

New Covenant Theology and Progressive Covenantalism Compared: Common Ground

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INTRODUCTION

Beginning in 1977, New Covenant Theology (NCT) emerged as a *developing* theological system through the diligent labors of such men as Jon Zens, John Reisinger, Tom Wells, S. Lewis Johnson, and Gary D. Long. However, what is NCT? NCT has been described in a multitude of ways. For example, Dennis Swanson of The Master's Seminary refers to NCT as a “theology of the Internet.”¹ Fred Zaspel describes NCT both as a “recent attempt” to “gain a clearer understanding of the unfolding of Biblical redemptive history” and as a theological system occupying “middle ground” between Covenant Theology and Dispensational Theology.² Blake White writes, “New Covenant Theology is the system of theology that allows the Bible to have the ‘final say’ most consistently.”³ Robert Plummer describes NCT as “[t]he theological system that attempts to systematize the Bible through the lens of old and new covenant, especially focusing on the ‘newness’ brought in Jesus.”⁴ Finally, Gary D. Long states that NCT “may be defined broadly as *God’s eternal purpose progressively revealed in the commandments and promises of the biblical covenants of the OT and fulfilled in the New Covenant of Jesus Christ.*”⁵

In 2012, Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum published their seminal work *Kingdom through Covenant* which sets forth the theological framework known as Progressive Covenantalism (PC). In this work, Wellum rightly argues that “the biblical covenants form the backbone of the metanarrative of Scripture, and apart from understanding each biblical covenant in its historical context and then in its relation to the fulfillment of all of the covenants in Christ, we will ultimately misunderstand the overall message of the Bible.”⁶ Following this, Stephen Wellum, Brent Parker, and other contributors published *Progressive Covenantalism*, a book which further crystallizes the tenets and teaching of this new system. Although there are some disputable differences between NCT and PC—a matter which will be addressed by my article, there is also vast agreement between these two systems. In this article, I will address the following areas of common ground between NCT and PC: 1) historic Protestant Christianity; 2) one plan of God—centered in Christ; 3) God’s plan is unfolded via the biblical covenants; 4) the interpretive priority of the NT; 5) the Mosaic Law is an indivisible unit; 6) Christians are not under the Old Covenant; 7) all believers are members of the New Covenant, have full forgiveness of sins, are permanently indwelt by the Spirit, and are empowered by the Spirit to please God; and 8) the Church is the eschatological Israel as God’s people. This is not intended to be an exhaustive list; it is merely eight areas of common ground that I will highlight between both systems.

A DISCUSSION AMONG CHRISTIAN BRETHERN

As believers in Christ, we *must* be able to lock arms together on all essential matters of the Christian faith, while agreeing to disagree in non-essential or disputable matters. We must remember that famous statement of Rupertus Meldenus, “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.”⁷ When we fail to do so, we stand in *direct* violation of Christ’s command to love one another as he loved us (John 13:34; Matt 22:39). As long as we accept the *absolute* essentials of orthodox evangelical Protestantism, we should be able to agree to disagree with fellow believers on disputable matters, which would include the non-essential differences between NCT and PC.

This is *not* to say that non-essentials theological matters cannot and do not significantly affect one's understanding of Scripture and overall theology. Of course, they *can* and *certainly do* in certain cases. This notwithstanding, every Christian must zealously labor to be abundantly gracious when interacting with Christian brethren in all matters. As Ephesians 4:1–3 declares: “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

COMMON GROUND 1: HISTORIC PROTESTANT CHRISTIANITY

The *first* significant common ground between NCT and PC that I will discuss is that of historic Protestant Christianity. Advocates of both NCT and PC affirm the early ecumenical creeds, with two examples being the Nicene Creed and the theological resolutions of the Council of Chalcedon. At the former, the full deity of Christ, and hence the Trinity, was affirmed. In the latter, the hypostatic union was defined, namely, that Jesus Christ, the God-man, is one person with two complete natures—divine and human. These are essentials of the Christian faith, upon which proponents of NCT and PC both agree.

Advocates of NCT and PC both hold to the five *solas* of the Protestant Reformation: (1) *sola Scriptura* (Latin: “by Scripture alone”): Scripture (which is the inspired, infallible, and inerrant Word of God) is the sole authority of faith and practice for the believer; (2) *sola fide* (Latin: “by faith alone”): believers are justified before God by faith in Christ not by works; (3) *sola gratia* (Latin: “by grace alone”): God’s grace, that is to say, his unmerited favor (not man’s will or effort) alone initiates, secures, and applies salvation to his elect; (4) *solo Christo* (Latin: “by Christ alone”): salvation is found only in the God-man Jesus Christ, the sole mediator between God and man; and (5) *solī Deo gloria* (Latin: “to God alone be the glory”): not only does God all things for his own glory but also that man is to glorify God not himself in all that he does (Rom 11:36; Rev 4:11; 5:12; 1 Cor 10:31; Isa 6:3; Luke 2:14; Heb 1:1–3). These are pillars of Protestant Christianity, upon which proponents of both NCT and PC agree.

Advocates of NCT and PC both affirm a Calvinistic or Reformed Soteriology—the doctrines of grace: (1) *total depravity*: man (a) is guilty of Adam’s first sin, (b) desperately corrupted his entire being in Adam, and (c) is wholly unable to do anything that pleases God; (2) *unconditional election*: God in eternity past freely chose a specific number of people to become recipients of his saving grace, not because of any foreknown choices or merits but because he was sovereignly pleased to do so; (3) *definite (or limited) atonement*: Christ’s penal substitutionary sacrifice is fully efficacious for the particular people whom God freely and sovereignly elected to salvation; (4) *irresistible grace*: the special inward call, whereby the Holy Spirit regenerates and enables individuals to come to Christ, invincibly secures the salvation of the elect; and (5) *perseverance of the saints*: God preserves to the end all those who are saved and those who persevere to the end are truly saved. Again, these are theological matters which proponents of NCT and PC both affirm.

