

## INTRODUCTION

As Evangelicalism struggles to safeguard the Biblical and Christological foundations of the church from the subjective assault of Post-Modernism, she continues to wrestle with the continuity / discontinuity of the Old and New Testaments.

The Reform tradition camp (Covenant theology) and Dispensationalist school (Dispensational theology) have debated the issue for more than a century. The notoriety of the "Secret Rapture" teaching and the marketing sensation it enjoys courtesy of Dispensational advocates has given the latter system a popular edge. However, truth is not determined by majority vote. Biblical correctness finds no guarantee in mass sponsorship.

When we consider the historical development of eschatology, we would learn how the intellectual integrity and Biblical teachability of honest theologians, such as Dr. George Eldon Ladd, led them to denounce Dispensationalism. The hard break between Israel and the Church espoused by Dispensationalism implies a radical discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments. This is in contrast with the general continuity taught by Covenant theology.

A relatively new system entering the debate is New Covenant Theology (NCT) which attempts to strike a balance between Covenant Theology (CT) and Dispensationalism (Disp). Its beginnings could be traced to Krister Stendahl's ground-breaking essay, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," printed in 1961. The movement intensified with the publication of E. P. Sanders "Paul and Palestinian Judaism" in 1977. According to one reviewer, Sander's work has led to "the collapse of the Reformational consensus regarding the Pauline view of the law."

Despite being catapulted by two very influential theological publications into Evangelical popularity, NCT has not been formally defined as a theological system. Neither does it have a confessional formulation. As refugees from the CT and Disp conflict trickle into the NCT camp, NCT's identity becomes more difficult to establish. For instance, one of the most visible proponents of NCT is Fred Zaspel whose agreements with NCT expressions are eclipsed by his dispensationalist presuppositions.

Most recently, NCT has been presented in two books written by John G. Reisinger, entitled "Tables of Stone" and "Abraham's Four Seeds." The earlier engages CT in discussion while the latter confronts Disp. The main website of NCT is <[www.ids.org](http://www.ids.org)> with the principal tenets outlined in <[www.ids.org/ids/wnct.html](http://www.ids.org/ids/wnct.html)>

How Biblically accurate are the key premises of NCT? Is NCT radical enough to overturn the Reformers' understanding of Paul's teaching on Law and Grace? Should our Biblical hermeneutics be retrofitted to the NCT perspective? Most important, how consistent is NCT to the gospel, i.e. Justification by Faith? I'll share my reflections on these questions in my succeeding posts? "Come, let us reason together."

## LAW REPLACED IN NEW 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. The Ten Commandments are NOT the essence of the "Moral Law" but are seen as a unit applying only as the terms of the Old Covenant with Israel. The Christian, then, is no longer bound by the terms of the Old Covenant. The Law of Christ is the objective standard for the New Covenant believer. <[www.ids.org/ids/wnc.html](http://www.ids.org/ids/wnc.html)>

To paraphrase---the law written on the heart in the New Covenant is not the ten commandments. The key text on the question is Jeremiah. 31:31-34, "I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts." This is the only Old Testament passage that mentions the New Covenant by name. It is also the largest piece of text to be quoted in the New Testament (Hebrews 8:8-12, and partially repeated in Hebrews 10:16-17).

Jeremiah 31:33 states:

"But this *is* the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people."

Note that the law under the New Covenant is God's law, a law already in existence at the time of the writing of Jeremiah. The language of God Himself writing a law is familiar Old Testament language as illustrated in Exodus 31:18:

"And when He had made an end of speaking with him on Mount Sinai, He gave Moses two tablets of the Testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God."

Jeremiah's addressees must have thought of this verse as they read God's promise of the New Covenant. This antecedent understanding suggests that the law God writes in the New Covenant is the same law God wrote previously as a natural assumption of the text. Jeremiah clearly teaches that the law of God in the New Covenant is a law that was written on stone by God (in the Old Covenant) and a law that will be written on the hearts by God (in the New Covenant).

This becomes more obvious if we compare Exodus 31:18, Jeremiah 31:33. and 2 Corinthians 3:3 in canonical order:

"And when He had made an end of speaking with him on Mount Sinai, He gave Moses two tablets of the Testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God."

"But this *is* the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people."

"clearly *you are* an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, *that is*, of the heart."

