

New Covenant Theology and Progressive Covenantalism Compared: Disputable Differences

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INTRODUCTION

Although there are some disputable differences between New Covenant Theology (NCT) and Progressive Covenantalism (PC), there is vast agreement between these two systems. In my previous article,¹ I addressed the following eight 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 New Testament (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. Again, this is not intended to be an exhaustive list; it is merely eight areas of common ground that I highlighted between the systems. In this article, I will highlight five disputable differences which exist to varying degrees between PC and NCT: 1) whether or not a creation covenant existed between God and Adam; 2) the imputation of Christ's obedience; 3) the nature of the Law of Christ; 4) whether or not there is any instructive use of the Mosaic Law for the

Christian; and 5) differences regarding terminology and categories related to the covenants.

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 in Christian love. We must remember that famous statement of Rupertus Meldenius, “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.”² 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 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.”

DISPUTABLE DIFFERENCE 1: THE EXISTENCE OF A CREATION COVENANT

The *first* disputable difference that exists to varying degrees between PC and NCT is whether or not a covenant existed between God and Adam in the beginning. Representing the PC position, Stephen Wellum writes:

As we think of the Bible’s overall metanarrative, it is best to think of God’s one plan unfolding through a plurality of covenants, first starting with Adam and culminating in Christ and the new covenant. The creation covenant under Adam lays the foundation that continues in all the covenants and is fulfilled in

Christ and his obedient work. God's plan, then, moves from creation in Adam to consummation in Christ (Rom. 5:12–21; 1 Cor. 15:21–22; Heb. 2:5–18).³

Wellum argues that “starting with the creation covenant is crucial for grasping the Bible’s story for at least two reasons.” The first reason that Wellum states is the following:

First, the creation covenant is foundational for all future covenants since all subsequent covenants unpack Adam’s role in the world. Adam, and all humanity, is created as God’s image-son, a priest-king to rule over creation. Adam is created in relationship with God as he mediates God’s rule to the world; he does not need to merit favor before God. Yet, God, as holy and just, demands perfect obedience from his covenant partner. All subsequent covenant heads will function as subsets of Adam, who, in God’s plan, will point forward to Christ. Even though the amount of space devoted to Adam is small, his role as the representative head of creation defines what comes after him, and the entire work of Christ (Rom. 5:12–21; Heb. 2:5–18).⁴

Wellum continues with the *second* reason:

Second, the creation covenant is foundational for establishing various typological patterns that eventually reach their telos in Christ and the new covenant (e.g., the rest of the seventh day in Sabbath [Gen. 2:1–3; Ex. 20:8–11] and salvation rest in Christ [Heb. 3:7–4:13]; Eden as a temple sanctuary which is fulfilled in Christ as the new temple; and marriage which points to a greater reality, namely, Christ’s relationship to his people [Gen. 2:24–25; Eph. 5:32]). All of these patterns will eschatologically terminate in Christ and God’s new covenant people.⁵

Finally, Wellum summarizes the importance of the creation covenant for grasping the Bible’s overall storyline:

In fact, in and through the OT covenants, God re-establishes humanity’s lost rule in Adam by the establishment of his kingdom and saving reign (Heb. 2:5–18). In embryonic form, the OT covenants restore what was lost in the fall, yet always pointed forward to the coming of the Redeemer/Messiah who alone

establishes God's kingdom and the new creation by his life, death, resurrection, ascension, and Pentecost by the ratification of a new covenant (Luke 22:20; 2 Cor. 3; Heb. 8–10).⁶

Various arguments are used by proponents of PC to support the existence of a pre-fall covenant, known as the *creation covenant* similar to Reformed theology's *covenant of works*, rightly understood. *First*, though the word *covenant* (*bē'rit̄h*) does not appear in Genesis 1–3, it is not necessary for the word to appear in the Genesis account in order for a covenant to exist between God and Adam, and then Adam as head of all humans. *Second*, similar to Psalm 89 with regard to 2 Samuel 7 and the Davidic Covenant, Hosea 6:7, whose most natural reading is argued to be “*like Adam they have transgressed the covenant*,” counteracts the absence of the word *covenant* (*bē'rit̄h*) in Genesis 1–3. *Third*, the typological comparison in Romans 5:12–21 and 1 Corinthians 15 between the Lord Jesus Christ and Adam are argued to strongly imply that both men were not only heads of the human race — Adam of the old, Christ of the new — but also heads of their own respective covenants and thus covenantal representatives before God — Adam in the *creation covenant* and Christ in the *new covenant*. *Fourth*, it is argued that the usage of the covenant formula — “*I establish my covenant with you*” (cf. Gen 6:18, 9:9,11) — found repeatedly in Genesis 6–9 implies that God's covenant with Noah was an amendment, reconfirmation, or reestablishment of a previous covenant, namely a pre-fall covenant that God forged with Adam. *Fifth*, many covenantal motifs — pertaining to the priesthood, land, temple, king, even marriage — which are organically associated with many of the later biblical covenants appear in Genesis 1–3 with relation to the Garden of Eden, as well as Adam and Eve.