Finally, proponents both NCT and PC heartily acknowledge that creeds and confession statements, whether historic or contemporary, can be and often are helpful systematic expressions of the Christian faith. However, proponents of both firmly oppose the elevation, whether perceived or actual, of any creed or confession to a level of authority approaching the Scriptures themselves. As Stephen Wellum, a proponent of PC, rightly states “that historic confessions function as secondary standards to Scripture.”⁸ In other words, although creeds and confessions can be and often are helpful summaries of what Scripture teaches, these statements are nevertheless formulated by men and are hence not inspired.

COMMON GROUND 2: ONE PLAN OF REDEMPTION, CENTERED IN JESUS CHRIST

The *second* significant common ground between NCT and PC that I will discuss is that there is *one* plan of redemption, centered in Jesus Christ (Eph 1:10; 2 Cor 1:20; Col 1:18), implemented according to God’s eternal purpose (Eph 1:11; 3:11; 2 Tim 1:9), and securing the salvation of God’s elect (Rom 8:28–32). Wellum, as a PC advocate writes, “Our triune God has one eternal plan which is progressively revealed through the unfolding of the biblical covenants in redemptive history (Isa 14:24–27; Acts 2:23;

Eph 1:4, 11; 2:12; Rev 13:8). From all eternity, God has planned and foreordained all that comes to pass in history, or what is called in theology, the divine economy.” Notice the similarity with Gary Long, an advocate of NCT: “God’s plan of salvation is revealed and administered according to his eternal purpose (2 Tim 1:9) through the unfolding of biblical covenants in the flow of redemptive history,”⁹ and “fulfilled in the New Covenant (NC) of Jesus Christ.”¹⁰ Or consider the words of Blake White, “God has one will/purpose/plan, and it is to make Jesus central in all things ... The Bible is the story of God’s work in history to sum up all things in Christ.”¹¹

Both groups hold that there exists only *one* plan of redemption — the salvation of *one people*. This one people is all God’s elect from all time, comprised of believing Jews and Gentiles (Eph 2:15), first formed as the body of Christ, which is the Church, at Pentecost (Acts 1:4–5; 2:1–41), not before (John 7:39; 17:21; Col 1:26–27; Heb 11:39–40), as one corporate spiritual body in New Covenant union with Christ (1 Cor 12:13; Eph 2:19–21; Col 1:18, 24). This is where NCT and PC distinguish themselves from Dispensational Theology¹² (in all its forms), as they do not accept the latter’s *sine qua non*, i.e., the sharp distinction between Israel and the Church.¹³ Simply put, NCT and PC do not agree with the Dispensational teaching that God has *two* redemptive programs — one for Israel, and one for the Church.

Both NCT and PC affirm that the Scriptures resoundingly teach that the plan of God is *Christocentric*. Consider Daniel 7:13–14:

I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a Son of Man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him; His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

Ephesians 1:9–10 declares: “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ.” Hebrews 1:2 teaches that God the Father “appointed” his Son to be the “heir of all things.” Ephesians 1:20–22 also declares that God the Father

“raised him [i.e., Christ] from the dead,” “seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion,” and “put all things under his feet” (see also Heb 2:6–8). Clearly, God’s purpose, God’s plan is centered in his beloved Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

COMMON GROUND 3: GOD’S PLAN IS UNFOLDED VIA THE BIBLICAL COVENANTS

The *third* significant common ground between NCT and PC that I will discuss is that God’s one plan is unfolded via the biblical covenants. Recall the explanations above of Wellum and Long concerning the one plan of God:

Wellum: “Our triune God has one eternal plan which is progressively revealed through the unfolding of the biblical covenants in redemptive history (Isa. 14:24–27; Acts 2:23; Eph. 1:4, 11; 2:12; Rev. 13:8). From all eternity, God has planned and foreordained all that comes to pass in history, or what is called in theology, the divine economy.”¹⁴

Long: “God’s plan of salvation is revealed and administered according to His eternal purpose (2 Tim. 1:9) through the unfolding of biblical covenants in the flow of redemptive history.”¹⁵

Clearly, leading theologians in both groups believe that God’s plan is unfolded via the biblical covenants.

At this point, the term *biblical covenants* requires explanation. Advocates of PC hold the following: “The primary biblical covenants are creation (Gen. 1–3); Noahic (Gen. 6–9); Abrahamic (Gen. 12–50); Mosaic/old (Ex.-Deut.); Davidic (2 Sam. 7; 1 Chron. 17), and the new covenant (Jer. 31:29–34; Prophets; Heb. 8–10).”¹⁶ There are advocates of NCT that would agree with the previous statement. For example, Long writes that “God’s eternal purpose of redemption” is “covenantally revealed and administered through biblical covenants beginning with a pre-Fall covenant of obedience with Adam (Rom. 5:12–19) and a post-Fall covenant of promise (Gen. 3:15).”¹⁷ In short, Long agrees, even adding a post-fall covenant of promise. That being said, I believe it would be fair to say that the majority within NCT do

not hold to the existence of a pre-fall covenant. I will discuss this point in greater detail in my next message.