Both preceding revelation (Exodus 31:18) and ensuing Scripture (2 Corinthians 3:3) identifies the law of God with a law written by God Himself on tablets of stone. This law, without question, refers to the Decalogue. Jeremiah teaches that the basic law of God under the New Covenant is the Ten Commandments.

Thus, the change is NOT from one law to another law, but from stone to hearts. There is continuity and discontinuity. There is continuity of law --- the Decalogue, and discontinuity in placement --- stone to hearts. What God writes on the hearts of the New Covenant citizens is not the Ten Commandments as Old Covenant law but the Ten Commandments as New Covenant law!

Furthermore, the text in no way declares that the law of God under the New Covenant consists of a disposition to obey. This will be forcing the text to say something it does not say. The promise of the New Covenant includes both a law to observe and a disposition of the heart to obey --- two distinct elements. Neocovenantalism can be read out of Jeremiah's text but all forms of "neonomianism" can only be read into the text.

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Note that the law under the New Covenant is God's law, a law already in existence at the time of the writing of Jeremiah. Thus, it is NOT a new law as NCT claims.

A further claim of NCT is that "My Law" refers to a disposition to obey. This is also NOT in the text. The promise of the New Covenant is a heart disposition to obey a law ALREADY in existence.

#### DISTINCTION BETWEEN COVENANT AND LAW

The above two incorrect propositions NCT makes can be traced to the failure to distinguish between covenant and law.

A covenant is an agreement, contract, or compact between two parties. In this context, the covenant is an agreement between God and His people. Jeremiah uses the word BERITH derived from a root that means "to cut," and thus, a covenant is a "cutting," with reference to the cutting or dividing of animals into two parts, and the contracting parties passing between them, in making covenant (Genesis 15; Jeremiah 34:18, 19).

Law on the other hand is the revealed will of God as to human conduct. Therefore, the verse treats God's law as rules governing man's conduct in his relationship with God.

Again, it is a NEW COVENANT but NOT A NEW LAW. The disposition to obey from the heart is a PROMISE in the New Covenant and NOT A REPLACEMENT of "My (God's) law" already in existence at the time the New Covenant was established.

#### JEWISH ANTECEDENT

Old Testament scholars considers the language of "God Himself writing a law" as familiar Old Testament language illustrated in Exodus 31:18:

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Jeremiah's addressees must have thought of this verse as they read the God's promise of the New Covenant. This antecedent understanding suggests that the law God writes in the New Covenant is the same law God wrote previously as a natural assumption of the text. Jeremiah clearly teaches that the law of God in the New Covenant is a law that was written on stone by God (in the Old Covenant) and a law that will be written on the hearts by God (in the New Covenant). This unmistakably refers to the Decalogue.

## THE LAW OF GOD AND THE LAWS OF MOSES

There are definite contrasts between the Decalogue and the Ceremonial Laws. Let me mention at least four:

1. The Decalogue was spoken by God Himself (Exodus 20:1, 22);  
The Ceremonial Laws were spoken by Moses (Exodus 24:3)
2. The Decalogue was written by God (Exodus 31:18; 32:16);  
The Ceremonial Laws were written by Moses (Exodus 24:4; Deuteronomy 31:9)
3. The Decalogue was written on stones (Exodus 31:18);  
The Ceremonial Laws were written in a book (Exodus 24:7; Deuteronomy 31:24)
4. The Decalogue was handed by God, its Writer, to Moses (Exodus 31:18);  
The Ceremonial Laws were handed by Moses, their writer, to the Levites (Deuteronomy 31:25, 26)

This 'combo' cannot comprise the old covenant because they are laws and not the agreement. (Covenant is distinct from the law)

Neither can this 'combo' comprise "God's Law" in Jeremiah 31:33. The above exegesis clearly points solely to the Decalogue as its identity. The contrastive tablets God uses for writing are stones and hearts. The laws of Moses were not written on stone tablets, let alone by God.

A bigger problem results from interpreting "My law" as the 'combo.' This means the existing ceremonial laws will be written in the hearts of the people of the New Covenant. Why will God write laws governing a typical and temporal sacrificial system in the minds and hearts of New Covenant people forever if they will be abrogated by the Antitypical Christ?

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## A NEW LAW OF CHRIST?

