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The Future of NCT

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The purpose of this paper is not to present a theological position. Rather, this is an assembly of a few thoughts on the direction of New Covenant Theology as it gathers steam and a survey of what things lie ahead that need to be accomplished. It is not intended to be all-encompassing; instead, my hope is that this will be a catalyst for discussion today and for thought down the road.

The first item on my list is that of perception. In many circles, specifically in Reformed or Dispensational schools of thought, NCT has been defined in the terminology of those theologies and more specifically as error or even worse. As one brother said, “There is no greater danger to historic Reformed Christianity,” and referred to it as a “rampant antinomian attack ... that threatens the very foundations of biblical Christianity. ...”<sup>1</sup> The danger is not, however, to Reformed Christianity, which despite the motto of *Semper Reformanda*, has not been reforming; the danger is to specific systems or confessions, which are, in light of New Covenant Theology, in error and unfaithful to the clear teachings of Scripture. Those Covenant Theologians have strayed from *Sola Scriptura* and in doing so have strayed from *Solus Christus*.

(And to quote Moe Bergeron's presentation, it is those who insist on the Mosaic law and not the Spirit of Christ in us who are the antinomians.)<sup>2</sup>

As part of correcting this misperception, it is time now for New Covenant Theologians and pastors to define NCT on its own terms, using its own terminology correctly. NCT writers, most recently John Reisinger in his book *In Defense of Jesus, the New Lawgiver*<sup>3</sup>, have successfully and boldly defended their theology against criticism. But that successful defense means that it is now time to turn from polemics to a positive presentation of the theology, both systematic and practical. More on that below.

A corollary to that is correcting the mischaracterization that NCT is somehow attempting to find a mediating position between Dispensational Theology and the Covenant Theology of the Westminster Confession of Faith or the 1689 Second London Baptist Confession. While NCT holds positions that

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1 from the book Richard C. Barcellos, *In Defense of the Decalogue* (Enumclaw, Wash.: WinePress Publishing, 2001) quotation is from back cover and unnumbered inside page endorsement by Samuel E. Waldron

2 Moe Bergeron, presentation at New Covenant Theology Think Tank, June 2, 2008, at Camp Cherith near Hunt, N.Y.

3 John G. Reisinger, *In Defense of Jesus, the New Lawgiver* (Frederick, Md.: New Covenant Media, 2008)

may be in common with one or the other of those theologies, it is not because it is a matter of choosing one from column A or two from column B. Rather, it is a case of agreeing with NCT in those places in which those theological systems are not in error.

NCT is not designed to mediate, compromise between, or find consensus among those theologies, but rather to adhere to a theology that is based on the clear teaching of Scripture, with Christ as Covenant, Christ as the hermeneutic, and the Spirit of Christ indwelling in the people of God. It is, in some sense, a return to a pre-modern view of Christ, before systems and confessions created a framework that distorted or obscured the lens.

NCT advocates have a lot of work ahead to transform the theology from a grass-roots movement to a more widely-known and correctly-understood system. Much of this work will overcome the stigma attached to it from both Dispensational and Covenant circles, each of which have right up to the present time attacked it as in error or even heretical.

Grass roots publications like *Sound of Grace* and early authors like Reisinger, Wells and Zaspel started to put NCT on the map, while the internet has fostered discussion and growth in the movement. What is still lacking, however, are works on the biblical, systematic, historical and practical aspects of New Covenant Theology. Much ground has already been covered, but there is quite some distance left to travel. We've heard presentations this week that could become part of some of that work.

In defining a systematic theology for NCT, there is a bit of a dilemma: it is a strongly biblical theology that doesn't hang on extrabiblical systems or man-made logical assumptions for it to be coherent. However, even in a less expansive form than a typical Reformed systematic theology, the NCT movement would be benefitted by having one. Using the outline of Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology* as an example (although we could use Berkhof, Hodge, or others) we can see what such a work might look like.<sup>4</sup> Many sections or topics will be very similar – if not mostly so – with Reformed systematic theology works like Grudem's, while other parts will be significantly or drastically different. Perhaps an early effort could focus just on those areas of difference.<sup>5</sup>

Chapters 2-8 of Grudem's book focus on the doctrine of the Word of God. It is unlikely that any

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<sup>4</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1994 and 2000)

<sup>5</sup> In the discussion following the presentation of this paper, it was pointed out that there may be an inconsistency in using a Reformed systematic theology as the template for a New Covenant systematic. An NCT systematic theology may very well take a different organizational form than a Reformed version, particularly with NCT's emphasis on biblical theology and the trajectory of redemptive history. The reader is asked to read the remaining paragraphs on systematic theology with this in mind.

NCT proponent would find drastic variance with those views on the forms of God's Word, the canon, or the authority, inerrancy, clarity, necessity, or sufficiency of Scripture.

Similarly, the following section on the doctrine of God, the Father, may not vary too significantly.

When we get to the next sections, the doctrine of man and the doctrines of Christ and the Holy Spirit, there will be a significant parting of the ways. Extrabiblical theological covenants – outside of any enduring or predestined purpose of grace or redemption God has – are at odds with NCT's clear belief in the Biblical covenants. Serious development of NCT's teaching that the economy of the Mosaic Covenant has passed in totality, replaced by a radically different New Covenant would necessarily replace those sections. This would outline clearly that the Old Covenant of external laws and a remnant of elect among a chosen nation has been replaced. It has been replaced with the New Covenant, the Covenant of Christ – so beautifully explicated by Chad Richard Bresson on Tuesday<sup>6</sup> – with its chosen people of God and its laws that describe the nature of those indwelt by the Spirit – and not an external code of conduct.