That being said, the issue of a pre-fall covenant aside, both groups agree that God's one plan is unfolded and revealed through the biblical covenants. Wellum writes:

Each biblical covenant contributes to the unfolding and revealing of God's unified plan. To grasp God's plan, we must take seriously how all of the covenants reveal God's plan. It is crucial to interpret each covenant in its own redemptive-historical context and think through how it is related to the covenant(s) that precede it and to the covenant(s) that follow it. It is only by reading Scripture this way that we can discern how each of the covenants unveils God's plan over time and how all of the covenants reach their fulfillment in Christ. We do not view the covenants as isolated units; instead, we view them as organically related to each other as God's plan unfolds from creation to Christ. Thus, by the progression or unfolding of the covenants, God's plan is revealed.¹⁸

Take, for example, the seed promise that was first revealed in Genesis 3:15: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." In other words, God promises that one of Eve's offspring would be a champion who would triumph over the serpent via his own death. Genesis 4–6 then trace the genealogy of this coming seed from Adam through Seth to Noah. Immediately after the Flood, God makes a covenant with Noah which guarantees the future realization of the Genesis 3:15 promise — a blessing that is ultimately realized in Shem's distant descendant Jesus Christ. God subsequently enters into covenant with Abraham and grants to him the seed promise in Genesis 12:7 (renewed in Gen 15:18; 17:7), which itself is a continuation of the original seed promise in Genesis 3:15. Following Abraham, God establishes his covenant with Isaac and Jacob just as he promised in Genesis 17:19–21. In doing so, he extends the Abrahamic seed promise to Isaac and Jacob. Later, God enters into covenant with David, a descendant of Jacob's son Judah, and he promises to David a seed, who will build God's house, who will be God's son, and who will receive an everlasting throne (2 Sam 7:10–16).

As one traces the seed promise throughout the Scriptures using a Christological hermeneutic, it is unmistakably clear that the biblical covenants progressively unfold God's promises. As the NT Scriptures resoundingly indicate, Christ is the true seed of the woman, the one whom God promised would crush the head of the serpent (Heb 2:14). He is the true seed of Abraham (Matt 1:1); that is to say, he is both the ultimate fulfillment and chief beneficiary of God's promises to Abraham (Gal 3:16). As "the Lion of the tribe of Judah" (Rev 5:5), Christ is descended from Isaac, Jacob, and Judah. Christ is David's greater Son and true seed (Matt 1:1; Rev 5:5) — the One who ontologically is God's unique Son, who through his death, burial, resurrection, and ascension is "building" the Church — God's temple, and who was enthroned in power at God's right hand at his ascension (Acts 2:29–36). Clearly, the biblical covenants progressively unfold God's kingdom purpose (Matt 6:10) in history, culminating in Christ Jesus and the New Covenant.

COMMON GROUND 4: THE INTERPRETIVE PRIORITY OF THE NT

The *fourth* significant common ground between NCT and PC that I will discuss is that both groups agree that the NT has interpretive priority over the OT *due to the New being the final revelation of God*. For example, Long describes that in terms of its hermeneutics NCT strives for "consistent interpretation of the OT in light of the NT" with "Christ as the focus 'in all the Scriptures'" (Luke 24:27).¹⁹ Blake White writes: "We learn how to interpret the Old Testament from Jesus and his apostles . . . God has revealed himself over time (progressively) and his revelation has come to a climax in Jesus Christ. Now all previous revelation must be understood in light of his centrality."²⁰ Wellum similarly states that PC "appl[ies] the entire OT to us as *Scripture* and in light of its fulfillment in Christ."²¹ Elsewhere, he writes, "To apply rightly God's promises to us today, and to know now we ought to live as God's new covenant people, *all* of Scripture must be applied in light of its fulfillment in Christ."²²

Why do both groups advocate for the interpretive priority of the NT? This is so for at least three reasons. First, the Lord Jesus Christ understood the message of Scripture to be about himself. For example, in an encounter with the Jews, Jesus boldly declared, "You search the Scriptures because

you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me” (John 5:39). In the same exchange, Christ also testified, “For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me, for he wrote about Me” (John 5:46).²³ Second, the apostles and writers of the NT interpreted the OT in light of Christ, as he had taught them. In John 1:45, Philip exclaims to Nathanael, “We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth of son of Joseph.” When speaking to the Jews in Acts 3:18, 24, the apostle Peter declares: “But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ should suffer, he has thus fulfilled.²⁴ And likewise, all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and his successors onward, also announced these days.” Third, the NT revelation is a higher, clearer revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ than the OT Scriptures. This is not to say that the OT should be discarded, devalued, or considered less the Word of God (2 Tim 3:16–17) than the NT. May it never be! The NT though must have interpretive priority over the Old due to the former being the final revelation of God. John Reisinger also describes the interpretive priority of the NT: “First, we consider the promise/prophesy as stated in its Old Testament text. Next, we ask questions of that text. Finally, we turn to the New Testament for answers to those questions.”²⁴

As a brief aside, proponents of NCT and PC also find hermeneutical common ground with regard to the already-not yet or now-not yet principle to understand the teaching of the NT. For example, representing the NCT view, Long writes:

The “now-not yet” principle of interpretation is essential to understand the teaching of the NT. The Christian experiences the commencement of “every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ” (Eph. 1:3); yet he still awaits the consummation of these blessing at Christ’s return. The whole theology of the NT is qualified by this tension: between the “already” or “now” and the “not yet” (I John 3:2).²⁵

Presenting the PC view, Wellum writes:

In the ratification of the new covenant, we embrace the “already-not yet” of inaugurated eschatology in understanding how the new covenant is fulfilled in

redemptive history. In Christ and the new covenant, all that the OT prophesied, predicted, and anticipated through promises and typological patterns is now here in principle (e.g., Matt. 4:17; Jer. 31:34; Rom. 3:21–26; 8:1; Acts 2:32–36; 2 Cor. 5:17), yet we still await the fullness and consummation of the new covenant at Christ’s glorious return (e.g., Matt. 6:10; 2 Cor. 5:10; Eph. 1:13–14; Rev. 21:22).²⁶

As a result, both groups hold not only to a Christological hermeneutic in which the NT has interpretive priority, but also to the *now-not yet* or *already-not yet* hermeneutical principle.

