

*New Covenant Theology: Description, Definition, Defense.* By Tom Wells and Fred Zaspel. Frederick, Maryland: New Covenant Media, 2002. xiv + 324 pp. n.p.

The relationship between the OT and the NT, the law and the gospel, the old covenant and the new is one of the most difficult problems in biblical theology. No consensus has ever been reached, and fresh proposals from the standpoint of biblical theology are welcomed. A new movement within Reformed circles has been developing for some years, and now, in this work, we have a book length description and defense of what is called "New Covenant Theology" (henceforth NCT). Two prominent exponents of NCT have contributed to this work, Tom Wells and Fred Zaspel. Both of these men serve as pastors and have written various other studies over the years. One of the virtues of this work is that it is written with a friendly and irenic spirit, even in the two chapters where they respond to a recent book by Richard Barcellos that critiques NCT.

What is NCT? NCT argues that the scriptures should be interpreted in light of their eschatological fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Whether we are speaking of OT sacrifices, the Passover, the temple, or the Mosaic law, all of these OT practices and institutions must be understood in light of the newness that has dawned with Jesus the Christ. At first glance such a hermeneutical principle may seem to be uncontroversial, but NCT seems to occupy a place between dispensationalism and covenant theology. Covenant theology emphasizes the continuity between the OT and the NT, and typically argues that the moral law is normative for today. For most exponents of covenant theology the Sabbath command is still in force, though the injunction to rest is transferred to the Lord's Day. Dispensationalism, even with the changes that have been inaugurated

with progressive dispensationalism, stresses the discontinuity between the old covenant and the new, even though most dispensationalists believe that the OT prophecies will be fulfilled literally in the future.

The hermeneutical principle of NCT leads them in a different direction. Wells and Zaspel emphasize that the Mosaic Covenant has come to an end with the coming of Jesus Christ. Dividing the Mosaic law into the three categories of civil, ceremonial, and moral, and seeing the latter as still binding is unpersuasive. The Sinai Covenant has been set aside now that Christ has come. Indeed, the Mosaic Covenant points to Christ and is fulfilled in Christ. They do not conclude from this that believers are no longer under moral norms. Rather, believers are subject to the law of Christ, and the law of Christ is discerned from the NT. Wells and Zaspel maintain that many of the moral norms of the OT (nine of the ten commandments of the Decalogue) continue to be normative. They are normative, however, because they are part of Christ's law, not because they hail from the Mosaic law. The Sabbath, on the other hand, is no longer binding upon believers. The Sabbath points to the eschatological rest believers have in Christ, and there is no need for believers to observe it today, for it was the sign of the Mosaic Covenant that is no longer in force.

The difference between NCT and Covenant Theology is quite clear since the latter sees the Sabbath as normative for today. Wells and Zaspel concentrate particularly on the role of the Mosaic Law, and in this sense they are closer to Dispensationalism. Still, the hermeneutical principle, if applied consistently, would likely lead to different eschatological conclusions from what we see in Dispensationalism. Indeed, the hermeneutical principle of interpreting the OT in light of the NT is typical of the

eschatology of most who espouse Covenant Theology. Hence, it may be the case that advocates of NCT will truly occupy a place between Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology.

Wells and Zaspel focus on Matt 5:17-20 in four of their chapters and on the Sabbath in two others. Their interest is clearly in a proper understanding of the law and its relevance for Christians today. They rightly argue that Matt 5:17-20 teaches that the law reaches its eschatological fulfillment in Christ and points to Christ. They are also correct in saying that Matt 5:17-20 points to discontinuity between the OT law and the NT law. If Matt 5:17-20 teaches absolute continuity, then it would follow that believers should practice circumcision and observe food laws. But Matthew clearly implies that food laws are no longer in force in Matt 15:1-20. On the other hand, I am less convinced with their contention that Matt 5:21-48 actually teaches that the law of Christ is superior to and brings to an end the specific Mosaic statutes addressed in these verses. The text is extremely difficult, but I am still more persuaded by the view that Jesus rightly interprets misunderstandings of the OT law. For example, the taking of oaths is not absolutely prohibited by Jesus despite his words in Matt 5:33-37. We see from Matt 23:16-22 that some abused oath-taking through casuistry. An absolute prohibition of oaths is also unlikely since Paul took oaths (cf. Rom 1:9; 2 Cor 1:23), and even God swore by himself (Heb 6:13-17). Even more important, Wells and Zaspel should clarify that NCT does not stand or fall on this issue in any case. Both truths may be explicated in Jesus' ministry, i.e., he rightly interprets the law and he teaches that the law finds its fulfillment in Christ. Perhaps many could agree that the content of the law of Christ is clarified through Jesus' exposition of the law in Matt 5:17-20.

Surely Matt 5:17-20 is important in determining one's view of the law. Still, the authors provide little discussion of the Mosaic Covenant in its OT context. They discuss the OT law frequently and particularly the Decalogue, and yet the covenantal context in which the OT law is placed receives little attention. They emphasize that the law cannot justify, but we are not given much help in understanding the role of the Mosaic Covenant as a whole. One of the key issues for NCT in the future is to explicate more fully in what sense the Mosaic Covenant is gracious and in what sense it leads to death and is to be distinguished from the covenant with Abraham.

The authors may also underestimate the meaning of the commands in the Decalogue. The prohibition in the tenth commandment against coveting may suggest that each one of the commandments, even in their original context, should not be limited merely to external actions. Even though Job did not receive the Torah, his words in Job 31:1 seem to confirm this view in the injunction against adultery. "I have made a covenant with my eyes; how then could I gaze at a virgin?" In some instances it seems that Wells and Zaspel strain to emphasize the discontinuity between the OT law and the law of Christ in order to emphasize the newness of what has come in Christ. But their basic thesis can still stand even if the OT commands are not merely external commands. They rightly say that moral norms for believers are summed up in Christ's law, that Christ's law includes many moral norms from the OT, and that the Mosaic Covenant has been both abolished and fulfilled with the coming of Christ.

Tom Wells has an intriguing chapter on creeds near the end of the book. He worries that creeds may hinder us from engaging in biblical theology, preventing us from seeing new truths in God's word. At the same time, he acknowledges that creeds play an

important role in codifying the essentials of the faith. He rightly suggests that some matters in our creeds are non-negotiables, while others are less important. This is an important word for Southern Baptists after the doctrinal conflicts of the last few years. The essentials of the faith must not be surrendered. And yet there must be some freedom to analyze creedal statements in the light of scripture. Otherwise, the notion that scripture is our ultimate norm becomes useless in practice. Our seminaries must never deviate from orthodoxy, but neither should we allow our categories to become so hardened and rigid that any questioning of confessional statements is excluded. Otherwise, we are saying that we have already arrived at a perfect expression of the truth—something rather hard to believe! In conclusion, Wells and Zaspel have examined the relationship between the Mosaic law and the law of Christ from the standpoint of biblical theology. In my mind their solution is basically correct, but we can all be sharpened by further discussion and study.

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