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ABSTRACT

THE RELATIONSHIP OF LAW AND GRACE IN THE  
HERMENEUTICS OF NEW COVENANT THEOLOGY

by

Carlos J. Cruz Pacheco

Adviser: Martin Hanna

ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH

Thesis

Andrews University

Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

Title: THE RELATIONSHIP OF LAW AND GRACE IN THE HERMENEUTICS OF  
NEW COVENANT THEOLOGY

Name of researcher: Carlos J. Cruz Pacheco

Name and degree of faculty adviser: Martin Hanna, Ph.D.

Date completed: April 2017

Problem

This thesis evaluates the offer by New Covenant Theology of an interpretation of salvation history that stands in criticism of interpretations offered by Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism. Does New Covenant Theology demonstrate a distinctive view of the law-grace relationship that brings new perspectives on important theological and hermeneutical issues such as the relationship between the Old and New Testaments, and the Sabbath. Are New Covenant theologians correct in their claim that their system presents the best interpretation of salvation history, and of the law-grace relationship?

## Purpose

The purpose of this investigation is to evaluate New Covenant Theology's hermeneutics by analyzing the neocovenantal interpretation of the law-grace relationship in comparison to the presentations of Covenant Theology and New Covenant Theology.

## Justification

New Covenant theologians are gaining new ground among theologians and lay people due to the availability of their publications online. Although several informal articles, one book and a doctoral dissertation have been written to evaluate New Covenant Theology, not formal study has been made to analyze its hermeneutics from the perspective of the law-grace relationship. This study is an incipient attempt at exploring the challenge that New Covenant Theology brings to contemporary hermeneutics and theology, and especially to Seventh-day Adventist theology.

## Delimitations

Due to the proliferations in the current generation of New Covenant theologians, and also, in recognition of the original hermeneutical developments that have shaped New Covenant Theology into its present form, I will be primarily focusing on first generation New Covenant theologians.

## Conclusions

New Covenant Theology appears as an alternative hermeneutical/theological system that attempts to mediate between the covenantal and dispensational proposals. It offers a development of the law-grace relationship that reflects an emphasis on a soteriological distinction (i.e., works-vs.-grace, *à la* Luther) in the context of covenantal progressiveness.

New Covenant Theology's Christological and Christotelic emphasis springs from a particular understanding of the law-grace relationship, where *law* refers to the Mosaic covenant that is soteriologically understood as a *legal* covenant. This interpretation of the Mosaic covenant serves as a presupposition that informs the interpretation of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. As such, the interpretation of the law-grace relationship in New Covenant Theology demonstrates the basic tenets of the theological/hermeneutical system: 1) the *legal-istic* nature of the Mosaic Covenant, 2) the newness of the new covenant and 3) the progressiveness of God's plan centered in Christ.

New Covenant theology shares similarities with Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism. All three systems demonstrate a certain level of commitment to Luther's law-grace soteriological interpretation that results in an understanding of *law* (either historical or theological) as a *works* principle. Also, the covenant concept (rather than the word *covenant*) plays a significant structural role in the development of their respective interpretations of redemptive history. On the other hand, New Covenant Theology rejects both the dispensational literalism and the hermeneutical implications of Covenant Theology's covenant of grace as well as its existence.

New Covenant Theology's interpretation of the Mosaic covenant as a *legal* covenant (and its implications for the interpretation of the law-grace relationship) does not do justice to the totality of Pauline writing on the subject or to the Old Testament's self-understanding of the Mosaic covenant. It does not give proper attention to the nature of the sacrificial system and the intricacies of the Hebrew cultus. Furthermore, it has not yet demonstrated sufficient concern for a full biblical perspective on critical terms such as νόμος.

New Covenant Theology's Christocentric emphasis, although commendable, has not yet been explored in its proper *cosmic conflict* background. This results in an application of the *hermeneutical priority* principle that could distort the intended meaning of salvation history, especially the New Testament data.

In maximizing New Covenant Theology's contribution to the contemporary theological discussion, it is necessary to affirm the following duality of God's historical purpose in Christ. As a foundational source of theological data, Genesis 3:15 presents the major theme of a Kingdom in conflict actively involved in 1) the salvation of humans and 2) in the eternal resolution of the moral dissension in the universe, all through the exaltation of the coming "Seed" (i.e. Christ) in salvation history.

Andrews University  
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

THE RELATIONSHIP OF LAW AND GRACE IN THE  
HERMENEUTICS OF NEW COVENANT THEOLOGY

A Thesis  
Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

by  
Carlos J. Cruz Pacheco  
2017

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Carlos J. Cruz Pacheco

APPROVAL BY THE COMMITTEE:

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Martin Hanna, Ph.D., Advisor

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Member: Darius Jankiewicz, Ph.D.

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Date approved

## DEDICATION

A Darío y Menorca Peguero,  
y en ellos,  
a la Iglesias Adventista Hispana Maranatha Grand Rapids

Por manifestar el espíritu de Cristo al amar, servir y animar a aquellos que buscan cumplir con el mandato divino: “καὶ καθὼς θέλετε ἵνα ποιῶσιν ὑμῖν οἱ ἄνθρωποι, ποιεῖτε αὐτοῖς ὁμοίως” (ΚΑΤΑ ΛΟΥΚΑΝ, 6:31).

A Elvira Altagracia Pacheco Gil

Por demostrar la anchura y la profundidad del amor divino en su cuidado materno, con benignidad, sin envidia, sin vanidad, no buscando lo suyo, sin rencor, sufriendolo todo, creyéndolo todo, esperándolo todo, soportándolo todo.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank all the men and women at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary who have contributed to my academic formation and ultimately, to the development of this investigation. Among them, I would like to make special mention of Dr. Martin Hanna, professor of systematic and historical theology. He offered significant insights into the development and polishing of this research. The extent of his contributions cannot be fairly expressed in the confines of these pages. I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Darius Jankiewicz, who so willingly accepted the responsibilities of being part of this project and provided necessary recommendations to make this project what it is today.

Also, I would like to acknowledge those whose writings served as primary motivation for this research. I am thankful for Jon Zens, John Reisinger, Fred Zaspel and Tom Wells, whose writings challenged me to think more biblically and theologically.

I would also like to thank my family, and especially, Elvira A. Pacheco Gil and Yasiry Burgos, for being always there for me however necessary since long before I can remember. To Lusanni M. Acosta Rodriguez, for believing in me and in this project even when at the times I doubted. To Arnaldo and Yailin Contreras, for their constant support and encouragement. To Dr. Eric Del Valle, whose friendship and guidance often made the writing of this investigation appear smoother than it was. To the Grand Rapids Hispanic Maranatha SDA Church, for supporting my graduate studies even when it meant sacrificing themselves to give their pastor more time to study.

Finally, and more importantly, to the Almighty God, for being a loving Father that provides for His child every step of the way, giving him the wisdom, knowledge, love and inspiration to produce this investigation.

Soli Deo Gloria

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

This project is an investigation into the hermeneutic of New Covenant Theology—a Christian movement that proposes a new theological/hermeneutical scheme for the interpretation of the Bible as a whole. Challenging the traditional systems of Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism, New Covenant theology calls for an interpretation of the Bible that more closely recognizes the centrality of Jesus Christ in God’s progressive plan in salvation. This new proposal stands in a long line of interpretations of the law-grace relationship that could be clearly traced back to the Protestant Reformation. As such, New Covenant Theology’s role in contemporary theology and hermeneutics is significant, and a further exploration into its contributions is necessary.