COMMON GROUND 5: THE MOSAIC LAW IS A UNIT

The *fifth* significant common ground between NCT and PC that I will discuss is that the Mosaic Law is a unit. For example, Wellum describes the PC view:

[W]e do not simply divide the Mosaic/old covenant into a threefold division: moral, civil, and ceremonial. Such an approach insists that the civil and ceremonial parts of the old covenant are now fulfilled and abrogated for Christians, yet the Decalogue continues as God’s eternal moral law for all people. No doubt, this approach is helpful and it often yields similar conclusions on how the Christian ought to live and obey God today, yet there are some hermeneutical problems with it. The old covenant is best viewed as a unit which has now reached its fulfillment in Christ and the new covenant. As Christians, we are no longer under the old covenant as a covenant (Rom. 6:14–15; 1 Cor. 9:20–21; Gal. 4:4–5; 5:13–18). Merely to appeal to the Decalogue as the principle by which we establish moral law today is not sufficient, and it faces difficulties with the Sabbath command. Instead, we ought to apply the Decalogue to us (as embedded in the entire old covenant) in light of its fulfillment in Christ.²⁷

Long describes the predominant view within NCT:

The Ten Commandments are not moral law “forever,” first written in the heart of man at creation and forever binding upon all mankind as CT teaches in its

confessions of faith; e.g., the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647–49) and the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith (1677/1689). In fact the term “moral law” does not occur in the original languages of the Bible. Although under any given covenantal administration, man is morally obligated to obey all of God’s commandments, yet the Bible does not separate God’s law into three parts: moral, ceremonial and civil. Historically, this threefold separation was not substantially taught until the time of Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century and in the 16th century by Calvin ... The Decalogue is not “transcovenantal” and, therefore, does not function outside the Old Covenant as a unit as much of CT teaches.²⁸

Blake White similarly writes: “[T]he old covenant law is a unit. It is a package deal. Another way to state this is to say that the law is bound up with the covenant in which it was given. One cannot separate the commands from the covenant to which they belong.”²⁹

COMMON GROUND 6: CHRISTIANS ARE NOT UNDER THE OLD COVENANT

The *sixth* significant common ground between NCT and PC that I will discuss is that Christians are not under the Old Covenant. Wellum expresses the PC view:

The old covenant is best viewed as a unit which has now reached its fulfillment in Christ and the new covenant. As Christians, we are no longer under the old covenant as a covenant (Rom. 6:14–15; 1 Cor. 9:20–21; Gal. 4:4–5; 5:13–18). Merely to appeal to the Decalogue as the principle by which we establish moral law today is not sufficient, and it faces difficulties with the Sabbath command. Instead, we ought to apply the Decalogue to us (as embedded in the entire old covenant) in light of its fulfillment in Christ. When we do so, we discover that the Decalogue comes over to us with greater expectations in light of Christ’s work applied to us by the Spirit.³⁰

Long, representing NCT, stands in general agreement:

Christians “are not under law (hupo nomon), but under grace (hupo charin)” (Rom. 6:14), meaning that the believer in Christ is no longer under the Mosaic law as covenant law but under the grace of the NC ... The Ten Commandments are a covenantal outworking of the two greatest commandments in redemptive history, not the reverse. They were given through the hand of Moses to the nation of Israel first at Mount Sinai (Exod. 20).³¹

Blake White similarly states: “New covenant Christians are not under the law of Moses but the law of Christ.”³² The Law of Moses can be defined as the exhaustive, *indivisible* (Jas. 2:10; Gal. 5:3) legal code, summed up in the Ten Commandments (Exod. 34:28), covenantally binding upon *the nation of Israel* (Exod. 19:5–6; 24:3), temporary in its duration (Heb. 7:11–12; Col. 2:14), and fulfilled in Jesus Christ (Rom. 10:4; Matt. 5:17–18; Col. 2:16–17).³³

As a brief aside, advocates of NCT and PC also hold that the Sabbath command is fulfilled in Christ. Stemming from the three previous areas of common ground, namely if the NT has interpretive priority over the OT, if the Mosaic Law is an indivisible unit, and if Christians are no longer under the Old Covenant as a *covenant*—and hence, the Mosaic Law as *covenant law*, this leads to the view held by both NCT and PC that the Sabbath command is typologically fulfilled in Christ. Speaking for the NCT view, Long writes: “The old covenant Sabbath commandment is typologically fulfilled by Christ for the people of God who rest in Him by faith (Heb. 4:9–10; Col. 2:16–17).”³⁴ Wellum describes the PC view of the Sabbath:

Regarding the Sabbath, like the Decalogue, we obey the Sabbath command in light of its fulfillment in Christ (Heb. 3:7–4:11). We do so by first setting the Sabbath command within its covenantal location (old covenant). This allows us to see how it functioned as a command/sign to Israel (which no longer applies to us), but also how it typologically pointed forward to a greater salvation rest that is now here in Christ (which does apply to us). In this way, Christians “obey” the Sabbath by entering into the rest that it typified and predicted, namely salvation rest in Christ.³⁵

COMMON GROUND 7: ALL MEMBERS OF THE NEW COVENANT ARE BELIEVERS WHO ARE FULLY FORGIVEN, INDWELT BY THE SPIRIT, AND EMPOWERED BY THE SPIRIT

The *seventh* significant common ground between NCT and PC that I will discuss is that all believers are members of the New Covenant, have full forgiveness of sins, are *permanently* indwelt by the Spirit, and are empowered by the Spirit to please God. Representing PC, Wellum states:

Under the old covenant, Israel visibly was constituted as a mixed community of believers and unbelievers (Rom. 9:6), ruled by various Spirit-empowered leaders (prophets, priests, and kings), hence the famous visible-invisible distinction. However, under the new covenant, the church is constituted as a believing, regenerate people, united to Christ by faith and those who have minimally experienced the forgiveness of sin, new birth and gifting by the Spirit, and heart circumcision (Rom. 6). No doubt, not all people who profess faith in Christ show themselves to be truly regenerate. Yet, the church, unlike Israel under the old covenant, is constituted by those who have professed true saving faith in Christ. Thus, our view of the visible-invisible church is different than covenant theology. We affirm that the visible church is a professing believer's church, while the invisible church pertains to God's one people in all places and throughout time (Heb. 12:18–29).³⁶

Blake White describes the New Covenant position:

New Covenant Theology believes that all in the new covenant community know the Lord ... Unlike the old covenant, all are indwelt by the Spirit in the new covenant. Moses longed for the day when all would have the gift of the Spirit ... These promises came to fruition at Pentecost, and not before then. The Spirit is the gift of the last days. The new covenant community consists only of those who are indwelt by the Spirit. The church is to be a believer's church. There is no biblical precedent for having a mixed community of believers and unbelievers in the new covenant church. All are fully forgiven and are indwelt by the Spirit of God.³⁷

Long also writes: “the believer in Christ is no longer under the Mosaic law as covenant law but under the grace of the NC — a covenant that ... has the internal leading of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:4, 11).”³⁸ Later, he continues: “The indwelling of the Holy Spirit is the norm for Christian living. NCT does not teach that the Ten Commandments are the only objective standard for evaluating the Christian life. Rather, NCT emphasizes that it is the Spirit who through Scripture enables the Christian to have a godly walk (Rom. 8:4) acknowledging that all Scripture is profitable for instruction in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16).”³⁹

God promised to make “a new covenant” which not only would not be like the Old Covenant (Jer 31:31–33) but would also be founded “on better promises” (Heb 8:6). In 2 Corinthians 2:14–4:6, the apostle Paul contrasts the Old and New Covenants, demonstrating the New Covenant’s superiority over the Old.⁴⁰ The Old Covenant was a “ministry of death” (2 Cor 3:7) and “condemnation” (2 Cor 3:9), and its defining dynamic was the Law of Moses, which, although a blessing for the regenerate⁴¹ Israelite (e.g., Ps 19:7; 40:8; 119:72, 97, 174), inexorably resulted in death for the unregenerate⁴² Israelite (2 Cor 3:6). However, the Mosaic Law resulted in death for unregenerate Israelites because the Old Covenant did *not* guarantee to its members the internal work of the Spirit.⁴³ This internal working of the Spirit was only experienced by a small remnant of the Old Covenant community to whom God freely and sovereignly chose to extend it in order to fulfill the spiritual promises made to Abraham. In contrast to the Old Covenant, the New Covenant is a “ministry of the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:8) and “righteousness” (2 Cor 3:9), and its defining dynamic is the Spirit, who inexorably produces “life” (2 Cor 3:6) in all members of the New Covenant.

Not only are all members of the New Covenant believers via the regenerative working of the Holy Spirit, but they also have full forgiveness of sins through faith in the salvific work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Unlike the Old Covenant, the New Covenant does guarantee its members the internal work of the Spirit. Put differently, membership in the New Covenant community *does* indicate that a Christian is spiritually redeemed and empowered by the Spirit to live righteously and please God. Jeremiah 31:31–34 declares:

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD', for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

Similarly, Ezekiel 36:25–27 states:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

Notice that all God's elect "from the least of them to the greatest" (Jer 31:34) know the living God (Jer 31:34), have his "law" written upon their hearts (Jer 31:33), will be forgiven of their iniquity (Jer 31:34), have "a new heart" and "a new spirit" (Ezek 36:26), have the Holy Spirit indwelling them (Ezek 36:27), and are empowered to please God (Ezek 36:27). Behold, the breathtaking glories of the New Covenant!

Among the promises of the New Covenant was the permanent gift of the Holy Spirit to all the members of the New Covenant.⁴⁴ Ezekiel 36:27 declares: "I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances" (cf. Isa 44:3; 48:16; Ezek 11:18; 37:14). Isaiah 59:21 foretold that the promised gift of the Spirit would be permanent: "My Spirit which is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart from your mouth . . . from now and forever." In John 14:16–17, Jesus taught his disciples, "And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is

the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not behold Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you, and will be in you” (emphasis mine). When would the advent of the Holy Spirit occur? On the day of Pentecost, the ascended Christ poured out the Holy Spirit upon his followers; the apostle Peter declares: “Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He [i.e., Christ] has poured forth this which you both see and hear” (Acts 2:33).

Another promise of the New Covenant is that the Holy Spirit would cause all the members of the New Covenant to obey the triune God. Ezekiel 36:27 declares: “I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances” (cf. Isa 44:3; 48:16; Ezek 11:18; 37:14). In other words, the indwelling Holy Spirit is the divine agent who causes a believer’s willing obedience (Ezek 36:27) by giving him a new heart or inclination⁴⁵ (Ezek 36:26) which consequently seeks to follow God and keep his inscripturated commandments (Jer 31:31–33).⁴⁶ The apostle Paul’s words in Philippians 2:13 echo Ezekiel: “For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” Again, in Romans 8:14, Paul writes: “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.” Simply put, the Spirit of God causes new covenant believers to obey God’s commandments (cf. Phil 2:13; Rom 8:13–14; 1 Pet 1:2).⁴⁷

As a result, advocates of NCT and PC both hold that all believers are members of the New Covenant, have full forgiveness of sins, are permanently indwelt by the Spirit, and are empowered by the Spirit to please God. In other words, both groups affirm a baptistic ecclesiology. In light of the doctrines of grace described above, both groups would understand the Church not to be a mixed multitude of believers and unbelievers—as taught by the Westminster Federalist branch of Covenant Theology—but rather a regenerate body of believers who all know the triune God “from the least of them to the greatest” (Jer 31:34). Both groups would substantially, and in some cases entirely, agree with historic Baptist confessions—such as the First London Confession, Second London Confession, or the Abstract of Principles.

