

Faith Pulpit

What Is New Covenant Theology?

Over the past few years, the Faith Pulpit has alerted its readers to some aberrant theological movements and positions, e.g., the Emerging Church, the New Perspective on Paul, and the Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic. These views may seem obscure at first, but they eventually make their way into the life and practice of a church. Several elements of the Emerging Church movement are already showing up in churches outside that movement. This issue of the Faith Pulpit examines another doctrinal issue that pastors and church leaders should be aware of. Tim Little, adjunct professor at Faith Baptist Theological Seminary, describes and evaluates New Covenant Theology to help us understand another movement that is poised to impact churches in the near future.

New Covenant Theology (NCT) is a rather new theological movement.^{[1](#)} Its proponents come from the local church rather than academia, and the majority of its adherents are found within the local church. Its proponents include Tom Wells, Fred Zaspel, John Reisinger, and Steve Lehrer.

Some people within the movement have reacted against Dispensationalism or Covenant Theology, and sometimes both. John Reisinger writes, “As New Covenant Theologians, we believe that historic Dispensationalism, as a system, is not biblical. . . . We are also convinced that Covenant Theology, as a system, is just as unscriptural.”^{[2](#)}

Several of its proponents come out of a Reformed Baptist position, abandoning the tripartite division of the law (moral, civil, and ceremonial), infant baptism, and the historic covenants of works and grace. While they abandon these aspects of Reformed theology, most also reject dispensational distinctives, such as the distinction between Israel and the church and dispensational hermeneutics.

One of the bulwarks of NCT is its hermeneutics. NCT has admonished theologians to look beyond their presuppositions, analyze the text exegetically, and craft their theology around their exegesis.^{[3](#)}

What distinguishes New Covenant Theology from these other movements? A key component is its primary hermeneutical principle, which they call the “logical priority of the New Testament over the Old Testament.”⁴ If we understand this aspect of New Covenant Theology, we will have a good grasp of the movement and how it approaches the Bible (their hermeneutics).

In this article we will define progressive revelation, determine what NCT theologians mean by “the logical priority of the NT,” and look at the New Covenant (Jer. 31) as an illustration of their hermeneutics at work.

Progressive Revelation

Most Christians subscribe to a belief in progressive revelation. Wells and Zaspel comment, “The assumption here is that there is advance in revelation as well as an accumulation of sources.”⁵ At another point they state, “Like so many other teachings of the Scriptures, we should expect to find the doctrine of divine law progressively (emphasis mine) unfolded throughout the history of redemption.”⁶ This understanding of progressive revelation appears similar to other scholars.⁷ Craig Blomberg gives an illustration of progressive revelation when he writes:

God’s progressive revelation allows for development in Scripture in numerous ways. An excellent example is the OT’s progressive understanding of an afterlife. Initially Sheol seems little more than the grave or a very shadowy existence beyond. But by Daniel 12, resurrection of both just and unjust is articulated, and the NT even more clearly delineates the nature and occupants of heaven and hell.⁸

These definitions and explanations of progressive revelation are neutral, but how a person applies his concept of progressive revelation affects his hermeneutics. Millard Erickson writes, “If we understand God to have worked in a process of accomplishing redemption for humanity, revealing himself and his plan gradually, we will weight later developments more heavily than earlier ones.”⁹ The question then becomes, how is this later revelation weightier, and can the later revelation correct or contradict the previous revelation? While some may say “yes,”¹⁰ for the purpose of clarifying the difference between progressive revelation and the logical priority of the New Testament, I answer “no.”¹¹

Logical Priority of the New Testament

Wells and Zaspel state, “NT revelation, due to its finality, must be allowed to speak first on every issue that it addresses.”¹² NCT proponents contend that in issues where the New Testament and the Old Testament appear to contradict each other, the New Testament is correct and the Old Testament should be understood in light of the New Testament. NCT adherents would not say the Old Testament is wrong, but they would say that our historical grammatical understanding of the Old Testament text is wrong.

Using Luke 24 as an illustration, Carl Hoch explains it this way: “Jesus had to open the disciples’ minds so that they could understand the Old Testament Scriptures. One can conclude that Jesus provided a hermeneutic that would allow the disciples to interpret the Old Testament. . . . They now had to read it christologically as seen through the lens of Jesus’ redemptive work as the Messiah of Israel.”¹³ This Christological lens is the logical priority of the New Testament.

Michael Adams is quite critical of the historical grammatical interpretation of Scripture. He recognizes that the historical grammatical hermeneutic should be employed, but he sees deficiencies in it as well. “I think that type of hermeneutic turns a blind eye to the different literary types found in Scripture and it fails to take into account the progressive nature of revelation in the Bible.”¹⁴ Thus Adams at times employs a figurative, or symbolic, understanding of the text. This approach is warranted, he claims, on the basis of Jesus Christ and the New Testament authors.

Tom Wells similarly states, “For some years, I have been uncomfortable with what is called ‘Classic Dispensationalism.’ . . . My discomfort arises from this system’s presupposition that we can know how to read the Old Testament prophecy without being told how by the Lord Jesus. It uses ‘literal’ or ‘natural’ interpretation.”¹⁵ In addition Wells advocates a figurative, or symbolic, understanding of Old Testament texts.