#### **Statement of Problem**

This thesis evaluates the offer by New Covenant Theology of a new approach to the interpretation of the Biblical canon that encompasses, among many other features, a distinctive interpretation of the law-grace relationship. New Covenant Theology stands in criticism of Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism, bringing a new perspective on many hermeneutical and theological issues. Its unique hermeneutical and theological

scheme places New Covenant Theology in opposition to both of these systems.<sup>1</sup> Are New Covenant theologians correct in their claim to provide the best model for interpreting the Biblical revelation as a whole, and consequently, for the interpretation of the law-grace relationship?

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this investigation is to evaluate New Covenant Theology's hermeneutical paradigm. I will do so by analyzing the New Covenant interpretation of the law-grace relationship and its place in the development of New Covenant hermeneutics in the context of covenantal and dispensational hermeneutics. As a consequence, this investigation will evaluate New Covenant Theology's claims concerning its superiority over Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism in relation to the law-grace relationship. It will also offer a basis for the development of a model for the relationship between the Old and New Testaments that seeks to validate the Biblical data available on the topic.

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<sup>1</sup> Fernando Canale (in "Paradigm, System, and Theological Pluralism," *Evangelical Quarterly* 70, No. 3 [1998]: 202-203) offers several definitions for a system as it has been used in theology: 1) the "*ordo disciplinae*" (or *order of learning*), the principle that organizes the "Christian doctrines;" 2) the total content of doctrines arranged in a certain way; 3) the foundational "a priori" principles for Dogmatics, and 4) the principle used to articulate "the whole." In this research, I am employing the second, the third and the fourth definitions. Here, however, by theological system I mean the second, namely, a set of beliefs and/or teachings organized in a relatively logical and coherent manner. By hermeneutical system I mean a set of guiding rules for the interpretation of a particular material (e.g., the Bible) that are based on foundational beliefs. These two will be the main definitions for theological and hermeneutical terms throughout this thesis, unless otherwise stated in a particular context.



## Justification

New Covenant Theology is constantly gaining new theological ground in the Christian world due to the fact that an important number of their publications are freely accessible online to both professional theologians and lay people as well. Several informal articles, one book and a doctoral dissertation have been written to evaluate and criticize New Covenant Theology's main assumptions, yet no formal study has been conducted to analyze New Covenant hermeneutics from the perspective of the law-grace relationship. Furthermore, New Covenant theologians claim their system is a better alternative to both Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism. And since their proposal for the understanding of the law-grace relationship stands as a challenge of contemporary hermeneutics, New Covenant Theology brings forth various challenging issues that are significant for the development of Adventist systematics.<sup>2</sup> No formal study has been

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<sup>2</sup> Several attempts have been made to systematize Adventist theology. To mention a few examples of these attempts: Alfred F. Vaucher, *La historia de la salvación: teología sistemática* (Madrid, España: Safeliz, 1988); Richard Rice, *The Reign of God: An Introduction to Christian Theology from a Seventh-day Adventist Perspective* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1997); Marco T. Terreros, *Teología sistemática concisa* (Medellín, Colombia: Marter, 2001); Norman R. Gulley, *Systematic Theology*, 3 Volumes (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2003-2012). In relationship to the subject of the covenant, an even fewer number could be mentioned: Gerhard F. Hasel and Michael G. Hasel, *The Promise: God's Everlasting Covenant* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2002); Hans K. LaRondelle, titled *Our Creator Redeemer: An Introduction to Biblical Covenant Theology* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2005) and Skip MacCarty, titled *In Granite or Ingrained? What the Old and New Covenants reveal about the Gospel, the Law and the Sabbath* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2007). Both *The Promise* and *Our Creator Redeemer* present an Adventist perspective on the relationship between the Old and New Testaments and are primarily concerned with establishing the Biblical and systematic basis for a proper understanding of salvation history as a whole (Hasel and Hasel) and of the relationship between the old and new covenants (LaRondelle). MacCarty's *In Granite or Ingrained* follows the presentation on the covenants advanced in *The Promise* and in *Our Creator Redeemer*. Standing out from these previous attempts, however, MacCarty develops the concept of

conducted to explore these issues. The present study is an incipient attempt to fill this gap.

### **Delimitations**

Due to the variations in the current generation New Covenant Theology, and also to the fact that the hermeneutical basis for current developments are grounded on the works of the previous generation new covenant theologians, the discussion of New Covenant Theology will be primarily focused on first generation New Covenant theologians.<sup>3</sup> Dialog with other sources from within New Covenant Theology, Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism will be presented where necessary, mainly in the footnotes.

### **Methodology**

In the first chapter, I will provide the basic elements of the proposal and a proper background for the study of New Covenant Theology. In the second chapter I will survey

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“the covenant DNA” (i.e., key structural and content similarities) as the primary way to assert the continuity between the old and new covenants. Also, MacCarty develops his argumentation in a way that might sometimes resemble the presentation of Covenant Theology. For instance, in page 14, MacCarty begins explaining “God’s covenant” and its relationship to several historical covenants (with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Israel and David) in an apparent *one-covenant-several-administrations* structure (ibid, 13, 77). He also employs languages such as “implicit covenant” (ibid, 15), “covenant of redemption” (ibid, 19, 27), commonly found in covenantal literature. Although the meaning of such phrases in MacCarty seem to be essentially different from the those found in Covenant Theology, their presence in an Adventist source suggest the need for further exploration of the topic.

<sup>3</sup> Dennis M. Swanson, “Introduction to New Covenant Theology,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 18, no. 1 (Fall 2007): 149-163. This article offers a very condensed yet important introduction to New Covenant Theology, including its development and most influential proponents such as John Zens, John C. Reisinger, Fred Zaspel and Tom Wells.

New Covenant Theology's interpretation of the Law-Grace relationship, and then I will proceed to compare New Covenant Theology's interpretation of the Law-grace relationship with the interpretations offered by Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism. In the third chapter, I will demonstrate how New Covenant Theology's understanding of the Law-Grace relationship affects the development of their Theological system. I will also compare and contrast the neocovenantal system of theology with the systems of Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism. In the fourth chapter, I will evaluate New Covenant Theology's interpretation of the law-grace relationship and its effect upon the overall hermeneutics of New Covenant Theology. This will be done to prepare the way for the basis of a new proposal, an interpretation of salvation history that better validates the Biblical data available on the topic.

## **Historical Background**

### Introduction

To properly understand New Covenant Theology and its contribution to the contemporary debate as presented in the following chapters, it is first necessary to consider the movements that serve as the direct background to neocovenantalism:<sup>4</sup> Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism. Since the hermeneutical aspects of these movements that are relevant to our discussion could be traced back to early Christianity, I will briefly survey such developments as early as they appear in history. For that reason, the following section will be dedicated to the topic of Christian hermeneutics in

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<sup>4</sup> For convenience, I will be using terms such as "neocovenantalism" in reference to New Covenant Theology and "neocovenantal" in reference to either the whole of New Covenant Theology's hermeneutics, or particular aspects of it.

connection to the law-grace relationship, which informs the foundational presuppositions for neocovenantal hermeneutics and theology.