COMMON GROUND 8: THE CHURCH IS THE ESCHATOLOGICAL ISRAEL AS GOD'S PEOPLE

The *eighth* significant common ground between NCT and PC that I will discuss is that the Church is the eschatological Israel as God's people by virtue of her New Covenant union with Christ—the true Israel. Wellum writes the following:

God has one people (Deut. 4:10; Isa. 2:2–4; Matt. 16:18; 1 Cor. 11:18; Heb. 10:25), yet there is an Israel-church distinction due to their respective covenants. The church is new in redemptive history since she is God's new covenant people due to Christ's coming and work, yet she is in continuity with OT saints who in faith looked forward to the fulfillment of God's promises in Christ (Heb. 12:18–29).⁴⁸

He continues:

The Israel-church relationship must be viewed both covenantally and Christologically. The church is not directly the “new Israel” or her replacement. Rather, in Christ, the church is God's new creation, comprised of believing Jews and Gentiles, because Jesus is the last Adam and true Israel, the faithful seed of Abraham who inherits the promises by his work. Thus, in union with Christ, the church is God's new covenant people in continuity with the elect in all ages, but different from Israel in its nature and structure.⁴⁹

Representing the NCT view, Blake White states:

Dispensationalism teaches that the church and Israel are two separate people, while New Covenant Theology teaches that the church is the continuation of Israel through Jesus Christ. Sometimes, New Covenant Theology is accused of being “replacement theology,” but this is unfair. New Covenant Theology does not teach that the church replaces Israel but that the church is the *fulfillment* of Israel by virtue of its union with the Jewish Messiah.⁵⁰

To this, I will offer two definitions which represent the position of Providence Theological Institute of New Covenant Theology and which also generally agree with the aforementioned statements.

The people of God: all God's elect from all time, comprised of believing Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:15), first formed as the body of Christ, which is the Church, at Pentecost (Acts 1:4–5; 2:1–41), not before (John 7:39; 17:21; Col. 1:26–27; Heb. 11:39–40), as one corporate spiritual body in New Covenant union with Christ (1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 2:19–21; Col. 1:18, 24).

The nation of Israel: the ethnic descendants of Jacob (Gen. 28:13–15) formed by God into a geopolitical entity at Sinai via the Old Covenant (Exod. 19:5–6), comprised of both believers and unbelievers (1 Cor. 10:1–5; Heb. 3:16–4:2), eschatologically fulfilled in Christ—*the True Israel* (Hos. 11:1; Matt. 2:15)—and His Church (Exod. 19:5–6; 1 Pet. 2:9), the believing remnant (Rom. 9:27; 11:5) of which was transformed into the Church at Pentecost (Acts 2:1–10,41), and which awaits a future *spiritual* restoration (Amos 9:8) in the form of a massive, end-time ingathering of *elect* Jews into the Church at Christ's Parousia (Rom. 11:12, 15, 25–27)

Proponents of both NCT and PC prefer to emphasize that the Church is the *fulfilment* of Israel as *the people of God*. However, this “fulfillment” is secondary to an even greater “fulfillment” regarding the nation of Israel—namely, *that Jesus Christ has fulfilled Israel as the True Israel*. As Christ is the true seed of Abraham and David's greater Son, Christ fulfills all God's promises, including those given to Israel (2 Cor 1:20). Not only does he recapitulate Israel's history in his own sinless humanity but he also perfectly succeeds where all God's previous mediators, including Israel, failed. Advocates of NCT and PC agree with other theologians in this regard such as Stephen Motyer and R. T. France. The former states:

Jesus appears, not just as the Saviour of Israel in fulfilment of prophetic expectation, but also as an embodiment of Israel as they should be. Matthew makes this point dramatically in his opening chapters, first by applying the Exodus verse Hosea 11:1 to Jesus (Matt. 2:15), and then by telling the story in a way that makes Jesus re-enact Israel's history: the Exodus from Egypt (2:19–20), the crossing of the Red Sea (3:13–17), the temptations ... in

the desert (4:1–11), even the arrival at Mt. Sinai to receive the law (5:1–2). Perhaps most pointedly, it is Jesus on whom the Spirit descends (Matt. 3:16), although the prophetic expectation was of an outpouring of the Spirit upon Israel (Is. 44:2–3; Ezek. 36:25–27). Where Israel had failed the temptations in the desert, Jesus now remains faithful to God.⁵¹

Similarly, R. T. France writes:

Jesus then saw himself as God's son, undergoing prior to his great mission as Messiah the testing which God had given to his 'son' Israel before the great mission of the conquest of Canaan. Israel then had failed the test; now, in Jesus, was found that true sonship which could pass the test, and be the instrument of God's purpose of blessing to the world which Old Testament Israel had failed to accomplish. 'The history of Israel is taken up by him and carried to its fulfilment.' The antitype, as always, is greater than the type. Old Testament Israel had failed; Jesus must succeed.⁵²

Again, France writes: "The resurrection of Christ is the resurrection of Israel of which the prophet spoke.' It is not so much that Israel was a type of Jesus, but Jesus is Israel."⁵³

When one studies the NT, it is very clear that Christ Jesus understood the message of Scripture to be about himself (e.g., John 15:1; Isa 5:2; John 5:39; Matt 5:17; Luke 24:27, 44). Additionally, it is apparent that Christ taught his apostles and the writers of the NT to interpret the OT in light of his person and work. Thus, the NT repeatedly describes the Church, Christ's New Covenant community, with terms originally used to describe OT Israel. Recall that the Lord at Mount Sinai declares to Israel, "Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod 19:5–6). Now, notice how the apostle Peter describes New Covenant believers—members of the Church of Jesus Christ—in 1 Peter 2:4–9:

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable

to God through Jesus Christ ... you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

The apostle Paul similarly understands the Church to be a New Israel—namely, “the Israel of God” (Gal 6:16). Thus, the apostles understand the Church as *the people of God*, by virtue of being “in Christ,” the true Israel. In other words, by virtue of being “in Christ,” the true Israel, the Church is by extension the fulfilment of Israel *as the people of God*—a new Israel.