This decidedly Christocentric view will also require much deeper development of NCT doctrines of Christ and the Holy Spirit. Pneumatology has been a widely ignored – or at least under-represented – portion of Reformed thinking and teaching, especially in the past century. Sanctification through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit – not through the letter that kills – as Moe Bergeron has presented this week<sup>7</sup> – requires us to take a more in-depth look at the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps it also requires a more balanced look at the Trinity, which has shifted more and more toward the Father (in some circles) and away from Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Some NCT advocates are taking a deeper look at the doctrines of atonement and redemption. Reid Ferguson yesterday presented his intriguing initial look at some of the both/and tensions in Christ's atonement for sin and for the elect.<sup>8</sup> Much of this discussion has been off limits among five-point Calvinists, but a direct look at Scripture with a proper hermeneutic based in Christ and the gospel does require that we look at all doctrines with a critical eye, ever striving to be faithful to God's Word. I would hope that within NCT there would always be room for Scripturally-faithful doctrinal exploration without fear of reprisal or ad hominem.

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6 Chad Richard Bresson, "Christ, Our Covenant": paper presented at New Covenant Theology Think Tank, June 3, 2008, at Camp Cherith near Hunt, N.Y.

7 Bergeron, June 2, 2008

8 Reid A. Ferguson, presentation made at New Covenant Theology Think Tank, June 3, 2008, at Camp Cherith near Hunt, N.Y.

Before ending his text with eschatology – an area which I'll skip except to note that there here also is room for a variance of eschatological views, acknowledging that there are some which definitely do not fit within NCT – Grudem includes a large section on ecclesiology. NCT is a definitively credo-baptist movement, but there are other aspects of our church and body life that should be reviewed. I'll address those, briefly, when we get to our discussion of practical theology.

All of NCT's systematic theology must be based on sound biblical theology. In the past century, the development of biblical theologies which address the redemptive-historical unfolding of Scripture, have been excellent tools to understand God's plan. An NCT systematic must not make the errors of anachronism or the perpetuation or return of obsolete type and shadow that are characteristic of other systems (Hebrews 8:13).

And the establishment of NCT seminaries and programs, such as Dr. Gary Long's Providence Theological Seminary, will no doubt help and add a scholastic imprimatur to the movement.

In addition to scholarly works, popular NCT books are critical. Writers in our time like R.C. Sproul, John MacArthur, John Piper have beautifully explained Christian doctrine in accessible terms. Volumes on living in the Spirit, Christ as Covenant, even NCT-based popular commentaries will be very valuable to churches, teachers and saints as they seek to understand a theology that is as clear and succinct as Scripture itself.

This dovetails nicely with the next area, practical theology.

From a practical theology standpoint, NCT's commitment to look at Scripture and not system for its church and body life practice and its clear understanding of the role of the Spirit in sanctification and knowledge will clearly inform the life of the church and its people. Christ's commands to us to love one another as He has loved us (John 15:12), Paul's teaching on Spirit vs. letter (Romans 7:6, Galatians 5:18 and many others) and the examples of and cautions toward the churches from Acts to the epistles to Revelation are essential for us to understand church practice and how we are to live with each other as the body of Christ. Counseling in an NCT body – in particular the field of biblical counseling – must be informed by a proper focus on Spirit-based sanctification rather than the erroneous third use of the law.

Historically, New Covenant Theology as a movement only traces itself back to the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While none of the following men are – without being anachronistic – NCT themselves, writings from the Reformation era like Calvin and Luther, and later through Bunyan, Gill, Spurgeon, Lloyd-Jones, Vos and countless others as well as many present-day authors (including the epic work

from Carson and Beale)<sup>9</sup>, all inform and are aligned with various aspects of what NCT teaches. With a strong determination to be true to Scripture, in reality, the origins of NCT are as old as the Scriptures themselves.

Similarly, there are historic creeds and confessions which are aligned with NCT thought. The 1646 First London Baptist Confession, for example, has found favor among some NCT churches.<sup>10</sup>

These writings, teachings and confessional documents form a direct line back to Scripture and indicate that NCT, while recent as a movement, is core to Christianity from the Apostles until now. A work tracing the thought and doctrine that leads to NCT is probably essential in showing that it is a theology that at its core is as old as the faith.

So, how does NCT proceed?

I've only just skimmed the surface here. But, standing on the shoulders of those who have paved the way by laying the foundation of the movement while successfully countering critics of the theology, we must move forward in a positive direction. We must write more. A lot more. And more of us should write.

We must continue to use technology to share our thinking and writing. The success of internet ministries like *Desiring God*<sup>11</sup> as well as information businesses demands that material must be made available freely. This free distribution could be supplemented by on-demand book printing, as well as on-demand DVD or CD replication, in which the cost of the publication could be kept at a reasonable level or supported by donation. Churches and pastor/teachers should share their sermons, class notes, and audio/video recordings freely in a clearinghouse online.

We must define on our own terms the distinctives that characterize New Covenant Theology. (Many have started on this, and perhaps a harmony of distinctives is in order.)

But – most importantly – we must put into practice in our churches and in our walk what it means to have Christ as our Covenant, living as Spirit-filled people assured of – and finding joy in – our future glory with Him.

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9 G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, editors, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2007)

10 Discussion after the presentation of this paper included thoughts that the 1646 could itself form a starting point for a modern NCT confession of faith.

11 <http://www.desiringgod.org/>