Given that Christian believers since apostolic times have striven to find better models to explain the relationship between the Testaments, hermeneutics has been a central concern in Christian discussions since the first century. Beginning with the Council of Jerusalem (around 50 AD), Christians have struggled to find meaningful ways to relate the divine revelation of the Old Testament with the new revelation of God in Jesus Christ and, subsequently, with the New Testament. The circumstances that mandated the necessity for this Christian council, its concerns and final resolution are registered in Acts 15.<sup>5</sup> For the most part of the last two millennia, this relationship has been simply understood as one of general agreement or continuity.<sup>6</sup> But with the advancement of the Reformation of the fifteenth century and its hermeneutical reform, new ways of understanding the underlying principles and themes of the canonical Scriptures were developed, and with them, more complex perspectives on the relationship between the Testaments.

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<sup>5</sup> See Rodney Petersen, "Continuity and Discontinuity: The Debated Throughout Church History," in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments: Essays in Honor of S. Lewis Johnson, Jr.*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1988), 17-18.

<sup>6</sup> However, degrees of discontinuity within the general umbrella of continuity has been also debated through the ages. See *ibid*, 16-34.

## Luther and the Beginning of the Protestant Interpretation of Law and Grace

Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation, started to question Roman Catholic theology and ethics. His criticism towards Rome began with an attack against the sacramental system and scholastic theology, but eventually moved towards the question of biblical interpretation.<sup>7</sup> With his spiritual experience as an analogical basis, he elaborated a theological method and system centered on the article of *justification by faith*.<sup>8</sup> Luther employed this principle in his critical attempt to evaluate the authority of each one of the books of the Biblical canon, and by doing so created a *canon within the Biblical canon*.<sup>9</sup> The result was clearly visible in Luther's understanding of the relationship between the Old Testament and the New: a complex position encompassing a tension between continuity and discontinuity. The unity was asserted by the implementation of the theological categories of *law and gospel*.<sup>10</sup> Luther found the

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<sup>7</sup> Luther's ultimate concern was to understand the meaning of the Biblical revelation of God, especially in connection to the way in which we relate to God as sinners.

<sup>8</sup> Concerning the relationship between Luther's personal experience and his theology, see Adam Darnell's *Luther's Law/Gospel Hermeneutics*, April 5, 2011, a paper presented in the class Methods and Issues in Biblical Interpretation, BTI 6500, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, NC.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1966), 82-86. Althaus suggests that Luther did "theological criticism" by employing the Christological principle to determine what books of the Bible stay true to the central message of the Bible, and to determine the "apostolicity" of the Biblical books of the New Testament. The way in which Luther employed the Christological principle is discussed further by Althaus in the section titled "The Old Testament and the New" (pages 86-89).

<sup>10</sup> These categories, as Darnell points out, are not used unequivocally by Luther. Sometimes, he uses "law" in reference to the Mosaic Law and, sometimes, he uses it in

gospel category, namely, the gospel of justification by faith through Christ (here referenced to as the Christological principle) to be present in both the Old Testament and the New. He also found the law category to be present in both Testaments. The primary difference between the Testaments concerning the gospel principle was attested by a transition from promise in the Old Testament to fulfillment in the New.<sup>11</sup> The discontinuity came from an understanding of the law principle that separated the ethical demands of the Old Testament as a book for the Jewish nation from the ethical demands of the New Testament as a book for Christians.<sup>12</sup>

The identification of law as demand and gospel as statement (i.e., imperative and indicative)<sup>13</sup> was instrumental in the development of his theological system and a theoretical basis for the Reformation. It was Luther's understanding that the distinction between law and gospel was not only an essential "hermeneutical principle" for the

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reference to commands in general. In the case of the word "gospel," he makes reference to either "justification by faith, the NT [sic], or any exhibit of grace found in Scripture" (Darnell, *Luther's Law/Gospel Hermeneutics*, 5).

<sup>11</sup> Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 87.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 90. By quoting Althaus here I do not intend to suggest that the totality of the content of the Old Testament that could be classified as law was an exclusive concern of the Jewish nation, and as such, of no concern to the Christian believer. Althaus clearly states that Luther validated the idea of a natural law for Christian ethics even if these laws were given in Old Testament times. He proceeds to clarify: "As far as law of Moses agrees with this natural law it is also valid for and binding on us non-Jews. It binds us, however, not because it is the Law of Moses but because it binds our conscience by being in our hearts" (90-91).

<sup>13</sup> As Myron Houghton suggests it ( in *Law and Grace* [Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Books, 1982], 9), the distinction could be easily stated in the following manner: "the law makes demands while the gospel does not make any demands. In other words, the law says *do*, while the gospel says *done*."

establishment of the doctrine of “justification by grace alone through faith alone,”<sup>14</sup> but also essential for the proper handling of the Bible.<sup>15</sup>

Luther’s distinction between law and grace, anchored in the doctrine of justification, becomes particularly relevant in light of the historical position of the Catholic church. In Catholicism, justification is a two-part process that includes both “the remission of sins” and “a transformation of the inner man.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, justification in Catholic theology is not merely a legal transaction, but also an infused power that enables people to obey God’s law.<sup>17</sup> Even though God initiates the process of justification based on Christ’s merits, the divine help offered through the Spirit allows humans to merit a particular kind of justification. Such Spirit-inspired meritorious works are called *salutary acts*.<sup>18</sup> As such, justification in Catholic theology encompasses both the divine *satisfaction* made possible by Christ’s sacrifice and the sanctification grounded on our *meritorious* work—which, in turn, results from the Spirit-infused power given to the believers.<sup>19</sup> The key difference between the Protestant and the Catholic position lies,

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<sup>14</sup> See Houghton, *Law and Grace*, 71; Daniel P. Scaer, “The Law and the Gospel in Lutheran Theology,” *Grace Theological Journal* 12, no. 2 (1991): 167; Robert D. Preus, “Luther and the Doctrine of Justification,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 48, No. 1 (January 1984): 1-12.

<sup>15</sup> Preus, “Luther and the Doctrine of Justification,” 7-9.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 34.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 36.

<sup>18</sup> Joseph Pohle, “Merit,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 10 (New York, NY: Robert Appleton, 1911), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10202b.htm>.

<sup>19</sup> Pohle, “Merit;” see also Houghton, *Law and grace*, 39.

then, in *sola fide* against the so-called Roman legalism.<sup>20</sup> Though a central topic in Reformation times,<sup>21</sup> distinguishing between law and gospel “is [still] the most difficult and the highest art of Christian in general and theologians in particular.”<sup>22</sup> This is also true in regards to the topic of sanctification.

In terms of the categories of *gospel* and *law*, Luther believed that a radical distinction between the two had to be made in relation to justification.<sup>23</sup> In other words,

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<sup>20</sup> As Houghton puts it: “The basic difference here is whether grace for salvation is a God-given ability infused *in* us, or the work of Christ on the cross *for* us. If it is a God-given ability, then grace and good works are not mutually exclusive” (Ibid, 46). In Catholic theology, Houghton argues, “the death and resurrection of Christ are important to the gospel, but so also is our grace-enabled obedience” (Ibid, 138). Further, he adds:

The primary issue in evaluating Catholic teaching concerning law is its role in our salvation. Is the law good news, that is an attainable way of salvation; or is it bad news, that is, a standard of perfection that condemns? If it is good news, then it can save us. If it bad news, then its purpose is to show us how really sinful we are [...] At times the catechism seems to present God’s law as bad news... but at other times, the catechism seems to imply that eternal life is obtained by keeping the Ten Commandments (Ibid, 39).