Although both NCT and PC teach that the Church has *fulfilled* Israel *as the people of God*, both *adamantly* maintain that God has not broken any of his promises to Israel, as is implied when either is accused of so-called “replacement theology.” God has fulfilled all his promises in Christ Jesus (2 Cor 1:20). As a result, both NCT and PC hold that OT promises should be understood typologically with relation to Christ. To sum up, Christ *is* the true Israel, and he has ultimately replaced Israel, and it is only by virtue of the Church’s spiritual union with him that she can be understood to be the *new* or *eschatological* Israel.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, a great deal of common ground exists between NCT and PC. Both groups lock arms on the absolute essentials of the Christian faith. Furthermore, both hold to historic Protestant Christianity, to include such things as the five *solas* and the doctrines of grace. Both groups believe that there is *one* plan of redemption, centered in Jesus Christ (Eph 1:10; 2 Cor 1:20; Col 1:18), implemented according to God’s eternal purpose (Eph 1:11; 3:11; 2 Tim 1:9), and securing the salvation of God’s elect (Rom 8:28–32). Both groups teach that God’s one plan is unfolded via the biblical covenants—though many within NCT do not hold to a pre-fall covenant. Both groups hold not only to a Christological hermeneutic in which the NT has interpretive priority, but also to the *now-not yet* or *already-not yet* hermeneutical principle. Both NCT and PC teach that the Mosaic Law is an indivisible unit. Both groups teach that Christians are not under the Old Covenant. Both groups teach all believers are members of the New Covenant, have full forgiveness of sins, are *permanently* indwelt by the Spirit, and are

empowered by the Spirit to please God. Thus, NCT and PC both hold to a Baptist ecclesiology. And finally, both groups understand the Church to be the eschatological Israel as God's people by virtue of her New Covenant union with Christ — the true Israel.

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- 1 Dennis Swanson, "Introduction to New Covenant Theology." *TMSJ* 18/1 (Fall 2007), 152.
- 2 Fred G. Zaspel, "A Brief Explanation of 'New Covenant Theology'" (online article from Zaspel's Biblical Studies); accessed October 20, 2015; available from <http://www.biblicalstudies.com/bstudy/hermeneutics/nct.htm>.
- 3 Blake White, *What is New Covenant Theology? An Introduction* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2012), 1.
- 4 Robert L Plummer, *40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2010), 155.
- 5 Gary D. Long, *NCT: Time for a More Accurate Way* (Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2013), 2.
- 6 Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 21.
- 7 Although frequently attributed to Augustine of Hippo, Schaff notes that the theological axiom "appears for the first time in German, AD 1627 and 1628" and "has recently been traced to Rupertus Meldenius, the otherwise unknown divine." Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. VII: Modern Christianity and the German Reformation (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1910; reprint 1974), 650.
- 8 Stephen J. Wellum, "Progressive Covenantalism: Key Points of Definition" (Stephen J. Wellum, 2020), 1.
- 9 Gary D. Long, "New Covenant Theology" (Gary D. Long, 2013), 1.
- 10 Long, "New Covenant Theology," 2.
- 11 White, *What is New Covenant Theology?*, 6–7.
- 12 *Dispensational Theology* can be generally defined in the following manner: "a theological system that tends to emphasize the elements of discontinuity between the Old and New Testament Scriptures; this system divides redemptive history into a number of distinct time periods known as dispensations; among its other distinctives, generally speaking, are its sharp distinction between Israel and the Church, a literal premillennial kingdom, a pretribulation rapture, and a restoration of national Israel." *PTSJ* 1.1 (Nov 2014): 8.
- 13 What is the *sine qua non* of Dispensationalism? Charles C. Ryrie is particularly helpful: "The essence of Dispensationalism, then, is the distinction between Israel and the church. This grows out of the dispensationalist's consistent employment of normal or plain or historical-grammatical interpretation, and it reflects an understanding of the basic purpose of God in all His dealings with mankind as that of glorifying Himself through salvation and other purposes as well." Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago, IL: Moody 1966; reprint 1995, 2007), 46–8. See also Michael J. Vlach who holds to a six-fold *sine qua non* of Dispensationalism: "At this point, I would like to offer what I believe are the core essential beliefs of Dispensationalism. By 'essential' I mean foundational beliefs of Dispensationalism that are central and unique to the system, beliefs upon which the system stands or falls ... 1. Progressive revelation from the New Testament does not interpret or reinterpret Old Testament passages in a way that changes or cancels the original meaning of the Old Testament writers as determined by historical-grammatical hermeneutics ... 2. Types exist but national Israel is not a type that is superseded by the church ... 3. Israel and the church are distinct, thus, the church cannot be identified as the new or true Israel ... 4. There is both spiritual unity in salvation between Jews and Gentiles and a future role for Israel as a nation ... 5. The nation Israel will be both saved and restored with a unique identity and function in a future millennial kingdom upon the earth ... 6. There are multiple senses of 'seed of Abraham', thus, the church's identification as 'seed of Abraham' does not cancel God's promises to the believing Jewish 'seed of Abraham.'" Michael J. Vlach, *Dispensationalism: Essential Beliefs and Common Myths* (Los Angeles, Theological Studies Press, 2008), 18–30.
- 14 Wellum, "Progressive Covenantalism," 1.
- 15 Long, "New Covenant Theology," 1.
- 16 Wellum, "Progressive Covenantalism," 1.
- 17 Long, "New Covenant Theology," 1.
- 18 Wellum, "Progressive Covenantalism," 1.

