's relation to the Mosaic Law in this age of grace, New Covenant Theology has more in common with Dispensationalism than it does Covenant Theology.

## **New Covenant Theology vs. Covenant Theology**

**Areas of Agreement between NCT and Covenant Theology:**

The Church has become "spiritual Israel."

Gentiles are heirs to the Abrahamic Covenant (Gal. 3:8–9; Eph. 2:11; Rom. 4:1–13; Rev. 5:9).

Acknowledges the redemptive-historical hermeneutic.

Both usually view salvation in terms of God's sovereign grace.

The Old Testament does have prophecies of the Church age (Jer. 31:31–34; Heb. 8).  
God's main purpose in history is Christ and His Church (elect throughout all ages).

Everyone ever saved is saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone (Rom. 4:1-16).

Christ offered a spiritual kingdom to ethnic Israel but was rejected. Spiritual Israel, however, accepted and continues to accept the kingdom.

The Kingdom of God is now through the dominion of Christ in the heart.

### **Areas of Disagreement between NCT and Covenant Theology:**

Because "the church" started at Pentecost, there is therefore no "Church" as such in the Old Testament/Covenant, though there are people of God delivered by God's grace through faith in the OT.

The three "theological covenants" of Covenant Theology (The covenants of redemption, works, and grace) are rejected by New Covenant theologians in favor of the shadow/reality of the Law and Gospel.

A New Covenant Theologian sees the Mosaic Law as only a means of blessing in Canaan.

The Mosaic Law is fulfilled with the advent of Christ and the New Covenant; New Covenant believers are under the Law of Christ (1 Cor. 9:21).

The Holy Spirit worked differently in the Old Covenant than in the New (the Spirit now indwells believers).

The biggest difference between classical Covenant Theology and New Covenant Theology is how they view the Mosaic Law. Covenant Theology sees the Mosaic Law as divided into civil, ceremonial, and moral, with only the moral law remaining in effect.

New Covenant Theology sees the New Testament writers as referring to the Mosaic Law in its totality (in other words all 613 laws, not only the Ten Commandments). Therefore, when Paul says that "we are no longer under a tutor" (Gal. 3:25) he is saying that the Mosaic Law *en toto* has passed away.

There is still a Law in the New Testament however. Paul says that he is "under the law of Christ" (1 Cor. 9:21), and he is therefore still responsible to Law.

The eternal, unchanging moral law is expressed in both the New and Old Law, but the Old Law doesn't itself carry over. The moral commands given by the writers of the New Testament (Jesus and His apostles) are "The Law of Christ".

As Moses went to a mountain to get the Law, so Christ went up into a mountain to give the new Law (Mat. 5-7; 2 Cor. 3).

## New Covenant Theology vs. Dispensationalism

### Dispensationalism sees God working with the nation of Israel in this manner:

- (1) The dispensation of innocence (Gen. 1-3), wherein the test was the eating from the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil," and the failure was the fall of man into sin.
- (2) The dispensation of conscience (Gen. 4:14), wherein the test was proper sacrifice and the failure was the continual evil of men's hearts judged by the flood.
- (3) The dispensation of human government (Gen. 9:15, 11:1-9), wherein the test was governance and compliance with government and the failure was evidenced at the tower of Babel.
- (4) The dispensation of promise (Gen. 12:1-4; Exod. 18), wherein the test came when God offered the Law to the Israelites, and the failure is alleged to be their abandonment of a prior grace/faith relationship with God by their rash and foolish acceptance of the Law.
- (5) The dispensation of Law (Exod. 19; Acts 1), the test of which came when Jesus came to earth and offered the Jews the Davidic kingdom which they refused, so God postponed the fulfillment of the kingdom promise.
- (6) The dispensation of grace (Acts 2; Rev. 19), wherein the test is for Christians to live obediently in grace, but the failure is predicted to be the apostasy of the institutional church.
- (7) The dispensation of the kingdom (Rev. 20), a thousand year period which will end in final rebellion leading to the judgment of God upon the earth then "new heaven and new earth."

New Covenant Theology says that the Kingdom of God has come and is now. The Law was a shadow of the reality of Jesus Christ and the fulfillment of the Law is through His Person and work.

- (1) Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of Messianic promises in the Old Testament,
- (2) All of God's redemptive and salvific actions are centered in and expressive of the Person and work of Jesus Christ, and
- (3) God continues to act in grace as the dynamic life of the risen Lord Jesus is lived out in Christians.

The Bible does not commence with Abrahamic promises. The Bible does not begin at Genesis 12 or 17. Neither should our theological explanation. Immediately after the fall of man into sin, recorded in **Genesis 3:1-7**, God began to make "promises" of the Messiah He would send to remedy the death consequences of man's sin and restore the spiritual presence of God in man. The first Messianic promise is found in **Genesis 3:15** when God promised that "*the seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent.*" Messianic promises precede and supersede Abrahamic promises! Messianic promises are universal in their application and spiritual in their fulfillment, rather than racially, nationally or religiously exclusive in physical, militaristic and geographic fulfillment. Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the Messianic promises of the Old Testament, including those given to Abraham (see II Cor. 1:20). Jesus Christ is the central "key" to understanding all of God's promises and all of God's dealing with man.