<sup>21</sup> See Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “The Law as God’s Gracious Guidance for the Promotion of Holiness” in *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 177: “The classic theme of all truly evangelical theology is the relationship of Law and Gospel.”

<sup>22</sup> Carl F. W. Walther, *God’s No and God’s Yes: The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, Walter C. Pieper, cond. (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1973), 20.

<sup>23</sup> In his thesis 62, Luther explained that:

The gospel is a preaching of the incarnate Son of God, given to us without any merit on our part for salvation and peace. It is a work of salvation, a word of grace...But the law is a word of destruction, a word of wrath, a word of sadness, a word of grief, a voice of the judge and the defendant, a word of relentlessness, a word of curse (Eric Lund, ed., *Documents from the History of Lutheranism, 1517-1750* [Minneapolis, IN: Fortress, 2002] 22).

And while commenting on Galatians 3:2 in *Lectures on Galatians*, 1535:



he believed that the reconciliation of humans with God was exclusively possible through Jesus, and because of that, the function of the law in this reconciliation was only the *usus elechticus sive paedagogicus* (the pedagogical use, i.e, the law as a mirror).<sup>24</sup> And it was in reference to this understanding of the law-grace relationship than other Reformers after him elaborated their positions.

### Further Developments in Early Protestantism

The diversification of the Protestant legacy favored the development of alternative interpretations of both the relationship between the Old and New Testaments and of the

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Therefore the Law and the Gospel are two altogether contrary doctrines. Accordingly, to put righteousness into the Law is simply to conflict with the Gospel. For the law is a taskmaster; it demands that we work and that we give. In short, it wants to have something from us. The Gospel, on the contrary, does not demand; it grants freely; it commands us to hold our hands and to receive what is being offered. Now demanding and granting, receiving and offering, are exact opposites and cannot exist together (Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 1-4*, in *Luther's Works*, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, Helmut T. Lehmann [St Louis, MO: Concordia, 1963], 26:208).

<sup>24</sup> It is necessary to clarify that although the *mirror* was the only use Luther saw fit to be integrated into the doctrine of justification, his general presentation of the role of the law in the life of the believer included a twofold use of the law, namely, the mirror and the curb. While the first one refers to the *law* in function of showing the true situation of humans and their separation from God, thus creating the condition necessary for grace, the second one refers to the function of the *law* as a restrainer of sin by producing fear of judgment. A third use of the law, commonly referred to as *guide*, points to the law as a normative model for Christian ethical behavior, appeared in the second edition of Philipp Melancthon's *Loci Communes*. Luther did not point out directly this third use or function of the Law. Yet, what Melancthon and the Formula of Concord explicitly expressed as *threefold use* of the law was present in Luther's writing: the first two explicitly while the third one only implicitly. See Ryan C. MacPherson, "A Lutheran View of the Third Use of the Law," *Systematic Theology 405: The Means of Grace* (Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary, Fall 2009, <http://www.ryanmacpherson.com/publication-list/26-research-papers/73-a-lutheran-view-of-the-third-use-of-the-law.html>).

principles of law and gospel/grace.<sup>25</sup> Starting with the first generation of Reformed theologians, a new hermeneutical-theological approach to explain these relationships was being gestated in the writings of Ulrich Zwingli. Zwingli, “the most important reformer of the Swiss Protestant Reformation,”<sup>26</sup> used an incipient redemptive-historical approach to theology and accepted the moral laws of both Testaments as valid ethical standards for Christians.<sup>27</sup> For him, the relationship between law and gospel was not a dialectic of radical discontinuity that ended with the awakening of a conscious need for justification (as in Luther), but rather a more moderate relationship of continuous interdependency in which the gospel liberates human beings from the consequence of their disobedience (after an awakening of the consciousness of sin and the need for Christ) and enables them to obey the law again.<sup>28</sup> Zwingli followed Aquinas threefold understanding of the law and

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<sup>25</sup> Although Luther employed the term *gospel* as a reference to the principle of grace, theologians after him have, for the most part, chosen the term *grace* instead when speaking of the pendulum of salvation in the Bible, namely, the *indicative* and the *imperative*.

<sup>26</sup> Geoffrey W. Bromiley, s.v. “Zwingli, Huldrych,” *Encyclopædia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite* (Chicago, IL: Encyclopædia Britannica, 2014).

<sup>27</sup> Justo González, *A History of Christian Thought*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1975), 3:70. Gonzales suggests that the reason why Zwingli accepted Old Testament moral laws is due to the fact that they deal directly the matter of sin and righteousness [that] has to do with the inner [person].”

<sup>28</sup> It is arguable that Luther’s chief article of faith limited his understanding of salvation and forced him to neglect important soteriological aspects such as the relationship between law-abiding Christianity and sanctification, which will in turn prevent him from developing the idea of *a justification that enables and produces obedience*. Nevertheless, it is clear that Zwingli’s understanding of the Bible as progressive salvation history made him disagree with Luther’s radical contradiction between Law and Gospel (see González, *History*, 3:70). We may call this relationship the soteriological circle: the breaking of the law creates the necessary conditions for the

developed a much more positive view of the function of the law in the life of the believer in terms of salvation than some of his contemporaries.<sup>29</sup>

A mention of two different theologians should be made in connection with Zwingli's theological legacy. The first one, Johannes Oecolampadius, was a German theologian that manifested strong inclinations towards humanist philosophy and Zwingli's hermeneutics.<sup>30</sup> Oecolampadius is regarded the first Reformed theologian to make reference to the covenant concept.<sup>31</sup> He employed a covenant of promise as the unifying principle underlying both the Old and New covenants.<sup>32</sup> Also, his understanding of the function of the law as it pertains to justification was indeed similar to that of

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appearance and efficacy of grace, which in turn restore humans to the perfect obedience of the law they originally broke, for which the gospel of grace is now in place.

<sup>29</sup> See above section on Luther.

<sup>30</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "Johann Oecolampadius," accessed April 08, 2015, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/425408/Johann-Oecolampadius>. The editors emphasize the fact that Oecolampadius and Zwingli were very close friends. After being notified of Zwingli's death in 1531, Oecolampadius' health deteriorated rapidly and he soon died.

<sup>31</sup> A very informative statement on Oecolampadius' contribution to what became to be known as Covenant Theology can be found in Andrew A. Woosley, *Unity and Continuity in Covenantal Thought: A Study in the Reformed Tradition to the Westminster Assembly* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2012), 210-214.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 211.

Zwingli.<sup>33</sup> The trifold understanding of the law<sup>34</sup> is also found in his writings together with the validation of the Old Testament moral law as Christian norm.<sup>35</sup> The second, theologian, Heinrich Bullinger, was the successor of Zwingli in Zurich. Bullinger followed Zwingli's footsteps in terms of covenantal theology, stressing the unity and continuity of the Old and New Covenants and the eternity of an overarching covenant underlying these two.<sup>36</sup> It seems that these two theologians, with Zwingli as father of the framework<sup>37</sup> and intellectual forerunner, together with a handful of other reformers as support, developed the basis for the system known as Covenant Theology.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 212. Oecolampadius believed that the Holy Spirit effected a transformation of the heart by engraving the covenant in the believer's heart. The result of this divine work on the human counterpart was a "faith that works by love" (*In Iesaiam Prophetam Hypomnematon, hoc est Comentariorum* [Basel, 1525], 285b, commentary on Isaiah 60:5-6, as quoted by Woosley, *Unity and Continuity*, 212).