In my estimation, I believe it is accurate to say that the majority within NCT do not hold to the existence of a pre-fall covenant. For example, the New Covenant Confession of Faith, authored by the elders of New Covenant Bible Fellowship and associated with In-Depth Studies, the New Covenant Ministry of Geoff Volker, makes no mention of a pre-fall covenant.⁷ Another example is the Redeemer Catechism, a New Covenant catechism, authored by Jordan Quinley, also makes no mention of a pre-fall covenant.⁸ Lastly, two of the largest NCT ministries, Cross to Crown Ministries (formerly

Sound of Grace) and In-Depth Studies, neither hold nor teach the existence of a pre-fall covenant.

Various arguments are used by those proponents of NCT that do not hold to a pre-fall covenant. *First*, the word *covenant* does not appear until Genesis 6–9 when God forges a covenant with Noah. *Second*, it is argued that the most natural reading of Hosea 6:7 is not “*like Adam* they have transgressed the covenant” but either “*like men* they have transgressed the covenant” or perhaps even “*at Adam* they have transgressed the covenant.” *Third*, it is argued that the typological comparison in Romans 5:12–21 and 1 Corinthians 15 between the Lord Jesus Christ and Adam does not necessitate the existence of a creation covenant with Adam. *Fourth*, it is argued that the usage of the covenant formula—“I establish my covenant with you” (cf. Gen 6:18, 9:9, 11)—found repeatedly in Genesis 6–9 and elsewhere—does not always indicate that the covenant being spoken of is an amendment, reconfirmation, or reestablishment of a previous covenant. Thus, it is reasoned that the usage of this covenant formula does not necessarily indicate that God’s covenant with Noah is a renewal of a preceding covenant.

Now, as I mentioned in the previous article, there are advocates of NCT who agree with the PC view. For example, Gary D. Long, former President of Providence Theological Seminary, 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).”⁹ In short, Long agrees, even adding a post-Fall covenant of promise. Elsewhere, he writes: “The type anti-type teaching of Adam and Christ in Romans 5:12–19 demands that a covenant relationship existed between God and Adam both before and after the Fall.”¹⁰ Furthermore, quite a few individuals who were directly associated with Providence Theological Seminary—referring to faculty and board members—held or do hold to a pre-fall covenant. Additionally, members of Providence Theological Institute hold to it as well. Speaking for myself as an advocate of NCT, I have been on both sides of this argument, as I am sure many have. But, if I were to define my position at this current time, I would say that I do hold to the existence of a pre-fall covenant. I teach the existence of a pre-fall covenant to my ninth-grade students at Samuel Fuller School, using Tom Schreiner’s book *Covenant*—

all the while explaining that I view this issue ultimately to be a disputable matter of the Christian faith.

So, is it possible for a brotherly, in-house discussion to take place regarding this issue? And if agreement is unattainable, are we still able to differ with one another in Christian love?

DISPUTABLE DIFFERENCE 2: THE IMPUTATION OF CHRIST'S OBEDIENCE

The *second* disputable difference that exists to varying degrees between PC and NCT pertains to the imputation of Christ's obedience—in other words, whether Christ's active obedience is imputed to his people. Within NCT, there is a sizeable contingent that understands Christ's passive obedience, which they define as his sacrifice on the cross, being imputed to the believer but rejects Christ's active obedience, which they define as his perfect obedience to the Mosaic Law, being imputed to the believer. That being said, I believe it would be accurate to say that it is held by a large group within NCT though it is not the majority view. In my estimation, though I could be wrong, it appears to me that relatively equal numbers believe that both Christ's active and passive obedience are imputed to his people. In this article, I will refer to the first view as the Passive Obedience View and its counterpart as the Total Obedience View.

The New Covenant Confession of Faith, authored by the elders of New Covenant Bible Fellowship and associated with In-Depth Studies, articulates the Passive Obedience View within NCT.¹¹ In Article 13—Justification, the confession states in the first paragraph concerning justification by faith:

God freely justifies, that is he declares righteous, all those he irresistibly calls to himself. He does not justify anyone on the basis of their performance (infused righteousness) but by pardoning their sins and viewing them as perfectly forgiven and accepted, which is the definition of righteousness. God imputes, or gives to the believer, the complete forgiveness of sins and full acceptance by God (the righteousness of Jesus Christ). Because of his sacrificial death on the cross which is the perfect payment for sin, righteousness is secured for all those who believe. Justification is received by trusting in the work of Jesus Christ alone to save us from our sins. This justifying faith

is a gift of God and is not something that we are able to produce or attain on our own. Romans 3:21–31, John 6:44, Romans 4:1–25, Romans 5:12–21, Ephesians 2:4–10, Romans 10:3–4.¹²