John Reisinger, a principal NCT proponent writes on page 13 of his book “Christ, Lord and Lawgiver:”

“Christ did say, and say most clearly, that His law is infinitely higher and more spiritual than Moses ever wrote. Contrasting the Sermon on the Mount with the Tablets of Stone is like comparing the sun to a candle. Making the Sermon on the Mount to be only the true interpretation of Moses is to effectively deny Christ is a lawgiver and make him to be merely a rubber stamp of Moses.”

Reisinger adds in his other text, “But I Say Unto You” (p. 21):

“The correct way to approach Mt. 5:27 is just let it mean exactly what it says. Let it really contrast the difference between rule under covenant law and rule under grace.”

In the Sermon on the Mount, according to NCT, Christ revealed new and higher law in contrast with the law of Moses. To contrast two things mean to show differences when comparing them. In Matthew 5:27-28, Christ said, “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘*You shall not commit adultery.*’ But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” According to NCT, Christ is here transcending the Law of Moses on adultery. The “But I say to you” phrase denotes that what He is about to say is new and more spiritual than anything merely written on stone.

If this NCT interpretation holds water, we would conclude that Moses in the 7th commandment refers to no more than external or physical adultery, implying that internal or heart adultery is not forbidden. Yet the 8th commandment clearly forbid heart adultery, “...you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant...” These are glaring prohibitions against heart adultery. The Bible does not wait until Matt. 5:28 to reveal the sin of lusting.

The same can be said of the previous “But I say to you” in Matt. 5:21-22, “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘*You shall not murder,* and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.’ But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment.” In Leviticus 19:17 is written, “You shall not hate your brother in your heart.” The Bible does not wait until Matt. 5:22 to reveal the sin of hatred (“heart murder”).

Thus, using the Sermon on the Mount as an argument establishing a contrastive neo-ethic for the New Covenant will not work. The law Christ expounded in the Sermon on the Mount includes portions of the very things Moses wrote, and sometimes without qualification.

A better way to understand Jesus’ words, “But I say to you,” in Matthew 5 is to see a contrast not between the Law of Moses and the Law of Christ. Instead, the difference is a true discernment of the law of Moses and the hypocritical interpretation of the Pharisees. In the next chapter of Matthew, Christ contrasts true righteousness with hypocrisy.

Thus, Christ is not altering the Law of Moses in the Sermon on the Mount but rightly applying it, unlike the hypocritical obedience of the Pharisees. They distorted the Law of Moses by settling for externalism. This was never God’s intention as numerous Old Testament passages indicate (Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18; Exodus 25:2; Deuteronomy 8:2; 10:12-13; 11:13, 18).

### NOT REPEATED, NOT BINDING

NCT advocates assert with John Reisinger, "Since all of the 10 Commandments are not repeated in the New Testament, and only those repeated are still binding, therefore, not all are still binding. Nine of the ten are repeated in the New Testament Scriptures and are therefore as binding on the Christian as they were on the Israelite." Whereas the Reformed hermeneutic presupposes CONTINUITY between the Old and New Testaments UNLESS REPEALED, NCT's Biblical interpretation assumes DISCONTINUITY UNLESS REPEATED.

Certainly, not all of the Decalogue are "explicitly repeated" in the New Testament. Only the 5th through the 9th commandments have explicit NT reiterations (the first four commandments are implicitly taught). The NCT axiom: "Not repeated, not binding" presents a hermeneutical problem particularly when restricted to explicit restatements. For instance, it would mean that only those verses in Proverbs repeated in the New Testament are relevant for Christians.

Furthermore, NCT functionally denies that there are 66 books in the Canon of Scripture. When it comes to ethics, NCT limits the law for the Christian to our Lord's earthly teachings and the rest of the New Testament (which by the way includes selective portions of the Old Testament).

In contrast with this view, Christ taught that the whole Old Testament and not just those parts repeated in the New Testament had a place in His kingdom. After all, the Scripture He used in His earthly ministry was the Old Testament alone! When Paul wrote that "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in RIGHTEOUSNESS, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work" he too, was alluding to the Old Testament (2 Timothy 3:16, 17).

Practically speaking, NCT reduces the canon for ethics to the New Testament only. In other words, NCT leaves us with a revelational canon --- the Old and New Testaments --- and an ethical canon --- the New Testament. The early Christians would have had a very small ethical canon if they had held to this theory.

NCT guru Fred Zaspel wrote, "We would rather expect that for new covenant believers divine law would be codified in the new covenant." Little wonder that some theologians labels NCT as neo-Marcianism -- dubbed after Marcion, a 2nd century heretic who rejected the OT and reduced the NT to an abbreviated Gospel of Luke and ten Pauline epistles. How ironic that the foundational NCT text is found in Jeremiah, an OT major prophetic book!