The New Covenant

While NCT proponents state that the NT does not contradict the OT, that is exactly what transpires. In Jeremiah 31:31 God states explicitly that the New Covenant is “with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.” Steve Lehrer comments, “If you read the verses that surround this text . . . , it is crystal clear that this New Covenant, in its Old Testament context, is promised to the geo-political nation of Israel at some point in the future.”¹⁶

Later Lehrer writes, “The Israelites would have read Jeremiah 31 and thought that the New Covenant restoration was exclusively for them. But when God interprets His own word He tells us that this is simply not the case.”¹⁷ Lehrer understands Jeremiah 31 in light of the New Testament, and he understands the New Testament to teach that the church is the recipient of the New Covenant. How is one to understand Jeremiah? NCT proponents say the answer is figuratively, symbolically, or in Lehrer’s words, typologically. He “understands Israel to be an unbelieving type or picture of the true people of God, the church. . . . Israel never was a believing people as a whole. Israel always had a tiny remnant of true believers in her midst. Israel was not the church in the Old Testament, but they did function as a type or picture of the church-the true people of God.”¹⁸

According to Lehrer, the reference to “the house of Israel and the house of Judah” in Jeremiah 31 then refers to the church typologically. He abandons the grammatical and historical hermeneutic. Such an approach is not true progressive revelation. It is simply the extension of NCT’s presupposition of the

logical priority of the New Testament.

An Evaluation

Progressive Revelation An emphasis on the New Testament is commendable, but why does the New Testament need to speak “first” on these matters? If revelation is progressive, then later revelation should not contradict the former revelation. In this matter NCT moves in a different direction from a dispensational (or premillennial) understanding of progressive revelation.

The Logical Priority of the NT The problem with the “logical priority of the New Testament” is that it opens the door for errant understandings of both the New and Old Testaments. The NCT theologian assumes that his understanding of the New Testament is correct, and he then interprets the Old Testament in light of this understanding. If the NCT theologian’s understanding of the New Testament is incorrect, he would convey that error into his exegesis of the Old Testament.

The New Covenant Theologians have presented better options than NCT that honor the grammatical historical understanding of both Jeremiah and the New Testament texts related to the New Covenant.¹⁹ These options present a Biblical theology of Jeremiah and a Biblical theology of the New Testament where contradiction is avoided and a correct understanding of progressive revelation is employed.

A Question of Presuppositions

NCT proponents criticize Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology “because [their] basic presuppositions are either assumed or wrongly deduced from their theological system.”²⁰ Yet as we have seen, New Covenant Theology is guilty of the very same premise because it approaches the text, particularly the Old Testament, with the faulty presupposition of the logical priority of the New Testament.

What then should be our approach? We should study the Old Testament first and read the New Testament from the perspective of the New Testament authors. A true Biblical theology of the Old Testament will not contradict the Biblical theology of the New Testament.

Works Cited

1. The name “New Covenant Theology” has led to some confusion. NCT is not that interested in the New Covenant. The purpose of the name is to emphasize their hermeneutics. Nevertheless, the New Covenant does serve as an illustration of their hermeneutics at work.
2. John G. Reisinger, *Abraham’s Four Seeds* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 1998), ii.
3. Reisinger, iv. Reisinger adds, “The basic presuppositions of any system of theology must be established with specific texts of Scripture and not with theological terms. Otherwise, our basic building blocks will be the product of logic and not of the Word of God itself.” Tom Wells and Fred Zaspel state, “NCT is a fresh attempt to put the text first.” (*New Covenant Theology: Description, Definition, Defense* [Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2002], 22.) Steve Lehrer states, “Our theology cannot

- be based on counting noses, but on sticking our noses into Scripture and examining and weighing men's opinions against God's Word." ("Is There a Future for Israel in Romans 11?" <http://idsaudio.org/ids/pdf/scripture/romans11.pdf> [accessed December 29, 2008], 9).
4. Wells and Zaspel, 22.
 5. Wells and Zaspel, 7, n. 9.
 6. Wells and Zaspel, 139.
 7. Charles Hodge writes, "What at first is only obscurely intimated is gradually unfolded in subsequent parts of the sacred volume, until the truth is revealed in its fullness." (Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 [1871; reprinted by Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, 2003], 446.
 8. Craig L. Blomberg, "The Unity and Diversity of Scripture," *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, gen. eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press), 71. Also see Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 9, and Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 15-16.
 9. Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2001), 132 (emphasis mine).
 10. Michael Adams, "Rethinking the Historical Grammatical Approach to Interpretation," *The Master's Seminary Journal Blog*, posted March 1, 2008 (accessed December 16, 2008).
 11. It is noteworthy that the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy's definition of progressive revelation is the following: "We affirm that God's revelation in the Holy Scriptures was progressive. We deny that later revelation, which may fulfill earlier revelation, ever corrects or contradicts it. We further deny that any normative revelation has been given since the completion of the New Testament writings." (Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994], 1205).
 12. Wells and Zaspel, 7 (emphasis mine).
 13. Carl B. Hoch, *All Things New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 12.
 14. Adams (emphasis mine).
 15. Tom Wells, *The Priority of Jesus Christ* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2005), 81.
 16. Steve Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology: Questions Answered* (n.p.: Steve Lehrer, 2006), 170.
 17. Lehrer, 175-176.
 18. Lehrer, 66. See also 176.
 19. The purpose of this article is not to argue for a specific position concerning the New Covenant but to evaluate the hermeneutics of New Covenant Theology.
 20. Reisinger, ii.

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