

NEW COVENANT THEOLOGY

New Covenant Theology (NCT) obviously has an emphasis on the new covenant. The specific language of 'new covenant' is found in Jeremiah 31:31, Luke 22:20, 1 Corinthians 11:25, 2 Corinthians 3:6, and Hebrews 8:8,13, 9:15, 12:24. In what follows we aim to explain what NCT is and why it is not to be accepted as true to the Bible.

Barcellos finds eight areas of problem. Considering these problem areas will also make clear what NCT is all about.

1. What is the promise of the new covenant? Jeremiah 31:31-34 is the only Old Testament text that specifically mentions the new covenant. One of the promises is, "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts" (verse 33). What is this 'law'? NCT does not identify this law with the Ten Commandments. Is this true? Note the following about the law as promised to be written on the heart of God's people in the new covenant:

- "My" law, so it is God's law. It had been set before them and their fathers (Jeremiah 44:10). It was something that had been revealed to them by God and that they had broken (see also Jeremiah 6:19, 9:13, 16:11, 26:4). It was something well known.
- All who will be members of the new covenant community will have this law put within them, written on their hearts. This was not true of the old covenant community as a whole.
- God is both the author of this law, and the One who writes it on the heart. It was specifically the Ten Words (Commandments) that God wrote with His own finger on the tablets of stone and gave to Moses (Exodus 31:18, Deuteronomy 9:10). The change in the writing is not in the content of the law, but where God writes it.

By way of conclusion, there is every reason for identifying the law written on the heart in the new covenant as the Ten Commandments specifically. There was something very special about the Ten Commandments. As 10 in number they are supremely *the* law of God. It is these alone that God wrote Himself. All the others were revealed to Moses who then wrote them down.

2. What was the old covenant? NCT identifies the old covenant with the Ten Commandments. Exodus 34:27-28 seems to support this, where the covenant is called the Ten Commandments. For those who follow NCT teaching the Ten Commandments are always and only to be identified with the old covenant and not with God's unchanging moral law. If this is true then it means that the Ten Commandments began at Sinai and ended at the cross. The following evidence shows this is not true, for the rest of the Bible clearly teaches that while the old covenant includes the Ten Commandments, it includes much more!

- The old covenant included such civil laws that had to do with slavery (Jeremiah 34:13-14).
- Ezekiel declares that the covenant was broken when ceremonial laws concerning bringing foreigners into the temple were broken (44:6-8).
- The author of the letter to the Hebrews understands that the first or old covenant includes the whole Mosaic legislation. It included "regulations for worship and an earthly place of holiness" (9:1). Further, the covenant was "inaugurated" with blood of sacrifice (9:18), a reference to Exodus 24:1-8. This inauguration ceremony took place after both

the Ten Commandments (ch. 20) AND the book of the covenant had been given (Exodus 24:7).

- Nor does Exodus 34:27-28 teach what NCT claims. Yes, God wrote the Ten Commandments for the second time. But Moses also wrote what is recorded in verses 10-26! It is prefaced with God's declaration that He is making a covenant (v. 10), and then ends with the words, "Write these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant". These words include what Moses has just written, so that they are also included in the covenant.

The question arises concerning the function of the Ten Commandments in the old covenant according to NCT. It is claimed that when the ten are considered as a unit, rather than as individual commands, then they are always thought of as a covenant. They make the conclusion that since the old covenant is no longer in force then the Ten Commandments as a unit are no longer in force as law under the new covenant. Individual commandments may be there as, for example, murder which was always wrong. However, an examination of the New Testament shows that the Ten Commandments continue to be thought of as a unit, even outside of the old covenant. So, for example, one of the commandments such as the fourth cannot be deleted, as the ten are a unity.

