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FOREWORD

I'll never forget my meeting with three brothers in Little Rock, Arkansas, on a Monday in February, 1977. I had spoken in an assembly over the weekend, and they wanted to have a time with me before I drove back to Nashville, Tennessee. They had specific things they wanted to go over with me, and one of them came in the form of a question: "Have you read *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren* by Leonard Verduin?" I told them Walt Hibbard pushed that volume on me when his book venture was operating out of his garage in Maryland, but I had not read it yet. They strongly encouraged me to read it.

In June, 1977, I finally read *Reformers* and it changed my world forever. It put the disconnected pieces of information in my head together in a way that was unbelievably liberating, and my focus on Christ was clarified and accelerated.

It was just months later that I felt compelled to write about the issues raised in *Reformers*, and other related concerns. As a result, "Is There A 'Covenant of Grace'?" appeared in the Autumn, 1977, issue of *Baptist Reformation Review*.

This article caused quite a stir, and John Reisinger called it "the first shot fired in twenty years" at a gathering in Dalton, Georgia. Thus began a journey of many to develop, discuss, and unpack the implications of the centrality of Christ in the New Covenant.

Heather Kendall has accomplished a great service to the body of Christ by compiling her historical study of the blossoming of "New Covenant Theology" at the end of the 20th Century. She has painstakingly researched the subject and pieced together a fair, balanced and engaging presentation of an important segment of history.

I know you will be uplifted and challenged by Heather's contemporary history of how Christ's pre-eminence came to the fore once again, and her drawing together of quotations from the past showing that the finality of the New Covenant was recognized by many others. *One Greater than Moses* is an important contribution to the ongoing work of Christ on earth.

— JON ZENS

Author of "This Is My Beloved Son, Hear Him": The Foundation for New Covenant Ethics and Ecclesiology," and editor of *Searching Together* since 1978.

INTRODUCTION

Many believers consider New Covenant Theology (NCT) a new phenomenon or even a passing fancy. Because so many do not know the modern development of this movement, I want to leave a written record for posterity. All humans, including believers, tend to cling to the familiar. In addition, we tend toward ignorance of our own history and the history of our beliefs.

Therefore I admire those men in the mid to late 1900s who questioned teachings in their respective churches in an effort to remain faithful to the Scriptures. Please understand I am writing about men who confronted fellow believers who had differing ideas of what the Bible teaches. I hope by the end of this history that readers will express sympathy and appreciation for Jon Zens, John Reisinger, Ron McKinney and Gary Long. Those men challenged their friends and relatives with God's Word. The significance of these men breaking with tradition should not escape our notice as it involved a slow step by step process. Breaking with tradition was not instantaneous.

New Covenant Theology explains how the Old and New Testaments fit together—the big picture in the Bible. Before beginning this history, I need to assume three important facts for myself and my readers.

First, sinners may have their sins forgiven and be reconciled to God—only through the shed blood of Christ on Calvary. When Jesus died on the cross, he paid the penalty that we deserved to receive for our rebellion against God. When Jesus rose from the grave, God the Father accepted his sacrifice once and forever. Whoever genuinely repents of sin, turns in faith to God, and accepts Christ's sacrifice as satisfying the wrath of God for his or her sins will live forever with God in the new heavens and new earth.

Second, repentance and faith require an act of will. For this reason, the church of Christ consists only of believers. Each one must answer to God for his or her own sin. No one else may do this for another person. Nevertheless the Holy Spirit must first open the spiritual eyes of sinners to their need for the Savior.

Finally, the Holy Spirit dwells within a believer and enables that person to persevere to the end. Sanctification or growing in

the knowledge of God and becoming more like Jesus continues as a life-long undertaking. Since all believers participate in this process of sanctification, we must first examine our own hearts. Before trying to correct another person's beliefs, we must ask ourselves these questions: Do I exhibit a teachable spirit? Does the other person's belief downgrade the supremacy of God or of the Lord Jesus? Does their belief change or affect the doctrine of salvation? Finally, how does their belief affect their view of the blood sacrifice of Jesus?

Since the Holy Spirit is always teaching all true believers, we must be careful how we treat our brothers and sisters in the faith. We must also make sure that we are on solid ground biblically before correcting another believer. If their teaching weakens the Gospel or downgrades the supremacy of Jesus, then we must present the Word in truth and with gentleness.