## JOHN BUNYAN ON THE SABBATH

NCT leans on John Bunyan's view of the Sabbath and considers him as the forerunner to the NCT Sabbath understanding. In fact, the most expansive cyber visibility of New Covenant theologians is named "The Friends of John Bunyan Internet Ministry." John Reisinger, in his article "John Bunyan and the Sabbath," focuses on Bunyan's arguments against the Sabbath as a Creation Ordinance.

NCT claims that Bunyan broke rank with his Puritan bretheren on the Sabbath issue by denying the perpetuity of the seventh-day Sabbath from creation to the resurrection of Christ. The title of his treatise on the Sabbath is: "Questions about the Nature and Perpetuity of the Seventh day Sabbath and proof that the First Day of the Week is the true Christian Sabbath." This in itself divulges Bunyan's purpose in writing. He was not combating the Sabbatarian teaching of the Puritans but disputing the imposition of the seventh day Sabbath as Moral Law on Christians.

Though John Bunyan denied the seventh day Sabbath to be Moral Law, he did not teach that the Sabbath concept itself is not Moral Law. In Volume 2 of his works p. 361, he says:

"I have here . . . proved that the seventh day sabbath was not moral. For that must be done before it can be made clear that the first day of the week is that which is the sabbath day for Christians . . . A SABBATH FOR HOLY WORSHIP IS MORAL [emphasis supplied]; but this or that day appointed for such service, is sanctified by precept or by approved example. The timing then of a sabbath for us lies in God . . ."

Bunyan obviously believed that a Sabbath for worship was part of the moral law, but that the seventh day as Sabbath was not. In his treatise on law and grace he clearly affirms that the Decalogue, in substance, predates the stone tablets:

". . . it is evident that the substance of the ten commandments was given to Adam and his posterity . . . the law given before by the Lord to Adam and his posterity is the same with that afterwards given on Mount Sinai." (Volume 1, p. 499)

In Bunyan's thought, the seventh day Sabbath was not given until Sinai but a Sabbath for holy worship was demanded by the law of nature and the terms of the covenant between God and Adam as the representative of all mankind. On the one hand, a Sabbath for worship is Moral Law and binding on all men. On the other hand, the seventh day Sabbath is positive law and awaited the giving of the law on tablets of stone.

Evidently, NCT's reading of their theological forerunner's position on the Sabbath is lopsided. John Reisinger went out on a limb and claimed in his above article, "His [Bunyan's] basic view of the nature and origin of the Sabbath commandment is exactly what I believe." Bunyan was not anti-Sabbatarian; he was anti-seventh-day-Sabbatarian. Thus, it is quite puzzling for non-Sabbatarian NCT adherents to ground their position on the works of a Sabbatarian!

### A LIMITED COVENANT VIEW

NCT subscribers, particularly those who left Seventh-day Adventism, claim adherence to the Reformation slogans: SOLO CHRISTO, SOLA GRATIA, SOLA FIDE, SOLA SCRIPTURA, and SOLI DEO GLORIA --- yet NCT rejects the core of the Reformation Biblical hermeneutic, the Law-Gospel approach to Biblical interpretation. NCT also spurns the three uses of the law as taught by the Reformers.

However, the greatest difficulty I have with NCT is what I perceived to be its inconsistency with the gospel (by gospel I mean Justification by Faith). NCT's signature covenant view is limited to the contrast between the Mosaic and New covenants. Thus, NCT refuses to accept the conditional Covenant of Works that God established with Adam before the Fall and denies the Everlasting Covenant of Redemption within the Trinity as well.

This raises serious questions. If Christ's doing (perfect righteousness) and dying (infinite sacrifice) undergirds JBF, what law did Christ obey in the gospel transaction? If Christ as second Adam succeeded where the first Adam failed, what law did Adam disobey? On the basis of what law were the righteousness of Noah, Abraham, and other OT heroes of faith reckoned? Does God have a double legal standard? One for the OT and another for the NT? What was the gospel in the OT or was there a gospel at all in the OT economy? What about the clear declaration of Scripture that Christ is the Lamb slain since the foundation of the world?