The particular sentence in this section that is expanded and explained in a subsequent paragraph entitled *Imputation of Active Obedience* is the following: “Because of his sacrificial death on the cross which is the perfect payment for sin, righteousness is secured for all those who believe.” In Section 4 of Article 13, the New Covenant Confession of Faith directly addresses the issue of the imputation of Christ’s obedience. It states the following:

The perfect obedience of Jesus to the Mosaic Law was necessary in order for him to be our substitute on the cross, but the perfect law-keeping of Jesus is not imputed to our account and is not necessary for our justification. The only work that secures our justification is the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross by which he paid for our sins and secured for the believer a status with God as though the law had been perfectly kept. The cross work of Jesus secured everything necessary for our justification.¹³

The Confession lists such passages as Romans 5:12–19, Romans 8:3–4, Hebrews 10:14–18, Hebrews 4:15, and 1 Peter 1:18–19 as support for its view.¹⁴ Thus, we can see that this confession teaches that Christ’s *active obedience*, defined here as “the perfect obedience of Jesus to the Mosaic Law ... is not imputed to our account;” however, Christ’s *passive obedience*, defined here as “the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross,” is imputed to the believer.

Various arguments are used by those proponents of NCT that hold to the Passive Obedience View. *First*, it is argued that the phraseology of “one act of righteousness” in Romans 5:12–19 is best understood as being restricted to the sacrifice of Christ Jesus on the cross, his passive obedience as defined by this view. *Second*, it is argued via Hebrews 10:14–18 that Christ’s “single offering” whereby “he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified” is likewise best understood in this sense as well. *Third*, it is argued that other passages such as Romans 8:3–4 and 1 Peter 1:18–19 are best understood as being restricted to Christ’s death on the cross, again his passive obedience as defined by this view. *Fourth*, those

proponents of NCT that hold to the Passive Obedience View also view the imputation of the active obedience of Christ as an unnecessary “hold-over” from Covenant Theology; this stems from their definition of Christ’s *active obedience* as his perfect obedience to the Mosaic Law.

I would like to point out two observations at this point. *First*, although all proponents of NCT who reject the existence of a pre-fall covenant do not hold to the Passive Obedience View, all those who do hold to the Passive Obedience View do not hold to the existence of a pre-fall covenant. Whether this is readily apparent or not, it is still worth noting. *Second*, many people within NCT do hold to the Total Obedience View, as opposed to the Passive Obedience View. This is perhaps partly due to this issue’s proximity to that of justification by faith alone—a cornerstone of Protestant Theology. This proximity can and does understandably engender a degree of controversy within NCT circles as well as between NCT and PC. That being said, it is still worth noting that the preceding excerpts from the New Covenant Confession of Faith representing the Passive Obedience View do also affirm *justification by faith alone*.

As just stated, there are advocates within NCT who do hold to the Total Obedience View. For example, Long states: “Christ merited righteousness for the elect only and imputed it to them based upon His total obedience to the will of the Father in His life and death (Matt. 3:15; Rom. 5:19).”¹⁵ Elsewhere, he writes: “The imputation of Adam’s first sin to all mankind (Rom. 5:12d, 18a-19a), the elect’s sin to Christ (2 Cor. 5:21), and Christ’s righteousness to the elect (Rom. 5:18b-19b) are vital for the Christian faith. Without the doctrine of imputation the whole doctrine of the substitutionary atonement and justification by faith alone in Christ alone are undermined (Rom. 5:12–19). 4. The type anti-type teaching of Adam and Christ in Romans 5:12–19 demands that a covenant relationship existed between God and Adam both before and after the Fall.”¹⁶ Long’s words highlight the linkage by some advocates of NCT, and as we will see as well with the PC view, of a pre-fall covenant with Romans 5:12–19, and hence with the Total Obedience View. Additionally, I believe it would be fair to say that one of the largest NCT ministries, Cross to Crown Ministries (formerly Sound of Grace) also generally holds to the Total Obedience View. Speaking for myself as an advocate of NCT, I would fall into this particular camp as well that embraces the Total Obedience View.

Advocates of PC likewise hold to the Total Obedience View, meaning that the passive and active obedience of Christ are both imputed to the believer in justification. Wellum writes:

Unfortunately, Adam disobeyed resulting in sin and death (Gen. 3; Rom. 3:23; 6:23). However, our triune God did not leave us to ourselves. Instead, God the Father chose to redeem his people by sovereign grace by the provision of God the Son, who by his incarnation, life, death and resurrection secured our eternal salvation. As the incarnate Son, Jesus, as the last Adam, perfectly obeyed for us as our covenant head (Rom. 5:12–21; Phil. 2:6–11; Heb. 5:1–10). As the divine Son, he bore the penalty of our sin and satisfied God’s own righteous demand against us (Rom. 3:21–26). By our covenantal faith-union in Christ, wrought by the regenerating work of God the Spirit, we stand justified before God as his redeemed, reconciled, and adopted sons (Rom. 8; Eph. 2:1–10). As new creations in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17), we are restored to the purpose of our creation, namely to know, love, serve, and glorify God, now and forevermore, in a new heavens and new earth (Rev. 21–22).¹⁷