- 19 Long, "New Covenant Theology," 1.
- 20 White, *What is New Covenant Theology?*, 9.
- 21 Wellum, "Progressive Covenantalism," 5.
- 22 Wellum, "Progressive Covenantalism," 1.
- 23 See John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 224. Concerning John 5:46, Calvin writes, "When Christ says, that *Moses wrote concerning him*, this needs no long proof with those who acknowledge that Christ is the end and soul of the Law."
- 24 John G. Reisinger, *New Covenant Theology and Prophecy* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2012), 23.
- 25 Long, "New Covenant Theology," 3.
- 26 Wellum, "Progressive Covenantalism," 1.
- 27 Wellum, "Progressive Covenantalism," 5.
- 28 Long, "New Covenant Theology," 2.
- 29 White, *What is New Covenant Theology?*, 25.
- 30 Wellum, "Progressive Covenantalism," 5.
- 31 Long, "New Covenant Theology," 2.
- 32 White, *What is New Covenant Theology?*, 36.
- 33 See Gary D. Long, *Biblical Law and Ethics: Absolute and Covenantal: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Matthew 5:17–20* (Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2009), 86. Long writes: "... God's absolute law-individually and personally binds all mankind by virtue of their being moral creatures of God regardless of dispensational and covenantal distinctions. But God's covenant law corporately and covenantally binds only those who are in the covenant community according to the terms of the covenant in force at a specified time within redemptive history. In its absolute sense, then, God's law is ethically and morally binding upon all mankind as individuals forever — whether Jew or Gentile (Rom. 2:12–15), whether living in the Old or New dispensation era (Matt. 22:36–40). But in its covenantal sense, God's law is only binding upon a covenant community so long as that specified covenant is in force. The law of Moses as covenant law was binding upon the physical seed of Abraham under the Old Covenant dispensation. The law of Christ is binding upon the spiritual seed of Abraham under the New Covenant dispensation."
- 34 Long, "New Covenant Theology," 3.
- 35 Wellum, "Progressive Covenantalism," 5.
- 36 Wellum, "Progressive Covenantalism," 4.
- 37 White, *What is New Covenant Theology?*, 38–43.
- 38 Long, "New Covenant Theology," 2.
- 39 Long, "New Covenant Theology," 3.
- 40 See Colin G. Kruse, "Law," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology: Exploring the Unity & Diversity of Scripture*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander, Brian S. Rosner, Donald A. Carson, and Graeme Goldsworthy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 636. Kruse writes: "After the coming of Christ, obedience to the Mosaic law was no longer the distinguishing mark of the people of God. They were now distinguished by their faith in Jesus Christ and participation in his Spirit. The law continued to have an educative role for them, but it was no longer the regulatory norm under which they lived. Christians were not bound to the actual demands of the law but had much to learn from the principles and values underlying them."
- 41 The regeneration of the OT remnant of Israel by the Holy Spirit is the fulfillment of the spiritual promises of the Abrahamic Covenant, not the Old Covenant.
- 42 The Old Covenant community of Israel was largely unregenerate. For example, Jeremiah 9:26b proclaims that "all the house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart" (cf. Isa. 1:9; Heb. 3:16–4:6). See also John G. Reisinger, *Abraham's Four Seeds* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 1998), 77. Reisinger states that Israel was "indeed a special nation ... but the nation by and large was unregenerate." See also John G. Reisinger, *Tablets of Stone and the History of Redemption* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2004), 44. On page 44, Reisinger writes, "It is true that God showed special favor to the Jews in their redemption from Egypt, but that was a physical redemption. Most of those Israelites were still hard-hearted sinners who needed to be convinced of their lost estate (Heb. 3:16–19)."
- 43 See Blake White, *The Newness of the New Covenant* (Frederick: New Covenant Media, 2008), 17. White rightly declares, "Indeed, Israel was unable to serve the Lord (Josh. 24:19), lacking the heart inclined to keep the Torah (Deut. 30:6, 31:16)."
- 44 Max Turner, "Holy Spirit," 551–2.

- ⁴⁵ This change of heart (or inclination) wrought by the Holy Spirit is the fruit of regeneration, one of the Holy Spirit's own ministries. Although not all OT saints were indwelt by the Holy Spirit, all saints, whether in the OT or NT eras, experience 'Holy Spirit' regeneration, resulting in willing obedience (albeit imperfect prior to death) to their own respective system of covenantal law (e.g., Law of Moses, Law of Christ).
- ⁴⁶ See Peter O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, Pillar New Testament Commentary, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 298–9 (emphasis mine).
- ⁴⁷ The Scriptures also declare that the Holy Spirit testifies of Christ (John 15:26) and guides believers "in all the truth" (John 16:13). This testimony and this truth center upon the Lord Jesus Christ.
- ⁴⁸ Wellum, "Progressive Covenantalism," 4.
- ⁴⁹ Wellum, "Progressive Covenantalism," 4–5.
- ⁵⁰ White, *What is New Covenant Theology?*, 45.
- ⁵¹ Stephen Motyer, "Israel (Nation)," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. by T. Desmond Alexander, Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 584–5.
- ⁵² R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament: His Application of Old Testament Passages to Himself and His Mission* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1998) 53.
- ⁵³ France, *Jesus and the Old Testament*, 55.