

# "Covenant Theology Versus New Covenant Theology"

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## Introduction:

A proper understanding of the nature of "Covenant" is essential to the proper understanding of the Bible. It provides the proper relationship between the Old and New Testaments, between the Law and the Gospel; it provides the proper continuity of God's redemptive purpose being accomplished in the world. In this brief study we will examine the all important concept of covenant.

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There are three basic schools of thought on God's Covenant:

## Dispensational Theology

- I. Dispensational theology maintains a hermeneutic of strict literal biblical interpretation.
- II. Dispensationalism teaches that history is divided into various periods or stages (dispensations).
  - A. Proponents have listed as many as seven: innocence, conscience, human government, promise, law, grace, kingdom.
    1. There is an absolute discontinuity between the Old and New Covenants
    2. God is carrying out three distinct programs: one for the Jews, one for the Church, and one for the nations.
  - B. Dispensationalism teaches that God has two separate and distinct people – National Israel and the church. Israel is God's earthly people, the church is His heavenly people. They deny the spiritual identity of Israel with the church.
    1. God has two separate plans for these two distinct people.
      - An earthly kingdom for Israel postponed until Christ's coming and establishment of His earthly kingdom.
      - A heavenly kingdom for the church existing in eternity
    2. They interpret the church as only pertaining to this present dispensation (it does not include Old Testament saints)
  - C. Most Dispensationalists teach that God has two plans of salvation:

1. Old Testament believers were saved by works (keeping the Mosaic Law) and sacrifices.
2. New Testament believers are saved by grace through faith.

### Covenant Theology

- I. Covenant theology sees God's historical outworking of redemption grounded upon God's eternal covenant.
  - A. The Covenant of Redemption
    1. All historical Biblical covenants are grounded upon God's eternal covenant and are to be understood in relationship to God's eternal plan. .
    2. In this eternal covenant the Father gives His Son to be the eternal head and Redeemer of the elect and the Son gives Himself to be the Surety for them.
      - a. The Father has elected a people by His unconditional grace and has pledged to give them to His Son as His inheritance.
      - b. The Son has pledged to serve as the Redeemer and Mediator of God's elect people.
    3. This covenant is between the Father and His Son, not between God and man. The covenant was proposed by the Father and accepted by the Son.
    4. The covenant of redemption was conditional upon obedience but Jesus accepted the covenant on behalf of the elect. Jesus was made under the law and met all of its demands. He became obedient even unto death (**Phil. 2:8**).
  - B. The Covenant of Grace
 

**Herman Witsius** – “The covenant of grace is a compact or agreement between God and the elect sinner; God on his part declaring his free goodwill concerning eternal salvation, and every thing relative thereto, freely to be given to those in covenant, by, and for the mediator Christ; and man on his part consenting to that goodwill by a sincere faith.”  
(Witsius, Herman. *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man*, Book II, Chapter 1, Page 164.)

**1689 Confession: (Chapter 7:2)** - “Moreover, man having brought himself under the curse of the law by his fall, it please the Lord to make a covenant of grace, wherein he freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved; and promising to give unto all those that are ordained to eternal life, his Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe.”

    1. In time God's eternal covenant of redemption is interposed upon the elect through the covenant of grace. The covenant of redemption undergirds the covenant of grace.
    2. The Gospel that offers Jesus Christ to sinners is an invitation to enter into a covenant relationship with God.
    3. This involves the fulfillment of the eternal Covenant of Redemption. The covenant of grace presupposes the eternal covenant and is founded upon it.
    4. The Requirement of the Covenant
      - a. Faith
 

**Romans 10:9-11** – "That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with

the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the scripture saith, Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed."

**Acts 16:30-31** – "And brought them out, and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house."

b. Repentance

**Acts 2:37-38** – "Now when they heard *this*, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men *and* brethren, what shall we do? Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost."