Notice the two sentences: “As the incarnate Son, Jesus, as the last Adam, perfectly obeyed for us as our covenant head (Rom. 5:12–21; Phil. 2:6–11; Heb. 5:1–10). As the divine Son, he bore the penalty of our sin and satisfied God’s own righteous demand against us (Rom. 3:21–26).”¹⁸ This is the language of the Total Obedience View. Wellum also summarily states elsewhere: “The creation covenant under Adam lays the foundation that continues in all the covenants and is fulfilled in Christ and his obedient work.”¹⁹ Thus, the PC view holds to the imputation of both Christ’s active and passive obedience.

Various arguments are used by PC as well as those proponents of NCT that hold to the Total Obedience View. *First*, it is argued that Christ’s *active obedience* should not be restricted to Christ’s perfect obedience to the Mosaic Law (which of course he never broke), rather it should be understood as his perfect obedience to the will of the Father — a far greater, far higher standard. *Second*, it is argued that Christ’s *passive obedience* should not be restricted to his sacrifice on the cross, as in the words of Greg Van Court, “the active obedience has been historically defined as to have its greatest fulfillment in the sacrifice of Christ.”²⁰ *Third*, it is argued

that the “one act of righteousness” in Romans 5:12–19 should not be so restrictively interpreted as “to exclude any aspect of Christ’s obedience from that obedience through which ‘many will be made righteous.’”²¹ Thus, it is possible to view the “one act of righteousness” in Romans 5:12–19, Christ’s “single offering” in Hebrews 10:14–18, and other references to the sacrifice of Christ on the cross as *synecdoches*, in other words, literary expressions whereby a whole is signified via one of its component parts or vice versa. In other words, references to Christ’s death on the cross may also referentially include other concepts such as the atonement, his perfect humanity, and his perfect obedience to the Father. *Fourth*, with regards to passages such as 2 Corinthians 5:21, as Van Court states, “There is nothing in the context of either Corinthian passage to suggest that the righteousness imputed to the elect is anything other than his entire righteousness. They are entirely found in him by union with him. His entire righteousness is reckoned as theirs.” For these various reasons, advocates of the Total Obedience View argue, “It is best to speak of the obedience of Christ, meaning his obedience in the totality of his incarnate life.”²²

At this particular point, I want to reemphasize that this is a disputable matter of the Christian faith, and believers should be able to freely hold to either position and differ with one another in Christian love. Is it then possible for a brotherly, in-house discussion to take place regarding this issue? If agreement is unattainable, are we still able to differ with one another in Christian love?

DISPUTABLE DIFFERENCE 3: THE LAW OF CHRIST

The *third* disputable difference that exists to varying degrees between PC and NCT pertains to how both groups define *the law of Christ* (ἐννομος Χριστου — literally “in-lawed to Christ”) in 1 Corinthians 9:20–21. Advocates of both groups, in my estimation, acknowledge that New Covenant believers are *not only* “not under the Law” of Moses (1 Cor 9:20–21) *but also* are “not without the law of God” since they are under the *law of Christ*. For NCT, we believe that the *law of Christ* is a *new* law (Heb 7:12), a *higher* law (Matt 5:20), and a *better* law (Matt 5:21–48; Heb 7:19) than the Law of Moses with its Ten Commandments, but for PC, the *law of Christ* includes all of God’s moral absolute moral demand from creation to Christ, which is best

captured by the Great Commandment, which also is basically represented in the Decalogue, except for the Sabbath command. On this issue, there are significant differences in how both groups define *the law of Christ*.

The New Covenant Confession of Faith, authored by the elders of New Covenant Bible Fellowship and associated with In-Depth Studies, articulates one such NCT view.²³ In Article 20 — the Law of God, the confession states in the seventh section concerning *the law of Christ*: “This is the law that must be obeyed in the New Covenant era. It comes to us through Jesus and the Apostles. It is what believers are required to obey today. The content of the Law of Christ contains both new laws and repeated laws from the Mosaic Law. 1 Corinthians 9:19–23, Galatians 6:1–5, Ephesians 4:25–32, Matthew 5–7.”²⁴ Thus, this confession defines *the law of Christ* as consisting of not only the new laws of the NT but also certain commands from the Mosaic Law which are repeated in the NT. In *What is New Covenant Theology?*, Blake White defines *the law of Christ* in the following manner:

It is clear that the heart of the law of Christ is cross-shaped love, but there is more to new covenant ethics than love. It also includes the teaching of Jesus and his apostles. *The law of Christ can be defined as those prescriptive principles drawn from the example and teaching of Jesus and his apostles (the central demand being love), which are meant to be worked out in specific situations by the guiding influence and empowerment of the Holy Spirit.*²⁵

The Redeemer Catechism, authored by Jordan Quinley, echoes Blake White’s definition of *the law of Christ*:

The law of Christ includes the example and commands of Jesus himself and the way of life set forth in all the New Testament. Yet the law of Christ may be summed up in Christ’s new commandment, that we love one another as he has loved us. Therefore, our new life in Christ should exhibit Christlikeness. (John 13:14–15, 34–35; 14:21–23; 2 Thess. 3:4; Rom. 15:2–3; 1 John 2:3–6; 3:23; 4:17; 2 John 5–6; Eph. 5:2).²⁶

Gary Long also provides an explanation on the law of Christ:

The law of Christ is not to be equated with the Decalogue. Although the law of Christ, the law of the NC [new covenant] people of God, is related to the Decalogue in that it incorporates nine of the Ten Commandments. The law of Christ is a better law than the law of Moses (Matt. 5:21–48; Heb. 7:19) in the sense that (1) it is a higher revelation of the righteousness of God (Matt. 5:20); (2) it is based upon a higher standard of love (Matt. 5:44); and (3) Christ's inauguration of the New Covenant brings in things that are qualitatively "newer," expressed in developing the theological significance of such basic concepts as new wineskins, new teaching, new commandment, new creation, new man, new name, new song, New Jerusalem and all things new (Rev. 21:5).²⁷

Each of these aforementioned definitions of *the law of Christ* contains aspects with which I heartily agree. As a result, being an advocate of NCT, I would suggest the following definition for *the law of Christ* which attempts to harmonize each together:

The Law of Christ is the gracious law of the New Covenant (Rom. 6:14), which is covenantally binding upon the Church (1 Cor. 9:20–21) and consists of *the law of love* (Gal. 6:2; Jas. 2:8; Rom. 13:8–10), *the example of the Lord Jesus Christ* (John 13:34; Phil. 2:4–12), *Christ's commands and teachings* (Matt. 28:20; 2 Pet. 3:2), *the commands and teachings of the New Testament Scriptures* (2 Pet. 3:2; Eph. 2:20; Jude 1:17; 1 John 5:3), and *all Scripture interpreted in light of Jesus Christ* (Matt. 5:17–18; Luke 24:27,44; 2 Tim. 3:16–17).

I believe it would be fair to say that PC has a broader, more general definition of *the law of Christ* than does NCT, a view that is closer to classic Reformed theology. Consider the following explanation by Stephen Wellum concerning *the law of Christ*:

The entirety of Scripture, including the OT, is to be applied to Christians today, but in and through its fulfillment in Christ and the new covenant (2 Tim. 3:15–17). We do not embrace the hermeneutical options of either all of the OT applies to us unless explicitly abrogated (covenant theology), or none of the OT applies to us unless explicitly repeated (dispensational theology). Instead,

as Christians under the new covenant, we are not directly under the previous covenants as covenants, yet we apply the entire OT to us as Scripture and in light of its fulfillment in Christ. For us, the “law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2) is the entirety of God’s Word applied to us in and through the new covenant, while also carefully applying the Bible’s creation, fall, redemption, new creation structures to us.²⁸

Let me repeat the final two sentences of Wellum’s statement for emphasis:

Instead, as Christians under the new covenant, we are not directly under the previous covenants as covenants, yet we apply the entire OT to us as Scripture and in light of its fulfillment in Christ. For us, the “law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2) is the entirety of God’s Word applied to us in and through the new covenant, while also carefully applying the Bible’s creation, fall, redemption, new creation structures to us.²⁹

In other words, advocates of PC understand *the law of Christ* to be all of Scripture applied to us in and through the Lord Jesus Christ and the New Covenant. This definition resonates with me as I, in a similar fashion, understand *the law of Christ* to include all Scripture interpreted in light of Jesus Christ. In my estimation, I do believe there are advocates of NCT who would likewise agree with the PC definition of *the law of Christ*. Although to be fair, such an understanding of *the law of Christ*, is much less emphasized in NCT circles than in PC as the aforementioned definitions appear to indicate.

So, is it possible for a brotherly, in-house discussion to take place regarding this issue? If agreement is unattainable, are we still able to differ with one another in Christian love?

DISPUTABLE DIFFERENCE 4: INSTRUCTIVE USE OF THE MOSAIC LAW

The *fourth* disputable difference that exists to varying degrees between PC and NCT concerns whether there is any instructive use of the Mosaic Law in the life of a New Covenant believer. As note in my other article given in this issue of *SBJT*, advocates of both NCT and PC believe and teach Christians are not under the Old Covenant in terms of covenantal obligation. Also, both groups teach that all Scripture, including the OT, is *authoritative*

for the New Covenant believer. Both affirm the clear teaching of 2 Timothy 3:16–17: “All Scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.”