<sup>34</sup> Namely, 1) the mirror, 2) the curb and 3) the guide (see footnote 11). R. Scott Clark uses the terms 1) pedagogical, 2) civil and 3) normative ("Letter and Spirit: Law and Gospel in Reformed Preaching," in *Covenant, Justification and Pastoral Ministry: Essays by the Faculty of Westminster Seminary*, ed. R. Scott Clark [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2006], 5095-5096, Kindle).

<sup>35</sup> Oecolampadius, *In Iesaiam*, 150a, as quoted by Woosley, *Unity and Continuity*, 212. Concerning the place of the law in Oecolampadius' theology, Woosley adds: "For [him] the law still had an important place in the believer's life, not as an antecedent condition of salvation, but as a consequent condition of new life" (Ibid., 212).

<sup>36</sup> Woosley, *Unity and Continuity*, 229-230. Bullinger's contribution to covenantal theology *De Testamento seu foedere Dei unico et aeterno* (Zurich, 1534), was the first systematic treatise to be written as a presentation of some the basic elements of Covenant Theology (Ibid, 231).

<sup>37</sup> See Woosley, *Unity and Continuity*, 214-218.

<sup>38</sup> Johannes Cocceius has been regard by many as the father of Federal/Covenant theology, yet contemporary research on the area places Zwingli, Bucer, Oecolampadius, Bullinger and Tyndale as the minds behind the original inception of Covenant Theology. See Peter Golding, *Covenant Theology: The Key of Theology in Reformed Thought and*

## Covenant Theology and Luther's Distinction Between Law and Grace

Covenant Theology developed under the umbrella of the Reformed faith, but its systematic presentation is not officially found in the writing of the most influential leader of Reformed Theology, John Calvin. Calvin was very much influenced by the theological discussions between Luther and Zwingli held at Marburg,<sup>39</sup> and his theology manifest an evidently advanced understanding of many (if not all) of the main principles of covenantal theology.<sup>40</sup> But with the publication of his seminal work, *Institutio Christianae Religionis*, Calvin developed a theological system based on a different foundational presupposition than the theology of Luther and that of Covenant Theology.<sup>41</sup> The central principle of his theology was the sovereignty of God (in contrast to Luther's

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*Tradition* (Scotland, UK: Mentor, 2004), 14-18. For a magnificent review on the historiography of covenantal thought and the controversies regarding the origins of the movement, see Woosley, *Unity and Continuity*, 80-158.

<sup>39</sup> Phillip I of Hesse sponsored a Protestant conference to search for common ground to end the theological disparity between Luther and Zwingli, though Phillip I was also interested in the union for political reason as he was looking to unify the Protestant States. Martin Muncer, who was probably the head behind the conference (usually referred to as the *Marburg Colloquy*), failed to bring Luther and Zwingli together in relation to the topic of the communion. Nevertheless, he ended up providing the theological background for Calvin's latter developments and a *via media* between early Lutheranism and Zwinglianism (See González, *A History of Christian Thought*, 3:120-121; Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991], VIII: 85-87).

<sup>40</sup> See Woosley, 336-338.

<sup>41</sup> For an overview on the similarities and differences between Covenantalism and Calvin's theology, see Woosley, 336-343.

Christological principle).<sup>42</sup> In connection with this principle, Calvin developed a particular application of divine sovereignty that was expressed by means of the idea of predestination. Consequently, just as early Covenant Theologians, he favored the continuity between the Testaments more strictly than Luther.<sup>43</sup>

As a fully developed hermeneutical system, Covenant Theology did not appear until “the seventeenth century and in the Westminster Confession.”<sup>44</sup> *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, together with Johannes Cocceius’ *Summa Doctrinae de Foedere et Testamenti Dei*,<sup>45</sup> represent the earliest attempts at systematizing Covenant Theology.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> James E. McGoldrick, “John Calvin: Theologian and Pastor,” *New Horizons* 30, no. 9 (October, 2009) 3-5.

<sup>43</sup> See Petersen, “Continuity and Discontinuity” in Feinberg, ed., *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 27. Even though Calvin’s distinction between law and gospel was, in some instances, sharper than Luther’s (see Clark “Letter and Spirit,” in Clark, R. Scott *Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry: Essays by the Faculty of Westminster Seminary California* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2007], 5188-5192, Kindle); a similar idea is also presented by Michael S. Horton in “Calvin and the Law-Gospel Hermeneutics,” *Pro ecclesia* 6 [1996]: 29-40). My concern here is with the understanding of law and gospel by Calvin as the Old and New Testaments respectively, rather than the theological-soteriological meaning of law and gospel. Calvin’s articulating principle for theology leads him to a more harmonious understanding of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. Concerning these two usages of the terms in Calvin, Horton (“Calvin and the Law-Gospel Hermeneutics,” 28) advises carefulness to distinguish between the two in Reformed writings.

<sup>44</sup> See McNeill’s commentary on the topic in John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battle (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1957), 428.

<sup>45</sup> Johannes Cocceius, *Summa Doctrinae de Foedere et Testamenti Dei* (Amsterdam, Netherlands, 1648).

<sup>46</sup> Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1987), 40; Golding, *Covenant Theology*, 15-16.

Both the *Westminster Confession* and Cocceius used the covenant concept as the organizing principle of their interpretative framework. They both assumed the existence of one gracious covenant that is administered in two different dispensations, in the dispensation of the Law (most of the Old Testament) and in the dispensation of the Gospel (the New Testament times). This Covenant, sometimes referred to as the Covenant of Grace or as the Covenant of Redemption, presents an agreement among the members of the deity to save the elect through Christ.<sup>47</sup>

Since Covenant Theology was built upon the notions established by Zwingli, and in turn, in close connection with Luther's theology, it agrees with Luther and Calvin on basic continuity between the Testaments. Yet there are certain differences between the way in which Luther and Covenant theologians handle the law-grace relationship. For Luther, the relationship between law and gospel is one of hermeneutical distinction between the indicative of the gospel and the imperative of the law. In other words, the law-gospel relationship for Luther is dialectical, in which the two concepts play a significant, yet totally different role in matters of soteriology.<sup>48</sup> In Covenant Theology, nevertheless, this relationship is explained in terms of a redemptive-historical scheme, that is, in terms of two covenants showing the progression of God's plan for salvation. As

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<sup>47</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith* VII, 5-6;

<sup>48</sup> Or, as Justo González puts it, "The difference between the law and gospel has to do with two functions that the Word of God plays in the heart of the believer, and thus the same Word may be law, or gospel, according to the manner in which it speaks to the believer" (*A History of Christian Thought*, 3:46). In fact, González calls this relationship a "dialectic... apart from which [Luther's] views on such things as justification, predestination, and ethics cannot be understood (Ibid, 3:48).

such, the concepts of law and grace are used in continuous interdependency in both the dispensation of Moses and ethnic Israel (the Old Covenant) and the dispensation brought in by Christ (the New Covenant).<sup>49</sup> Covenant theology remained uncontested as a theological-hermeneutical paradigm for about two centuries.