After carefully studying Scripture, author and theologian, Jon Zens, felt compelled to write an article questioning the covenant of grace in covenant theology. The storyline of this theology flat lines Scripture and allows for the transfer of ideas back and forth between the old covenant era and the new covenant era. As a result the nation of Israel becomes a model for the church. The Ten Commandments become the means of convicting sinners of their need for a Savior and afterward the rule of law for the believer. (I shall explain covenant theology in more detail in chapter one.) In contrast, Zens believed a Christocentric reading of the Scriptures would both inform and transform how each believer lives his or her life. The issue for him was the superiority of Jesus over Moses. By insisting that the Ten Commandments are the only rule of law for the believer, covenant theology teaches that Moses has greater authority than Christ.

In December 1978, Don Garlington and Jon Zens had a meeting at the Marriott Hotel in Saddle Brook, New Jersey. As a covenant theologian, Don had written a challenge to Jon's article. In the course of their conversation, Jon asked Don:

As you know, Puritan Samuel Bolton said in the 1600s, it is a "hard lesson to live above the law, yet walk according to the law; to walk in the law in respect of duty, but to live above it in respect of comfort." Don, do you believe these sentiments are in line with the New Testament revelation?

NCT answers this question with a resolute, "No." And out of such considerations NCT feels strongly that the old covenant order is over, and that a new covenant—and a new and living way—has been inaugurated by Jesus Christ. NCT is concerned to open up the big picture, to see all of history moving toward the incarnation of the Son of God.¹

Let me reiterate. This history will be talking about believers disagreeing with believers—friends and brothers on opposite

¹ Jon Zens, e-mail message, March 2015.

sides. Peer pressure often prevents people from admitting they have made a mistake. I pray this history will be sensitive to feelings but will stand for the truth.

CHAPTER I

WHY NEW COVENANT THEOLOGY?

Understanding the big picture in the Bible should be one of the first steps for a believer after salvation. Nevertheless theologians have been arguing about the biblical storyline for almost 500 years.¹ Until recently evangelicals have taught two different storylines for Scripture: covenant theology and dispensationalism. Neither considered the existence of a third way of putting the Old and New Testaments together.

COVENANT THEOLOGY

The roots of covenant theology go back to the beginning of time. Since the formation of city-states, government and religion have joined together. Christian Roman emperors continued the practice. Having been raised a devout Catholic, Martin Luther firmly believed in the union of Church and State. When he nailed his Ninety-five Theses to the Wittenberg Church door on October 31, 1517, he changed the world forever. It was the birth of Protestantism. Although Luther preached salvation by faith alone, he never changed his attitude toward the union of Church and State. Other Reformers maintained the same position. Thus

1. The 16th century Anabaptists challenged the storyline of the Reformers, as we shall see in chapter 3.

the coalition of government and religion continued in Protestant countries as well as in Catholic ones.²

Eventually Johann Cocceius (1603–1669), a professor in Franeker and Leyden, built on the teaching of Zwingli (1484–1531) and developed the storyline called covenant theology, consisting of three main covenants. Before the world existed, the Triune God made a covenant of redemption. The Father purposed salvation; the Son purchased salvation; and the Holy Spirit applies salvation. Then God gave Adam a covenant of works. But he disobeyed God by eating the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. As the representative head of all humanity, Adam's sin became our sin. This means everyone must suffer the consequence of Adam's sin. We are born sinners with a natural inclination to sin. After the failure of the covenant of works, God promised a covenant of grace through Jesus Christ.

Thus all the covenants in the Bible fall under the one overarching covenant of grace.

The old covenant and the new covenant are two administrations or dispensations of the covenant of grace. Therefore these theologians transferred the principles of God's rule over the nation of Israel to the church—the union of religion and state, the right for the state to punish those who break God's laws, the transfer of the rite of circumcision to the practice of infant baptism. The theologians of today consistently believe in following those three principles. Most reformed believers, however, only insist on infant baptism for all babies born to church members.

2. Heather A. Kendall, "The Bible's Storyline: How It Affects the Doctrine of Salvation," *Journal for Baptist Theology & Ministry*, 8, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 62, last modified (Spring 2011), accessed January 28, 2015, http://baptistcenter.net/journals/JBTM_8-1_Spring_2011.pdf#page=62.