Thus, both groups heartily teach that the OT (i.e., the Law and the Prophets) and the NT together comprise the wholly inspired, wholly infallible, and wholly inerrant Word of God. Furthermore, these Scriptures constitute the sole authority for faith and practice in the life of a believer. To reiterate, Christians are neither members of the Old Covenant nor under its direct authority as a covenant. However, Christians are still under the authority of the OT (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16–17) as Scripture. John Reisinger notes: “Christians, while being free from the Mosaic law (the Old Covenant), are not free from the Old Testament. Failure to maintain this distinction will result in confusion and can lead either to legalism or to antinomianism.”³⁰ Elsewhere, he states that “the New Covenant has replaced the Old Covenant in totality, but it has not replaced the God-breathed Old Testament Scriptures.”³¹

The disputable difference is how both groups practically implement the OT as relates to their authority in the life of the New Covenant believer. A focal point for this particular disputable difference is highlighted in how proponents of each system interpret Matthew 5:17–18: “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill. For verily I say unto you, till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.” I believe it would be fair to say that many advocates of NCT apply the OT primarily in terms of instructing believers in such areas as redemptive history and theological doctrine, but less in terms of moral or ethical instruction. Some in NCT understand Matthew 5:17–18 to indicate that Jesus in his person and work has fulfilled the OT (which he certainly has), and thus, all the OT laws have been abrogated and cancelled as a result of his cross-work. Thus, only those OT commands which are explicitly repeated in the NT are ethically binding upon the New Covenant believer. As stated above, Article 20 of the New Covenant Confession of Faith states the following concerning the law of Christ: “This is the law that must be obeyed in the New Covenant era. It comes to us through Jesus and the Apostles. It is what believers are required to obey today. The content of the Law of Christ contains both new laws and repeated laws from the Mosaic Law.”³² Speaking for myself as an advocate

of NCT, I would respectfully differ from this position. I do so, as I believe it is important to understand an essential component of the law of Christ to be all Scripture interpreted in light of Jesus Christ (Matt. 5:17–18; Luke 24:27,44; 2 Tim. 3:16–17). Thus, although New Covenant believers are not under the Mosaic Law as covenant law, we can still glean ethical or moral instruction from the OT, even the Mosaic Law—provided that we understand it in light of its fulfillment in Christ and the New Covenant.

PC teaches that the entire OT, including the Mosaic Law, applies to Christians today through the lens of the Lord Jesus Christ and the New Covenant. Representing the PC view on this issue, Wellum writes:

The entirety of Scripture, including the OT, is to be applied to Christians today, but in and through its fulfillment in Christ and the new covenant (2 Tim. 3:15–17). We do not embrace the hermeneutical options of either all of the OT applies to us unless explicitly abrogated (covenant theology), or none of the OT applies to us unless explicitly repeated (dispensational theology). Instead, as Christians under the new covenant, we are not directly under the previous covenants as covenants, yet we apply the entire OT to us as Scripture and in light of its fulfillment in Christ. For us, the “law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2) is the entirety of God’s Word applied to us in and through the new covenant, while also carefully applying the Bible’s creation, fall, redemption, new creation structures to us.³³

Later, he states: “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).”³⁴ Wellum’s teaching on the Sabbath is particularly instructive of the PC view on the application of the OT to the New Covenant believer:

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

Wellum further describes this position regarding the authority and applicability of the OT to the New Covenant believer in his work *Progressive Covenantalism*:

Although Christians are not “under the law” *as a covenant*, it still functions for us *as Scripture*. As with any biblical text, however, before we directly apply to our lives, we must first place it in its covenantal location; *and* then second, we must think through how that text points forward, anticipates, and is fulfilled in Christ. Only by doing this can we correctly apply *any* biblical text to our lives as Christians. In fact, apart from following this hermeneutical process, we will incorrectly apply Scripture.³⁶

He continues by discussing the applicability of the Levitical sacrificial system to the Christian:

For example, if we ask, does the Levitical sacrificial instruction apply to us today?, the answer is no, if we mean *as* God’s covenant instruction to Israel. We, as Christians, live *after* Christ, who by his glorious work has brought the OT sacrifices to their *telos* (Hebrews 5–10). Yet Leviticus *as Scripture* does apply to us in diverse ways — *as* prophecy, instruction, and wisdom — but now only in light of Christ. What is true of Leviticus is also true of the law covenant (e.g., circumcision, food laws, civil laws, and Decalogue). No part of the law is applied to us without first placing it in its covenantal location (immediate and epochal context), and then asking how the entire covenant is fulfilled in Christ (canonical context).³⁷

Clearly, there is a disputable difference that exists to varying degrees between PC and NCT concerning whether there is any instructive use of the Mosaic Law in the life of a New Covenant believer. Again, I believe it is fair to say that many advocates of NCT apply the OT primarily in terms of instructing believers in such areas as *redemptive history* and *theological doctrine*, but less in terms of *moral* or *ethical instruction*. PC differs with this understanding, teaching that the OT, including the Mosaic Law,

applies to Christians today in and through the lens of the Lord Jesus Christ and the New Covenant.