- 2 Corinthians 3:3. There is an obvious reference back to the Ten Commandments written on the tablets of stone. They are now written by Christ through the Holy Spirit on the hearts of Christians in the new covenant (verse 6, remember Jeremiah 31:33).
- Ephesians 6:2-3. Paul quotes the fifth of the Ten Commandments as the first to contain a promise. This assumes a well known series of commandments. It is not binding for us simply because it is repeated in the New Testament, but because it is one of the Ten Commandments that are the basics of Christian ethics even under the new covenant.
- 1 Timothy 1:8-11. There was a problem of teachers using the law vainly, for speculation, instead of the lawful use, for those who are not keeping it! What is the law Paul is referring to in verses 8-10? It is notable that the final five are one word summaries in order of numbers 5 to 9 in the Ten Commandments – "those who strike their fathers and mothers" (5th.), "murderers" (6th.), "the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality" (7th.), "enslavers" (8th.), "liars, perjurers" (9th.). It is therefore reasonable to suggest that the previous four refer to number 1 to 4 – "the ungodly" (1st.) "and sinners" (2nd.), "for the unholy" (3rd.) "and profane" (4th.) [see profaning the sabbath at Matthew 12:5]. If this is a true interpretation of what Paul has written, then it shows that the Ten Commandments as a whole remain the standard of law under the new covenant as they were in the old. This includes the sabbath!

3. Has the old covenant been abolished? The Bible clearly teaches that the old covenant, as a covenant, has been abolished. NCT asserts that not only the covenant, but also all the legislation contained in it has been abolished. So it is taught that there is no abiding moral validity of the Ten Commandments in the new covenant. This cannot be true as Jesus clearly teaches that He has not come "to abolish the Law or the Prophets" (the Old Testament), but "to fulfil them" (Matthew 5:17). Obviously, 'to fulfil' cannot mean 'to abolish', as they are contrasted. It remains authoritative "until heaven and earth pass away" (verse 18). So although the old covenant is no longer in force, the Old Testament (Law and Prophets) continues to be the rule for the Christian in the new covenant. Similarly,

Ephesians 2:14-16, refers to the ending of the old covenant with Israel that separated Israel from the rest of mankind. Yet its continuance as the moral standard, now applied to the new covenant situation, is affirmed later in the letter as Paul appeals to the fifth commandment (6:2-3).

4. Is the Sermon on the Mount a new law? What does Jesus mean in Matthew 5:21-48 by the contrast, “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ... But I say to you” (verses 21 & 22, etc.). Is Jesus giving new teaching in contrast to Moses, or is He giving the true interpretation of Moses? NCT claims that Jesus is a new lawgiver with higher commands. How do we answer this? We point out that the contrast is not between Jesus and Moses, but between Jesus and the Pharisees (verse 20). In the first part of the contrast Jesus gives what the Pharisees said; in the second part He gives his own teaching, the true meaning of the law of Moses. For example, the Pharisees had limited the committing of adultery to the act itself. Jesus traces the sin back to the inner person. The law of Moses does the same. The tenth commandment states, “You shall not covet your neighbour's wife” (Exodus 20:17, see also Proverbs 7:25). Similarly in Matthew 6:1-18 Jesus contrasts true righteousness with the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, and not with the law of Moses.

5. What is the identity of the moral law? By ‘moral law’ is meant law that is common to all men, not just Israel. Some who support NCT state that the moral law is all those of the Ten Commandments that were punished before the giving of the law at Sinai. For them this at least excludes the fourth, the sabbath commandment. They further claim that the Fourth commandment is the only one not repeated in the New Testament. There is no exegetical basis for defining the moral law in this way. Romans 2 from verse 12 refers to the law in reference to both Jews and Gentiles. Jews have the law revealed to them, and Paul goes on to reference some of the Ten Commandments – stealing, committing adultery, idolatry (verses 17-24). Gentiles do not have this law revealed to them in a written, nevertheless they have “the work of the law ... written on their hearts” (verse 15). In the context this law is at least the Ten Commandments.

6. What in the Old Testament is binding on those in New Testament days? NCT seems to have the principle that if something from the Old Testament is not repeated in the New, then it is not binding. The more common, traditional, principle, is that continuity between the old and new is assumed unless rescinded (as in Mark 7:19). If the NCT principle were true then most of the Old Testament would be irrelevant to the Christian, for example the book of Proverbs. Very little of Proverbs is repeated in the New Testament! Further, although it is true that the fourth commandment is not repeated directly as in Exodus 20:8-11 in the New Testament, that does not mean it is not binding upon us.