### Dispensationalism as an Alternative to Covenant Theology

It was in Ireland in the nineteenth century that a new theological scheme providing an alternative interpretation of *heilgeschichte* (salvation history) was elaborated. This system, known as Dispensationalism, was forged in the core of the Plymouth Brethren movement in Ireland and England in the hands of John Nelson Darby, and it was popularized in United States in the Scofield Reference Bible.<sup>50</sup> Similar to Covenantalists (and close to Calvin), those who hold the teachings of Dispensationalism consider the glory of God as the central article of their theological system.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Covenant Theology employs the Law-Grace relationship in another way also. Besides the historical-redemptive approach, theologians from within this tradition make use of the threefold use of the law.

<sup>50</sup> For a concise history on the development of Dispensationalism in Ireland and Britain, see Clarence B. Bass, *Background to Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960), 64-99; for a brief overview on the development of Dispensationalism as it relates to Darby, see Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalism*, 14-18; for a general history on Dispensationalism, see W. David Buschart, *Exploring Protestant Traditions: An Invitation to Theological Hospitality* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 2002-211; 14-18.

<sup>51</sup> William Trotter, one of the early adopters of the Dispensational scheme among the Plymouth Brethren, not only presented the idea of progressive “dispensations” in the unfolding of God's purposes, he also highlighted two basic elements within each dispensation, namely, obedience and God's glory. While the former clearly points out some kind of ethical responsibility on the human part, the latter points to the purpose of each dispensation, and by doing so, to the purpose of salvation history as a whole (which



Dispensationalism presents Biblical history as a series of dispensations through which God's double purpose in history is accomplished, namely, the salvation of the human race and the demonstration of His glory. Dispensationalists also employ a historical-grammatical method of exegesis and a literalistic application of the Bible promises,<sup>52</sup> leading their theological interpretation to draw a radical distinction between Israel and the church in relation to teleology and eschatology.<sup>53</sup>

Dispensationalism, like every systemic attempt on theological grounds since Zwingli, is based on a *redemptive-historical* model. Its basic interpretation of the law-grace relationship is one of radical discontinuity,<sup>54</sup> probably the result of Darby's (and his follower's) acceptance of a radical distinction between Israel and the Church as people of

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is emphasized by Trotters use of the preposition *for*). See idem, *Plain Papers on Prophetic Subjects* (London, UK: Robert Theobald, 1854), 331; see also 1, 28, 97, 119, and 173. Trotter also recognizes that revelation has a twofold purpose, salvation and the display of God's glory, and then he proceeded to explain Christ's ministry and death in terms of the display of God's glory (Ibid, 135). Charles C. Ryrie, one of the main expositors of Dispensationalism, also points out to the glory of God as the unifying theme of Dispensationalism, see Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2007), 272-278, Kindle. Ryrie states “the dispensations are economies instituted and brought to their purposeful conclusion by God... the overall combined purpose of the whole program is the glory of God” (ibid, 485-487). He also adds: to the “dispensationalist the glory of God is the governing principle and overall purpose, and the soteriological program is one of the principal means employed in bringing to pass the greatest demonstration of His own glory” (ibid., 1778-1779); see also 739-742, 1785-1811, 2849-2851, 4245-4258.

<sup>52</sup> Bass, *Background*, 22; for an analysis and critical evaluation of Dispensational literal hermeneutics, see Hans K. LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1983), 10-32.

<sup>53</sup> Bass, *Background*, 25.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 33-34. This will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

God. This distinction is, as Gentry and Wellum suggests, the “*sine qua non*” that distinguishes Dispensationalism from other theological systems.<sup>55</sup> As a hermeneutical method and theology, Dispensationalism has been advocated mainly by evangelical theologians and is still today one of the most influential theological systems in both North America and Latin America.<sup>56</sup>

#### More Recent Development From Within the Baptist Tradition

The above mentioned theological and hermeneutical developments concerning the law-grace hermeneutics are the settings that facilitated the development of New Covenant Theology during the decade of 1970’s from the heart of the theological collective of North America. New Covenant Theology sprung from recent theological discussions within the Reformed Baptist tradition concerning infant baptism and its covenantal support. Baptist theologians that found the doctrine of infant baptism biblically unsatisfactory focused on finding better ways to understand the relationship between the

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<sup>55</sup> Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 42. Gentry and Wellum further point to the dispensational understanding of the major individual covenants (old and new) as the source for the doctrine of radical discontinuity between Israel and the Church (Ibid). That ecclesiological consequence also becomes cause of other theological developments that characterizes the Dispensational theological outlook (such as their eschatology, their theoretical ethics and, to some degree, their soteriology and other doctrines). Though three strains of Dispensational theology exists today (classic, revised and progressive), they all hold the same foundational principle from which the rest of their theology derives (see Ibid, 55-56).

<sup>56</sup> Craig L. Bloomberg and Sung Wook Chung, eds., *A Case for Historic Premillennialism: An Alternative to “Left Behind” Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009), 1-22, 147-170.

Old and New Covenants.<sup>57</sup> The theological and hermeneutical conclusions to which they arrived appears as a mediating position between the theological assertions of Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism.<sup>58</sup>

The hermeneutics of New Covenant Theology is characterized by a redemptive-historical approach that takes the promise-fulfilment view of the relationship between the Testaments as its interpretative paradigm. Neocovenantalists favor a Christotelic hermeneutic<sup>59</sup> against the more traditional hermeneutics of both Dispensationalism and

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<sup>57</sup> Dennis M. Swanson, "Introduction to New Covenant Theology," 151.

<sup>58</sup> Fred G. Zaspel, "A Brief Explanation of 'New Covenant Theology'," Biblical Studies (Blog), <http://www.biblicalstudies.com/bstudy/hermenutics/nct.htm><http://www.biblicalstudies.com/bstudy/hermenutics/nct.htm> (accessed April 5, 2015). An application of this new approach has been also labeled "progressive covenantalism" by Gentry and Wellum in *Kingdom Through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 24. Gentry and Wellum acknowledge the existence of varieties within New Covenant Theology due to differences in the understanding of several theological nuances. Nevertheless, if the basis of New Covenant Theology is understood as Fred Zaspel suggests in *New Covenant and New Covenant Theology* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant, 2011), 27-60, the integral unity of the movement could be seen with clarity.

<sup>59</sup> In Gary D. Long's words (*New Covenant Theology: Time for a More Accurate Way* [Frederick, MD: New Covenant, 2013], 2735-2736, Kindle), the word *Christotelic* as applied to the enterprise of theological hermeneutics points to an interpretative matrix that "views the Lord Jesus Christ as the focus and ultimate goal or end of God's Word seeking to consistently interpret all Scripture in view of this great truth." According to Long, the *Christotelic hermeneutics* "emphasizes three principles:" Jesus as the core of "God's plans in redemptive history;" 2) all Scripture points to Christ either directly (like the Gospels) or indirectly (typologically or by "unfolding redemptive history which ultimately points to [Christ's] person and work") and 3) "Christ and the New Testament must have interpretative priority over the Old Testament" (Ibid., Locations 1833-1837). In other words, when a Christocentric approach is applied to a redemptive-historical hermeneutic, then such hermeneutics becomes Christotelic. Consistent with Long's view, the way I am employing the term Christotelic in relation to New Covenant Theology's hermeneutics stand in contrast to both Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism since they choose the glory of God as the central article for the interpretation of salvation history, and consequently, the topic of Christ is secondary (although still essential) to this

Covenant Theology.<sup>60</sup> In New Covenant Theology, a strong emphasis is made on the progressive development of God's plan in history, a plan that reaches its fulfilment/climax and is centered in Christ.<sup>61</sup> New Covenant Theology presents itself as better alternative to both Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism.<sup>62</sup>

Not all Reformed Baptist theologians see New Covenant Theology as the better alternative to the already established theological and hermeneutical systems. Richard C. Barcellos, for instance, in his book *In Defense of the Decalogue: A Critique of New Covenant Theology*,<sup>63</sup> strongly criticizes some of the elements of New Covenant Theology,<sup>64</sup> especially the way New Covenant theologians understand Old Testament law

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purpose. This is one of the reasons why New Covenant theologians assume a logical priority of the New Testament over the Old (see Jeremy R. Benbrook, "An Analysis of the Seed of Abraham in New Covenant Theology," [PhD dissertation, Piedmont Baptist College and Graduate School, 2011], 93, 104, 178, 183).