So, is it possible for a brotherly, in-house discussion to take place regarding this issue? If agreement is unattainable, are we still able to differ with one another in Christian love?

DISPUTABLE DIFFERENCE 5: COVENANT CATEGORIES AND TERMINOLOGY

The *fifth* disputable difference that exists to varying degrees between PC and NCT concerns differences regarding terminology and categories related to the covenants. Wellum encapsulates this particular difference from the position of PC:

In contrast to covenant theology, we do not divide the covenants in redemptive history into the two categories of “the covenant of works” (Law) and “the covenant of grace” (Grace/Gospel). Although “Law” and “Gospel” are helpful theological categories, which we affirm in regard to their theological content, Scripture does not divide up the biblical covenants this way. By “Law,” we affirm that God’s will and nature is the law and that God makes an absolute demand on his creatures; by “Gospel,” we affirm that God, by sovereign grace, takes the initiative to redeem a people for himself and that he must achieve our redemption from beginning to end, but we do not think that each covenant can be simply divided under one of these two categories to the exclusion of the other.³⁸

Wellum also comments on strictly categorizing covenants as either *conditional* or *unconditional*:

So, instead of categorizing each covenant as either unconditional or conditional, it is best to see a combination in each covenant, culminating in Christ and the new covenant. By unconditional, we mean that God takes the initiative by grace to act and redeem, which is true in every covenant. By conditional, we mean that God demands complete loyalty and love from his covenant people, and thus perfect obedience, yet, sadly, we do not render it. This sad fact is important to remember since a crucial way the Bible’s story progresses is

that each covenant progressively reveals and anticipates the coming of the perfect covenant-keeper, our Lord Jesus Christ, who acts on our behalf and secures our eternal redemption by his entire life, death, and resurrection.³⁹

Advocates of PC argue that though these categories are helpful, they should not be strictly applied, as the biblical covenants do not fit neatly into one category or the other. Rather, they overlap multiple *covenantal* categories. This criticism would also likely extend to the strict usage of such terms as *royal grant* vs. *suzerain-vassal treaty* and *gracious* vs. *not gracious*.

In my opinion, this criticism is generally fair, as there is a tendency to a stricter categorization of the covenants among some advocates of NCT. For example, the New Covenant Confession of Faith states the following concerning the Old Covenant in Article 9—Section 3:

The Old Covenant is also called the Mosaic Covenant or the First Covenant. This was a legal agreement between God and the nation of Israel that was given to Moses on Mount Sinai. This covenant was not a gracious covenant. Although the Lord had a gracious purpose in giving this covenant, the covenant itself was a legal covenant that demanded perfect obedience. The failure to obey would result in the curse of God. This covenant was used to prepare the way for the Messiah. Israel, as a whole, was not a believing people. The Old Covenant caused the Israelites to sin all the more. It was never the means of anyone's salvation. The Old Covenant functions as a physical picture of many spiritual truths that can be used to teach believers today. The Ten Commandments are the essence of the Mosaic Law or Mosaic Covenant. The pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost brought to a close the Old Covenant era.⁴⁰

In my estimation, advocates of PC would differ with the phraseology, “This covenant was not a gracious covenant,” arguing that it emphasizes the conditional aspects of the covenant to the detriment of the unconditional aspects of the covenant. Consider also the New Covenant Confession of Faith's statement regarding the Davidic Covenant in Article 9—Section 4:

The Davidic Covenant is an unconditional covenant made between God and David through which God promises David and Israel that the Messiah would come from the lineage of David and the tribe of Judah and would establish a

kingdom that would endure forever. The Davidic Covenant is unconditional because God does not place any conditions of obedience upon its fulfillment. The fulfillment of the promises made rests solely on God's faithfulness and does not depend at all on David or Israel's obedience. The physical fulfillment of the promise to David came through his son Solomon as he reigned upon the throne and was responsible for the building of the physical Temple. Both the Temple and Solomon's reign were temporary however and only served as a picture of the true fulfillment of the Covenant which is the coming Messiah, Jesus Christ.⁴¹

In my estimation, advocates of PC would differ with the phraseology, "The Davidic Covenant is unconditional because God does not place any conditions of obedience upon its fulfillment," arguing that it emphasizes the unconditional aspects of the covenant to the detriment of the conditional aspects of the covenant. It is certainly true that the failure of David's heirs would not bring about the abrogation of the covenant; that being said, God did promise to discipline kings who disobeyed God and continued in said disobedience. Admittedly, I myself have been at times too strict in my categorization of covenants with the *conditional* vs. *unconditional*, *law* vs. *gospel*, and *royal grant* vs. *suzerain-vassal treaty*. The approach of PC regarding classification and categorization of the biblical covenants resonates with me personally, because we must all strive to let the Bible speak for itself and resultantly conform our theological understanding to its teaching.