When asked by the rich young ruler in Matthew 19 how one can obtain eternal life, Christ answered, "Obey the commandments" and directly alluded to the Decalogue. In effect, He's saying that the standard for the first and second Adam's and all of mankind, for that matter, is the Moral Law. To say that God's moral standard has been abrogated is to destroy the forensic basis of Justification by Faith. On the contrary, if the perpetuity of the moral law is recognized with its exacting eternal demands, JBF would make sense as the only way of salvation.

Take away the Moral Law and you might as well take away the war cries of the Reformation --- for where will be the perfect obedience of SOLO CHRISTO if He had nothing to keep? Where will be the sense of SOLA GRATIA without a substitutionary righteousness? Where will be the sense of SOLA FIDE without its object? Where will be the thrust of SOLA SCRIPTURA when its central testimony is gone? How can all rebound to SOLI DEO GLORIA when His everlasting will and demands have not been satisfied?

The above theological discrepancies and Biblical compromise inherent in NCT, in my opinion, has made it quite arduous to formalize NCT as a theological system. Taken to its logical end, NCT renders JBF void of saving worth. As Todd Wilken, Lutheran Bible commentator, pointed out:

"It's this simple: if you get Justification wrong, you get the Gospel wrong. And a wrong Gospel can't save sinners. This was the whole reason for the Reformation."

### LIMITING ADVENTISM TO LEGALISTIC ADVENTISTS

Most breakaway Adventists admit that their decision was influenced by their defection to New Covenant Theology (NCT). Their denominational desertion is most pronounced in their new Sabbath view which teaches that Christ has replaced the Sabbath.

When David Newman was senior pastor of Damascus Grace Fellowship he wrote:

“If I grow up with the subtle misunderstanding that Sabbath keeping is connected to my salvation, a prerequisite to my entering heaven, and then discover grace, that I am saved ONLY by what Jesus did for me at Calvary, I will suddenly have a very different view of the Sabbath. I will want to DISCARD IT, and I should, as a MEANS OF SALVATION. But the relief of discovering grace can be so overwhelming that it is quite possible to throw out blessings simply because we have previously seen them as HAVE TO's or MUST's or SHOULD's.”

Could it be that Pastor Newman was describing another motivation of Adventist breakaway groups? If so, their chosen direction throws the proverbial baby with the bath water. In steering away from a legalistic Sabbath interpretation they've abandoned the Sabbath altogether.

In my personal bout with legalistic Adventism, God's grace led me to the centrality of the gospel. That meant throwing a lot of sermon outlines and Bible study materials and making a radical switch in my growth in the knowledge and grace of Christ. My Scriptural paradigm shift drove me into studying gospel materials of inter-denominational persuasions. The exercise confirmed the gospel-centeredness of Adventism in my mind. As my friend Bille Burdick, At Issue editor, would say, “I became an evangelical through Ellen White but I understood the meaning of evangelical through John Stott.”

On that note, I'm quite uncomfortable when former Adventists who adhere to NCT make a blanket statement to the effect that gospel-centered Adventists wrongly interpret the Sabbath because of their “Adventist bias.” Worse, they even imply that Adventist Sabbath-keeping is legalism. These views are quite pronounced within the purview of New Covenant Theology. Yet, if they cease to limit their perception of Adventism to legalistic Adventists, they might just realize the shortcomings of NCT:

- (1) Exegetically, NCT forces a new law rather than a new placement of the law in their interpretation of the new covenant passages of the Bible.
- (2) Ethically, NCT inaccurately claims that Christ replaced the Moral Law rather than magnified it.
- (3) Canonically, NCT drives an artificial wedge between the Old and the New Testaments by espousing a revelational canon --- the Old and New Testaments --- and an ethical canon limited to the New Testament.
- (4) Historically, NCT fails to do justice to the Reformed confessional theology of the Decalogue misconstruing even their theological forerunner John Bunyan who was a Sabbatarian.
- (5) Evangelically, NCT's abrogation of the Moral Law compromises the gospel of Justification by Faith and limits the Biblical teaching on the covenants to the contrast between the Mosaic and the New Covenants bypassing the Everlasting Covenant and the Covenant of Works God made with the two Adam's.

Biblical discussions however eloquent and/or keen and noble are no more than high-sounding fluff when devoid of the gospel of Christ. Subjecting New Covenant Theology to careful Biblical scrutiny in comparison with the Adventist Reformed position reveals how much more consistent the Adventist faith is to the gospel of Justification by Faith.