**Acts 3:19** – "Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord;"

c. Faith and repentance is essential for entering into the New Covenant

(1) But this too comes by grace

(2) Regeneration is essential for faith and repentance

d. Faith & repentance are necessary for are essential for entrance into a covenant relationship with God and are a prerequisite for new covenant Baptism

**Acts 2:38** – "Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost."

II. There is a continuity between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

A. The Old Covenant isn't replaced by the New Covenant but is fulfilled by the New Covenant.

B. The Old Covenant was based upon a nation chosen by grace

**See Deuteronomy 7:6-8**

1 This covenant was conditional – it could be broken and was broken

2 It involved an elect nation of which not all knew and obeyed God. You could be in the Old Covenant but not know God savingly (an election within the election)

3. The Old Covenant was dedicated by the shedding of blood

**Hebrews 9:18** – "Whereupon neither the first *testament* was dedicated without blood."

**Hebrews 9:22** – "And almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission."

4. The nation would ultimately be rejected of God – But not true Israel!!

**Luke 13:28-29** – "There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when ye shall see Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets, in the kingdom of God, and you *yourselves* thrust out. And they shall come from the east, and *from* the west, and from the north, and *from* the south, and shall sit down in the kingdom of God."

**Matthew 21:43** – “Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof.”

- a. God would not forsake those with circumcised hearts  
**Deuteronomy 10:16** – “Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiffnecked.”
- b. God would not forsake His remnant  
**Jeremiah 23:3** – “And I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all countries whither I have driven them, and will bring them again to their folds; and they shall be fruitful and increase.  
**Jeremiah 31:7** – “For thus saith the LORD; Sing with gladness for Jacob, and shout among the chief of the nations: publish ye, praise ye, and say, O LORD, save thy people, the remnant of Israel.”
- c. God would not forsake the true Israel because of the election of grace  
**Romans 9:6-8** – “Not as though the word of God hath taken none effect. For they *are* not all Israel, which are of Israel: Neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, *are they* all children: but, In Isaac shall thy seed be called. That is, They which are the children of the flesh, these *are* not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed.”

- C. The eternal Covenant of Redemption is ultimately fulfilled in the New Covenant
1. The New Covenant is based upon people who have new hearts. The same Ten Commandments that were written upon the stone tablets are now written upon our hearts - (The Ten Commandments have not been abolished)  
**See Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:24-28**
    - a. In the New Covenant everyone will know the Lord
    - b. In the New Covenant everyone will obey and honor the Lord
  2. The New Covenant cannot be broken because it is not based upon our obedience to the Law but upon Christ's obedience
    - a. Jesus Christ is the Guarantor  
**Hebrews 7:22** – “By so much was Jesus made a surety of a better testament.”  
**See Hebrews 8:6-13**  
**1 Corinthians 1:30** – “But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption:”
    - b. Jesus sealed the Covenant with His own blood  
**Matthew 26:28** – “For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.”  
**Mark 14:24** – “And he said unto them, This is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many.”  
**1 Corinthians 11:25** – “After the same manner also *he took* the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new

testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink *it*, in remembrance of me."

3. All who are included in this covenant are united to a body
  - a. The community of the Covenant is the church
  - b. Individualism is not a part of this covenant
  - c. This is why we share in the Lord's Supper as a body
4. The demand of the New Covenant is a new heart – this has always been God's demand.
  - a. Even under the Old Covenant – they were commanded to circumcise their hearts.
  - b. Even under the Old Covenant, men were saved through trusting Christ (as revealed in God's promise) rather than through their own works.
  - c. This new heart is made possible through regeneration  
**John 3:3** – "Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."
  - d. Now the Holy Spirit creates within us new hearts to become partakers of that covenant

### III. Summary:

1. Covenant theology sees all of redemptive history as the progressive revelation of God's eternal covenant between the Father and the Son.
2. Covenant theology sees an inseparable continuity between the Old Testament and the New Testament.
3. Covenant Theology recognizes the eternal, unchanging nature of God's moral law. The law is still binding and we are still obligated to it, but we can only keep it in Jesus Christ. Our keeping of the law is the product of Christ working in us "both to will and to do of *his* good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13).
4. A proper understanding of Covenant theology is essential for a proper understanding of the Bible.
5. Although Covenant theology is of great importance, it must not be used narrowly to justify a particular direction of theology.