<sup>60</sup> A. Blake White, *What is New Covenant Theology? An Introduction* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant, 2012), 5-9; Fred Zaspel, *The New Covenant and New Covenant Theology*, 31; Long, *New Covenant Theology, 1691-1734; 2099-2105*, Kindle).

<sup>61</sup> White, *What is New Covenant Theology?*, 9, 17-18; Long, *New Covenant Theology*, 71-72, 703-706, 2099-2105;

<sup>62</sup> This is the basic argument brought forth by Jon Zens in the article that pioneered New Covenant hermeneutics, namely, "Is There a 'Covenant of Grace'?" *Baptist Reformation Review* 7, No. 3 (1977): 45-53. Reisinger (in *Abraham Four Seeds* [Frederick, MD: New Covenant, 1998], iii.) proposes the holistic hermeneutical bankruptcy of both Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism as the justification for a new approach. Gary D. Long (in *New Covenant Theology*, 45-49) proposes the lack of accuracy in the understanding and development of the New Covenant as justification for New Covenant Theology.

<sup>63</sup> Richard C. Barcellos, *In Defense of the Decalogue: A Critique of New Covenant Theology* (Enumclaw, WA: WinePress, 2001).

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

(norms and rules). He is convinced that “defining the Old Covenant as the Ten Commandments is fundamental to New Covenant Theology’s understanding of the relationship between the Covenants and the place of the Ten Commandments in the history of Redemption and Christian ethics.”<sup>65</sup> Barcellos acknowledges that his “critique in no way pretends to be exhaustive,”<sup>66</sup> and that “it may need to be modified in the days to come.”<sup>67</sup> Based on his analysis of 2 Corinthians 3:3, Ephesians 6:2-3, 1 Timothy 1:8-11 and Jeremiah 31:33, Barcellos concludes that “New Covenant Theology’s position on the identity of the Old Covenant and the function of the Ten Commandments in redemptive history emphatically must be rejected.”<sup>68</sup>

Barcellos’ criticism elicited a response from the trenches of New Covenant Theology. Tom Wells and Fred Zaspel wrote a series of articles that were published under the title *New Covenant Theology: Description, Definition, Defense*.<sup>69</sup> The authors clarify, however, that *New Covenant Theology* goes beyond Barcellos’ criticism “since it was time that something more substantial than fugitive pieces appears in print on the

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 8

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 59. He concludes the Decalogue has three different functions in Scripture: it works as 1) the “fundamental law of the Old Covenant;” 2) “as the basic fundamental law of the New Covenant; 3) “as the basic, fundamental law common to all men, the Moral Law.”

<sup>69</sup> Tom Wells and Fred Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology: Description, Definition, Defense* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant, 2002).

subject.”<sup>70</sup> In his criticism of Barcellos, Wells argues that Barcellos attempt to understand Jeremiah 31:33 is the “central challenge” of his book,<sup>71</sup> and that Barcellos drops the progressiveness of the historical-redemptive approach while interpreting the Decalogue as “my law” in Jeremiah 31:33.<sup>72</sup> Wells later clarifies issues such as the identification of the Old Covenant, the normative boundaries of the Decalogue, the meaning of Matthew 5:17-20 and whether New Covenant Theology has misunderstood the Sermon on the Mount. Zaspel, on the other hand, focuses on discussing the historical, exegetical and theological aspects of Matthew 5:17-20.<sup>73</sup> He also discusses the implications of his interpretation of the passage for New Covenant people.<sup>74</sup> What is lacking from Zaspel’s

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 1. Wells and Zaspel dedicated two chapters to respond to Barcellos. Thomas R. Schreiner (review of Tom Wells and Fred Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology: Description, Definition, Defense*, [Frederick, MD: New Covenant, 2002], *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 7, no. 4 [Winter 2003]: 95.) argues that Wells’ and Zaspel’s main concern “is clearly in a proper understanding of the law and its relevance for Christians today.”

<sup>71</sup> Tom Wells, “Critiquing a Friendly Attack (Part Two),” in *New Covenant Theology*, 187.

<sup>72</sup> Wells seem to suggest that Barcellos is being inconsistent in doing so since he does not find a fulfilment for the Decalogue later on in redemptive history (Ibid).

<sup>73</sup> Zaspel, “Matthew 5:17-20—A History of its Interpretation,” in Wells and Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology*, 77-90; idem, “Matthew 5:17-20—Contextual Observations,” in *ibid*, 91-108; “Matthew 5:17-20—The Messianic Mission,” in *ibid.*, 109-122; idem, “Matthew 5:17-20—The Law of Christ in Matthew 5:18-20 and Related Passages,” 122-138.

<sup>74</sup> Zaspel, “The Sabbath: A Test Case,” in *Ibid*, 211-238.

and Wells' *New Covenant Theology*, as Thomas R. Schreiner suggested, is proper study of Old Testament related themes in their Old Testament context.<sup>75</sup>

Another important investigation into New Covenant Theology is a doctoral dissertation written by Jeremy R. Benbrooks, titled "An Analysis of the Seed of Abraham in New Covenant Theology."<sup>76</sup> Benbrooks finds the justification for his research in John Reisinger's claim concerning the centrality of Abraham's seed.<sup>77</sup> The purpose of Benbrooks' research is to "provide a discussion of New Covenant Theology's understanding of the seed of Abraham."<sup>78</sup> His main thesis is that in New Covenant Theology's understanding of the seed of Abraham, "the system has rejected a

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<sup>75</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, review of *New Covenant Theology*, 95. Schreiner observes that though Wells and Zaspel perform a meritorious job advancing a new proposal for the relationship between the Old and New covenants in that which pertains to ethics (ibid., 96), they "provide little discussion of the Mosaic Covenant in its OT [sic] context" (ibid., 95). New Covenant Theology's insistence on interpreting the Old Testament in light of the New Testament occasionally has the undesired effect of not paying enough attention to Old Testament context in pertinent discussions, resulting in an exclusively typological non-historical-grammatical interpretation into the Old Testament.

<sup>76</sup> Jeremy R. Benbrooks, "An Analysis of the Seed of Abraham in New Covenant Theology," (PhD dissertation, Piedmont Baptist College and Graduate School, 2011).

<sup>77</sup> John G. Reisinger, *Abraham's Four Seeds*, 2; see also Steve Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology* (Steve Lehrer, 2006), 19; Benbrooks ("An Analysis of the Seed of Abraham," 187) summarizes this idea when saying: "The Abrahamic Covenant is central to the discussion of redemptive history for New Covenant Theology. This covenant guides the entire redemptive plan." I am not convinced about the place of the seed of Abraham for the development of New Covenant Theology as a redemptive-historical hermeneutic, but I do find his approach to be an important contribution to New Covenant Theology and a viable way of developing New Covenant hermeneutics and theology. In fact, the genius of the New Covenant Theology movement lies in their ability to develop their system from different perspectives. This concept will be developed further on chapter two.