So, is it possible for a brotherly, in-house discussion to take place regarding this issue? If agreement is unattainable, are we still able to differ with one another in Christian love?

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have highlighted five differences which exist to varying degrees between PC and NCT: 1) whether or not a creation covenant existed between God and Adam; 2) the imputation of Christ's obedience; 3) the nature of the Law of Christ; 4) whether or not there is any instructive use of the Mosaic Law for the Christian; and 5) differences regarding terminology and categories related to the covenants. Despite these disputable differences between NCT and PC, there is much agreement between these two systems. In my other article in this issue of *SBJT*, I addressed the following eight areas

of common ground between NCT and PC, and I want to conclude by again listing these areas of common ground: 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 a 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. "In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity."⁴²

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- 1 See Zachary S. Maxcey, "New Covenant Theology and Progressive Covenantalism Compared: Common Ground," in this issue of *SBJT*.
 - 2 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.
 - 3 Stephen J. Wellum, "Progressive Covenantalism: Key Points of Definition" (Stephen J. Wellum, 2020), 1.
 - 4 Wellum, "Progressive Covenantalism," 1.
 - 5 Wellum, "Progressive Covenantalism," 1–2.
 - 6 Wellum, "Progressive Covenantalism," 2.
 - 7 "New Covenant Confession of Faith" (online theological Confession from www.ids.org); accessed on April 16, 2023; available at <https://ids.org/featuredupdated-ncbf-confession-of-faith/>.
 - 8 Jordan Quinley, "The Redeemer Catechism" (Jordan Quinley, 2020), Part I.
 - 9 Gary D. Long, "New Covenant Theology" (Gary D. Long, 2013), 1.
 - 10 Long, "New Covenant Theology," 2.
 - 11 "New Covenant Confession of Faith" (online theological Confession from www.ids.org); accessed on April 16, 2023; available at <https://ids.org/featuredupdated-ncbf-confession-of-faith/>.
 - 12 "New Covenant Confession of Faith," Article 13 – Section 1.
 - 13 "New Covenant Confession of Faith," Article 13 – Section 4.
 - 14 "New Covenant Confession of Faith," Article 13 – Section 4.
 - 15 Long, "New Covenant Theology," 3.
 - 16 Long, "New Covenant Theology," 2.
 - 17 Wellum, "Progressive Covenantalism," 2.
 - 18 Wellum, "Progressive Covenantalism," 2.
 - 19 Wellum, "Progressive Covenantalism," 2.
 - 20 Gregory A. Van Court, *The Obedience of Christ: A Response to Steve Lehrer and Geoff Volker* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2009), 9.
 - 21 Van Court, *Obedience of Christ*, 14.
 - 22 Van Court, *Obedience of Christ*, 23.
 - 23 "New Covenant Confession of Faith" (online theological Confession from www.ids.org); accessed on April 16, 2023; available at <https://ids.org/featuredupdated-ncbf-confession-of-faith/>.
 - 24 "New Covenant Confession of Faith," Article 20 – Section 7.
 - 25 Blake White, *What is New Covenant Theology? An Introduction* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2012), 37–38.
 - 26 Jordan Quinley, "The Redeemer Catechism" (Jordan Quinley, 2020), Part III – Question 60.
 - 27 Long, "New Covenant Theology," 2–3.
 - 28 Wellum, "Progressive Covenantalism," 5.
 - 29 Wellum, "Progressive Covenantalism," 5.
 - 30 John G. Reisinger, *New Covenant Theology and Prophecy* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2012), 4.

- ³¹ Reisinger, *New Covenant Theology and Prophecy*, 14.
- ³² “New Covenant Confession of Faith,” Article 20 – Section 7.
- ³³ Wellum, “Progressive Covenantalism,” 5.
- ³⁴ Wellum, “Progressive Covenantalism,” 5.
- ³⁵ Wellum, “Progressive Covenantalism,” 5.
- ³⁶ Stephen J. Wellum, “Progressive Covenantalism and the Doing of Ethics” in *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course between Dispensationalism and Covenant Theologies*, ed. Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E. Parker (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 222.
- ³⁷ Wellum, “Progressive Covenantalism and the Doing of Ethics,” 222.
- ³⁸ Wellum, “Progressive Covenantalism,” 2.
- ³⁹ Wellum, “Progressive Covenantalism,” 2.
- ⁴⁰ “New Covenant Confession of Faith,” Article 9 – Section 3.
- ⁴¹ “New Covenant Confession of Faith,” Article 9 – Section 4.
- ⁴² Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 7:650.