Covenant theologians divide the Law given to Moses into moral, civil and ceremonial commands. Only the nation of Israel must obey all the civil and ceremonial laws. But the moral law is God's unchanging eternal law. Therefore it applies to us today. Since the Ten Commandments are the unchanging moral law of God, even Christ cannot change or add to them. Thus Christians remain under Moses' authority. The result of this teaching is that Moses has more authority than Christ.

DISPENSATIONALISM

The second storyline to consider is dispensationalism. It is an offshoot of premillennialism whose roots go back to the years between the Old and New Testaments. The *Pseudepigrapha* is a collection of writings by Jewish authors between 200 BC and AD 100. We may trace the development of premillennialism through those writings. Every author assumed the name of a famous person from the past and wrote in response to current events. Since premillennialism only describes the end of God's story, it is not a biblical storyline in and of itself. Dispensationalism, however, does attempt to explain the storyline of the Bible.

After apostolic times historic premillennialists became preoccupied with determining the date of Jesus' return. They longed for Jesus to come and establish his kingdom on earth. This hope was not surprising. To state churches, these believers were heretics. As such, state churches often persecuted them.

In the early 1800s, as an aftermath of the French Revolution, the prophetic parts of the Bible began to fascinate many people in England. Those believers thought that the Bible explained the course of future events, and they believed that they were living

in those times. Prophetic conferences became popular. Lady Powerscourt held such a conference, controlled mainly by the Plymouth Brethren, annually from 1831 to 1833. J. N. Darby attended her conference near Dublin in 1833. F. Roy Coad explains, “Darby threw himself wholeheartedly into this fervour of prophetic expectation and discussion.”³

After this Darby travelled extensively teaching the rapture of the church before the coming of Antichrist. Eschatology became central to the message of the Plymouth Brethren. Preachers would teach the urgency of repentance and faith in Jesus before it was too late. Because of Darby’s passion for eschatology and willingness to travel to foreign countries, many people believe in dispensational theology today.

Dispensationalists trace two biblical storylines. God has one plan for Israel and another for the church. The plan for Israel involves an earthly political kingdom, whereas the church looks forward to a heavenly spiritual kingdom. Thus Israel and the church are mutually exclusive. Classical dispensationalism teaches that the church is an afterthought in the divine plan because the Jews rejected Jesus. Progressive dispensationalists no longer believe that idea. Instead those theologians understand that God always intended to redeem the church through the death, resurrection and exultation of Christ. But God still plans to fulfill his land promise to Abraham in a future millennium on this present earth. Not many believe classical dispensationalism today. Most dispensationalists are progressive.

NEW COVENANT THEOLOGY

New covenant theologians believe in a Christ-centered storyline and the unity of the Scriptures. They believe the Bible to be one long upward progressive storyline from the fall of man

3. F. Roy Coad, *History of the Brethren Movement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), 109.

to the consummation in the new heavens and new earth. The backbone of this storyline is the covenantal nature of God as he accomplishes his plans through his covenants with people. “I will be your God and you will be my people.” The focal point of God’s story culminates in Jesus Christ. All humans fail by becoming covenant breakers. In contrast, Christ fulfills God’s plan to create an eternal covenant-keeping people.

Since there are 400 years between the Old and New Testaments, scholars have divided the Bible into those two sections. By doing this, we have a clue of what a Christ-centered

storyline means. The Old Testament relates how God prepared for the coming of his Son while the New Testament tells his story from the birth of Christ to the end of time. Thus Jesus remains the central character in God's story.

Before time began, God planned to form a community of redeemed people who would worship and praise him forever. As soon as Adam and Eve rebelled against God and sinned, God promised to send the Savior, the promised Seed. The Old Testament gradually reveals more of Jesus, who is this promised Seed. Since Israel was an important building block in God's plan, he set the Israelites apart to be his special people. Therefore the Mosaic covenant is like the foundation of a house. God gradually revealed more of his plan of salvation to Israel and prepared a family for Jesus to be born into.

The New Testament represents the house built upon the foundation of the Old Testament. It tells God's story during the New Covenant era, this present age in which God is building his eternal kingdom, the church, consisting of Jew and Gentile. The climax of the biblical story occurs at Jesus' death, resurrection and exaltation as King. At Jesus' return, the following events will occur: the general resurrection of the dead, the destruction of this present earth by fire and the general judgment. God will consign non-believers to hell and gather the redeemed to live forever with him in the new heavens and new earth.