J. Ligon Duncan – "Covenant theology is not a response to Dispensationalism. It existed long before the rudiments of classical Dispensationalism were brought together in the nineteenth century. Covenant theology is not an excuse for baptizing children, nor merely a convention to justify a particular approach to the sacraments (modern paedocommunionism and baptismal regenerationism). Covenant theology is not sectarian, but an ecumenical Reformed approach to understanding the Bible, developed in the wake of the magisterial Reformation, but with roots stretching back to the earliest days of catholic Christianity and historically appreciated in all the various branches of the Reformed community (Baptist, Congregationalist, Independent, Presbyterian, Anglican, and Reformed). Covenant theology cannot be reduced to serving merely as the justification for some particular view of children in the covenant (covenant successionism), or for a certain kind of eschatology, or for a specific philosophy of education (whether it be homeschooling or Christian schools or classical schools). Covenant theology is bigger than that. It is more important than that."

## New Covenant Theology

Intro:

1. Some see New Covenant Theology as a middle ground between Dispensational Theology and Covenant Theology.
  2. Giving a precise outline of New Covenant Theology is difficult because there are differences among those who hold to this system.
 

“It is somewhat difficult to critique New Covenant Theology for at least three reasons. First, New Covenant Theology is not a monolithic movement. New Covenant theologians differ on some of the nuances involved with defining New Covenant Theology. Second, New Covenant Theology is a relatively new school of thought. Though there is much in print on New Covenant Theology, there is no definitive work as yet. Third, one major adherent of New Covenant Theology has recently acknowledged that he will have to modify his understanding of the New Covenant Theology and revise some of his published works” (Barcellos, *In Defense of the Decalogue*, page 8)
- I. New Covenant Theology sees a discontinuity between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant.
    - A. The New Covenant has a distinctively new character to it
      1. The New Covenant law of Christ stands in sharp contrast to the Old Covenant law of Moses.
      2. New Covenant Theology teaches that the New Covenant has replaced the Old Covenant.
 

“The primary premise of NCT is that the New Covenant as mediated by Christ is a brand NEW covenant, which totally replaces the Old Covenant:”

(From a paper, *In Defense of the New Covenant*” by Michael W. Adams)
    - B. Where Covenant Theology recognizes the eternal, unchanging nature of God's moral law New Covenant Theology denies this
      1. God did not reveal His moral law to Adam, Noah, or even Moses
      2. The Ten Commandments were temporary
      3. Whatever is repeated from the Old Testament in the New Testament is binding but if it is not repeated it is not binding – again marking a discontinuity between the OT and the NT.
 

(In response to this position Richard Barcellos writes, “It is simply not true that only those things from the Old Testament repeated in the New are still binding. Where is the exegetical basis for such a claim? There is none. Where does the New Testament tell us that the absence of the Old Testament commands is the death knell of such commands?” (Barcellos, *In Defense of the Decalogue*” Page 86).
      4. New Covenant proponents believe that God waited until the coming of Christ to reveal His perfect law.
        - a. Christ has actually changed God’s laws
        - b. The Law of Christ is actually different than the law of Moses – this is distinctively seen with the 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment

- II. New Covenant Theology is an errant hermeneutic of the Word of God
- A. Scripture consistently demonstrates a continuity between the Old and New Testaments.
1. The Passover was instituted as an everlasting ordinance  
**Exodus 12:14** – "And this day shall be unto you for a memorial; and ye shall keep it a feast to the LORD throughout your generations; ye shall keep it a feast by an ordinance for ever."  
    - a. The Passover is continued in the Lord's Supper.
    - b. Jesus is the real Passover lamb
  2. In Romans 11 we find the New Covenant branches being grafted into the Old Covenant olive tree. It isn't a different tree but the same covenant tree with branches grafted in.
  3. The New Covenant law is the same as the Old Covenant law  
**Jeremiah 31:33** – "But this *shall be* the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people."  
**Hebrews 10:16** – "This *is* the covenant that I will make with them after those days, saith the Lord, I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds will I write them;"  
    - a. "My law" is referring to a law that was already written
    - b. It was the law written on stone that would be written on the hearts of God's people.
    - c. Paul's statement is **2 Tim 1:8** is referring to God's moral law as given in the Mosaic law.  
**1 Timothy 1:8** – "But we know that the law *is* good, if a man use it lawfully."
  4. James 2:8-11 surely affirms the continuity of the law.
- B. Christ came to fulfill the Old Covenant
1. He confirmed the Law of Moses and upheld it rigorously  
**Matthew 5:17-19** – "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. <sup>18</sup> For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach *them*, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven."
  2. Jesus quoted the Mosaic law in the Sermon on the Mount – He was not stating a new law but affirming and strengthening the Mosaic law. There is no difference between the law of God and the law of Christ
- III. New Covenant Theology risks antinomianism
- A. According to Samuel Bolton in *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom* the law has three uses
1. To convict of sin and drive the sinner to Christ
  2. To restrain sin in society
  3. To function in the life of a believer as a rule of life  
This third use is the realm around which antinomianism revolves.

- B. Antinomianism exists in various forms
1. Practical Antinomianism – since grace cannot be lost once received why bother about keeping the commandments
  2. Doctrinal Antinomianism – the way to growth in grace, promotion of sanctification and holiness of life is not by keeping the commandments. It is the work of the Holy Spirit; we must walk in the Spirit. The popular saying, "Let go and let God" lends itself to this form of antinomianism.
  3. New Covenant Theology creates a disconnect between the Old and New Testaments with the Old Testament law being abrogated – all we need to do is follow the law of Christ.  
They try to make a distinction between the law of God and the law of Christ.
- C. God's Moral Law cannot be abrogated
1. It is not arbitrary or positive but based on God's nature or character
  2. The moral law applies to the whole human race, not just the Old Covenant Jews

#### IV. Key New Covenant Theology Texts

- A. **Matthew 5:17** – "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil."
1. The NCT proponents are claiming that this verse proves that Jesus is declaring the Mosaic law null and void. The law has no part in the life of a believer for Christ has fulfilled it in them.
  2. They fail to take into regard the distinctions between the ceremonial, civil, and moral aspects of the law.
    - a. The ceremonial law dealt with the religious worship of Israel under the Old Covenant. Jesus fulfilled the ceremonial law by His death.
    - b. The civil law had regards to Israel as a theocracy under God. While some of the principles still apply, the civil law no longer exists.
    - c. The moral law (Ten Commandments) is laid down forever for people of all ages. To this Jesus said, "I came not to destroy." In other words Jesus did not destroy, abrogate, or declare obsolete the law.  
The moral law stands forever as God's standard of righteousness.
  3. Jesus Christ met the demands of the law.
    - a. God requires perfect obedience to the law. Jesus met all of the demands of the law.  
Children's Catechism:  
Q. #45 – What did Christ undertake in the covenant of grace?  
A. To keep the whole law for His people and to suffer the punishment due to their sins.
    - b. That Jesus met the demands of the law (and thus removing its curse) does not erase the law as a standard for God's people.
- B. **Romans 6:14** – "For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace."
1. NCT proponents state that this absolutely proves that the Old Testament law is abrogated – we are no longer under the law.



2. What did Paul mean by "ye are not under the law, but under grace."
    - a. The first part of the verse gives us some clarity -  
"For sin shall not have dominion over you" – in other words we are no longer under the law as a covenant of works like Adam was. We won't be condemned for falling short of it, we are under grace.
    - b. Justification does not come by keeping the law.
  3. Does this verse take us out from under law? No! We are now free to obey God's law – and it is not grievous.  
**1 John 5:3** – "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous."
- C. **John 1:17** – "For the law was given by Moses, *but* grace and truth came by Jesus Christ."
1. NCT proponents claim this verse proves a distinction between the law of Moses and the law of Christ.
  2. Does this mean Moses did not know truth or grace? Are the law and the gospel in conflict with each other?
  3. This verse does not present a conflict but a comparison.  
**Romans 3:31** – "Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law."