7. What is the place of Old Testament ethics for the Christian? If the NCT teaching under 6 is true, then the Old Testament is not binding for New Testament living. It is only what is in the New that is binding, that which Jesus and His apostles taught. But all the 66 books of the Bible are the word of God and are authoritative as properly interpreted. Jesus clearly taught that the whole Old Testament had a place in His kingdom (Matthew 5:17-20). Paul stated that the whole Old Testament is “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction,

and for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16), that it was written for our instruction (Romans 15:4).

8. Is New Covenant Theology new? What does our 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith teach? Does it, as NCT claims, fail to see the difference between the old and new covenants? It is true that the 1689, and the Westminster Confession of Faith that it follows, clearly states that the Ten Commandments are the law of God in both old and new covenants (19/5).

*19/2 The same law that was first written in man’s heart continued to be perfect rule of righteousness after Adam fell into sin, and was given by God upon Mount Sinai in the form of ten commandments, written in two tables. The first four commandments constitute our duty towards God and the remaining six our duty to man. The ten are known as the **moral law**.*

*19/3 Besides the moral law God also gave to the people of Israel **ceremonial laws** which served as types of things to come. They fell into two main groups. In one group were rites, partly relating to worship, which pre-figured Christ, His graces, actions, sufferings, and the blessings He procured for us. The other group contained a variety of instructions about moral duties. By divine appointment all these ceremonial laws were to be observed, but only until they were abrogated in New Testament days by Jesus Christ, the true Messiah and only law-giver, who was empowered by the Father to terminate them.*

*19/4 To the people of Israel God also gave sundry **judicial laws** which applied as long as they remained a nation. The principles of equity which appear in them are still valid, not because they are found in Moses’ laws but in virtue of their unchanging character.*

19/5 Obedience to the moral law remains for ever binding upon both justified persons and all others, and that in respect of the actual content of the law, and also of the authority of God, the creator, who is its author. In the gospel Christ in no way cancels the necessity for this obedience; on the contrary He greatly stresses our obligation to obey the moral law.

The Confession defines the “moral law” as the Ten Commandments (19/2). It points out that our obligation to obey is stressed under the gospel of Christ (19/5). It refers to other laws, ‘ceremonial laws’, now abrogated by Jesus Christ, who is called the only law-giver (19/3). Further, there are ‘judicial laws’ which were only for Israel as a nation, yet the just principles they embody remain valid for the Christian. Therefore the Confession clearly recognizes the changes in applications of the laws of the old covenant while at the same time upholding their continuing validity for the new covenant Christian.

Why is all this important?

(1) What is the law for our obedience under the new covenant? This is vital for Christian living. Being ‘under grace and not law’ does not mean we have no law to govern our life as a Christian. Read Romans 13:8-10, 1 Corinthians 9:8-9,21, 14:34, Galatians 5:14, 6:2, 1 Timothy 1:8. Is the law now only what of the Old Testament is repeated in the New, plus the teaching of Christ? Or is it the whole Bible properly interpreted, noting the changes brought about by the coming of Christ? Is there a tendency for those who follow NCT to be lax about obedience to law, not wanting to be ‘legalistic’?

(2) What should our attitude be to the Old Testament? Very little of the Old Testament is repeated in the New, or even referred to. But it all remains the word of God and thus totally authoritative. Proverbs speak to us directly today, for example.

(3) Is the fourth of the Ten Commandments about the sabbath to be kept under the new covenant? Sometimes it seems that this is what NCT is really about, an opposition to the fourth commandment. It is true that some might be very legalistic, ever talking about what cannot be done on the Sabbath. But the misuse by some does not cancel the facts that one day in seven was set aside by God as holy at creation (Genesis 2:2-3), that there was sabbath legislation before Sinai (Exodus 16:22-30), and that Jesus never abrogated the sabbath. It remains part of the law of the Ten Commandments and is to be joyfully kept for our benefit and God's glory. Are you as careful to keep this commandment as, say the sixth, 'Do not murder'?