The central issue for new covenant theology concerns the grammatical-historical approach of redemptive history. Nevertheless during the course of its development two other pillars of the faith developed: a believers-only church and the doctrines of grace. I shall delve into the history and meaning of both of those beliefs later in the book.

A CRITIQUE OF THE THREE VIEWS

New covenant theologians do agree in part with some teachings in covenant theology and dispensationalism. But a proper view of Jesus Christ and his work on the cross is at stake. Stephen Wellum, a professor of systematic theology, pinpoints the weaknesses of covenant theology and dispensationalism. Both base their storyline firmly on the unconditional covenant with Abraham. For covenant theology, the genealogical principle—"to you and your children"—remains constant across redemptive history. For dispensationalism, the land promise remains unchanging for the nation of Israel.⁴

In the New Testament, the church consists only of believers whereas covenant theology encourages a mixed multitude

of believers and non-believers as members of the church. This means that some people may have a false security of their salvation. Also, because of the overarching covenant of grace, covenant theologians insist that Moses has more authority over the believer than Christ. But believers are not under the command of Moses; rather they are under Christ's authority. This means

4. Stephen J. Wellum, in Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 117, 118.

that Christ has the right to interpret Moses' Law for new covenant believers. Nevertheless new covenant believers do walk in the same way of righteousness and holiness as God commanded the Israelites. But we must interpret the principles found in Moses' Law from a new covenant perspective.

In the case of dispensationalism, the idea of a restored Jewish temple with priests who perform animal sacrifices insults Jesus' precious blood. In addition, most of the Israelites in the nation of Israel did not have the right heart attitude toward God. Much of what they did was outward ritual. Therefore those people have forfeited their right to be part of God's kingdom of redeemed believers. The New Testament is clear that God has broken down the wall of partition between the Jew and Gentile. Thus Abraham's spiritual seed consists of the believing remnant of Israelites in the Old Testament and the believing Jews and Gentiles united in the church by faith in Christ. As Gentiles, we should be thankful for the believing Jews who spread the Gospel throughout the world. This means that the land promise will come true on the new heavens and new earth for the church, including the redeemed in the nation of Israel.

Today believers live in the day of grace, not under the legalism of Judaism. Because the Old Testament prophets waited expectantly for Christ, non-believing Jews persecuted them. Once Jesus died and rose again, Judaism became obsolete. True, God ordained Judaism in the Old Testament. But now that Christ has come, Judaism has served its purpose in history. New covenant theologians, however, do need to guard against the dangers of Marcionism—ignoring the Old Testament. We desire to exalt Christ as our King and Savior but not at the expense of dismissing a good part of the Bible. God never changes.

NEW COVENANT THEOLOGY PRESUPPOSITIONS

After studying the history of this movement, I believe new covenant theologians hold certain non-negotiable presuppositions:

- The Scriptures are the inspired, infallible, authoritative Word of God. Their purpose is to bring glory to the

Triune God by revealing who Jesus is: the Son of God and the Lord and Savior of a redeemed people, the church.

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16, NIV).

- The Holy Spirit is the author of the Scriptures: “The discernment of the Holy Spirit is absolutely essential for accurately handling the Word of God because *there is no authentic leading of the Holy Spirit that is not contextually wedded to the words of the Bible*” (italics Long’s).⁵

- Jesus Christ is the final revelation of God (Luke 9:35; Hebrews 1:1).

- There is only one gospel: God has decisively acted on behalf of sinful men in the person and work of Jesus Christ.⁶ All have sinned and rebelled against a holy God. Therefore we deserve to be punished. When Jesus died, was buried, and rose again, he took the punishment of rebellious sinners. God declares all those righteous and forgiven who have repented of their sin and, by faith, have accepted God’s gift of salvation through the shed blood of Christ on the cross.

5. Gary D. Long, “New Covenant Theology,” 1, last modified (2013), accessed November 2, 2015, [http://www.ptsc.org/NCT Brochure Text 2013.pdf](http://www.ptsc.org/NCT_Brochure_Text_2013.pdf).

6. Jon Zens, “After Ten Years: Observations and Burdens On My Heart,” *Baptist Reformation Review*, 11, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 24.