V. The issue of the Sabbath

- A. Many New Covenant theologians hold that unless it is repeated in the New Testament, the Old Testament law is abrogated and since the 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment is not repeated it is no longer binding.
  1. In reality, only the 5<sup>th</sup> through the 9<sup>th</sup> Commandments are actually repeated. Are we to annul the entire first tablet of the Ten Commandments?
  2. There is no Biblical basis for holding this position.  
"It is simply not true that only those things from the Old Testament repeated in the New are still binding. Where is the exegetical basis for such a claim? There is none" (Bruce A. Ray, Celebrating the Sabbath, [Phillipsburg, P&R Publishing, 2000], 86).
- B. Arguments against the perpetuity of the Sabbath - Romans 14:5-6; Gal. 4:9-10; Col. 2:16
  1. Romans 14:1-6 - Paul is almost certainly speaking of the various feast days and fast days consistent with the ceremonial law. Notice in Verse 14 Paul is dealing with things "unclean" obviously pointing to the ceremonial law
    - a. Hendriksen says that since the language in verses 2-4 & 6 brings up the idea of fasting this probably refers to fast days
    - b. Had Paul meant the Sabbath day he would have been clear - notice the number of times Paul mentions food here compared to the days mentioned only in verses 5-6
    - c. Matthew Henry - "We must understand it with an exception of the Lord's day, which all Christians unanimously observed; but they made no account, took not notice, of those antiquated festivals of the Jews."

2. Gal. 4:9-10 - The whole purpose of Galatians is Paul warning against the Judaizers who were trying to add works of the law to the finished work of Christ.
    - a. Verse 10 refers to ceremonial observances
      - Days - the various one day feasts
      - Months - the new moon rituals mentioned in Numbers 10:10
      - Times - or seasons pointing to great annual feasts
      - Years - Year of Jubilee and Sabbatical years
    - b. This would in no way abrogate the 4th Commandment
  3. Col. 2:16 - Paul is warning against those who would add to the work of Christ.
    - a. Verses 6-10 - we are complete in Christ - adding anything to the finished work of Christ is V.8 vain deceit after the tradition of men.
    - b. Paul is once again clearly speaking of the festival days and feast days - the many Sabbath days (σαββάτων – plural) - ceremonial  
Paul is certainly not speaking of the Sabbath day - nowhere do we find the Ten Commandments equated with the ceremonial law -
- C. Arguments for the perpetuity of the Sabbath
1. The Sabbath is a creation ordinance
  2. The Sabbath was in force and being observed before the giving of the Law on Sinai
  3. The Sabbath was to be observed by both Jews and Gentiles  
"nor thy stranger that is within thy gates"  
Foreigners were excluded from Levitical worship - for example they were forbidden to partake of the Passover, yet they are commanded to keep the Sabbath
  4. Violating the Sabbath was a capital offence - no ceremonial law carried this weight
  5. The Sabbath is part of the Ten Commandments all of which are moral
- D. New Testament Evidence for the change of day and its perpetuity
1. It began the very day of the Resurrection  
**John 20:19** – “Then the same day at evening, being the first *day* of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace *be* unto you.”
  2. In verse 26 we find them together again and Jesus, once again, met with them. According to the Jewish way of counting days this again the first day of the week  
**John 20:26** – “And after eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them: *then* came Jesus, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, Peace *be* unto you.”
  3. Pentecost in Acts 2 occurred on the first day of the week - the day God chose for the great outpouring of His Spirit - (See Lev. 23:15-16; Deut. 16:9)
  4. Other passages

**Acts 20:7** – “And upon the first *day* of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the morrow; and continued his speech until midnight.”

**1 Corinthians 16:1-2** – “Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye. Upon the first *day* of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as *God* hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come.”

**Revelation 1:10** – “I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day”