<sup>78</sup> Benbrooks, "An Analysis of the Seed of Abraham in New Covenant Theology," 244.

consistently literal hermeneutics, which has led to an erroneous view of Abraham's seed as it relates to present and future events."<sup>79</sup>

Benbrooks problem with New Covenant Theology lies precisely in the presuppositional area. As a dispensationalist, he does not accept New Covenant Theology's inconsistency in applying a literal hermeneutic. This is especially true concerning New Covenant Theology's (as seen in Reisinger) interpretation of the seed of Abraham.<sup>80</sup> Due to his concern with a literal hermeneutic, Benbrooks concludes that the logical priority of the New Testament over the Old Testament held by New Covenant Theology is "problematic" since it "adds [a] spiritual meaning to the Old Testament teaching of Israel and the seed of Abraham."<sup>81</sup>

#### Summary

A concern for hermeneutics, and more specifically, a concern for the way the relationship between the Testaments has been present in Christian circles since the first century. With the advancement of the Reformation, the largely accepted interpretation of such relationship as one of general agreement and continuity started to be challenged by more complex perspectives. Instrumental in the advent of such changes was Martin

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 248.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 247:

Christ is the true seed of Abraham promised to Abraham. However, all acknowledge that those who are in Christ are also the seed of Abraham through spiritual relation. This dilemma is caused by New Covenant Theology's failure to properly delineate between the categories of blessing given to Abraham. This again is due to New Covenant Theology's failure to consistently apply a literal hermeneutic to Scripture

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 245



Luther, who elaborated a theological method based on the doctrine of justification by faith, insisted on an interpretation of the Testaments that considered a complex tension between elements of continuity and discontinuity. The continuity was asserted by means of an interpretation of a more foundational, yet tacit, relationship: that of law and gospel.

In Luther's theology, law and gospel were presented as the indicative and the imperative components of which both Testaments constituted. For the sake of justification by faith, a radical distinction was to be made between law and gospel in the Bible. He chose the pedagogical use of law in relation to justification as the most fitting use of law to explain the relationship of these two terms in the Bible and in Christian experience. It was in reference to Luther's position that other Reformers elaborated their understanding of the law-grace relationship. Zwingli, for instance, developed an interpretation of the law-grace relationship that validated an idea of continuous interdependency in which the gospel offers liberation from the consequences of disobedience while offering enabling power to humans for obedience instead of Luther's dialectics of radical discontinuity. The same could be said about John Calvin, whose understanding of the sovereignty of God molded his application of the law-grace relationship, resulting in a view of the relationship between the Testaments that favored continuity even more than Luther emphasized.

On the basis of Zwingli's and Calvin's contributions, other theologians such as Heinrich Bullinger and Johannes Cocceius developed the basis for what came to be known as New Covenant Theology. Covenant Theology agrees with Luther and Calvin on basic continuity between the Testaments despite the interpretation of the law-grace relationship as one of discontinuity. Yet, there are evident differences in the way

Covenant Theology and Luther handle the law-grace relationship. For Luther, the indicative-imperative (gospel-law) relationship is the main concern. For Covenant Theology, the law-grace relationship is explained in terms of a historical-redemptive scheme that emphasizes the fulfillment of God's plan through major historical covenants. As such, Covenant Theology remained mainly uncontested until the rise of Dispensationalism in the nineteenth century.

Dispensationalism offered a historical-redemptive interpretation of salvation history that emphasized a distinction between God's plan with Israel and with the Church for the sake of properly distinguishing law from grace. Dispensationalism is still one of the most influential theological systems in both North America and Latin America.

These hermeneutical and theological developments concerning the law-grace relationship served as background for the development of New Covenant Theology during the decade of 1970's. Nevertheless, it was first developed as an attempt to understand the relationship between the Testaments without relying on the covenantal framework and its undesired consequence of validating Paedobaptism. This resulted in a new hermeneutical and theological position that attempts to mediate between the covenantal and the dispensational proposals.

New Covenant Theology strongly emphasizes the progressive development of God's purpose in salvation history by means of the implementation of the old and new covenants respectively. It teaches that the climax of this purpose is centered in Christ. And while being seemingly orthodox, New Covenant Theology have received criticism from within the own Baptist camp, from the perspective of Covenant Theology and even from the dispensational view. Among those criticism is found Richard C.Barcellos' In

Defense of the Decalogue: A Critique of New Covenant Theology, that focuses on the place of the 10 commandments in salvation history (validating the classical covenantal position). Another important criticism is made by Jeremy C. Benbrooks' doctoral dissertation "An Analysis of the Seed of Abraham in New Covenant Theology," in which the New Covenant Theology's interpretation of the "seed of Abraham" is evaluated from the perspective of the dispensational framework.

Considering that New Covenant Theology is still a growing movement despite criticism such as the ones mentioned above, it seems necessary to explore the foundations of neocovenantalism to determine its strengths and weaknesses and its contribution to the contemporary discussion. That being said, it is important to clarify, for the purpose of this investigation, that several things make the study of New Covenant Theology challenging. First, New covenant Theology "is not a monolithic movement," meaning theologians among the movement do not share an agreement in every doctrinal aspect.<sup>82</sup> Second, New Covenant Theology is a developing movement.<sup>83</sup> Third, there is no publication from New Covenant Theology "dedicated wholly to hermeneutics."<sup>84</sup> For these reasons, a collection and analysis of data synthesizing the system's basic beliefs and overall hermeneutical

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<sup>82</sup> Swanson, "Introduction to New Covenant Theology," 157; Benbrooks, "An Analysis of the Seed of Abraham in New Covenant Theology," 247; Barcellos, *In Defense of the Decalogue*, 7.

<sup>83</sup> Benbrooks, "An Analysis of the Seed of Abraham in New Covenant Theology," 247.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, 89. The fact that some of these points were observed by Barcellos in 2001 indicates that the situation within New Covenant Theology has not changed much in the last 15 years.

system is essential for the proper understanding of both New Covenant Theology. I will make a contribution towards responding to this need in the following chapters.

## CHAPTER 2

### NEW COVENANT THEOLOGY'S INTERPRETATION OF THE LAW-GRACE RELATIONSHIP

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter I intend to clarify New Covenant Theology's interpretation of the relationship between law and grace as it relates to the doctrine of salvation. I also intend to review, although succinctly, the presentations of both Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism on the topic and compare such presentations to that of New Covenant Theology. This will be done in order to demonstrate the relevance of New Covenant Theology's proposal to contemporary discussions concerning the relationship of law and grace. I will now proceed to investigate the concept of *law* and *grace* as they are used in New Covenant Theology.

#### **Law and Grace in New Covenant Theology**

##### Law and Grace as Covenantal Categories

#### **Law**

Among New Covenant Theologians, John Reisinger is the most avid expositor of what could be classified as New Covenant Theology's incipient doctrine of law. For him,

as well as for other New Covenant theologians,<sup>1</sup> *law* is primarily a historical covenant described in terms closely related to Luther's idea of law as demand;<sup>2</sup> the *law* is, primarily, the Mosaic covenant.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Reisinger adds: "The difference between the Old [Mosaic Covenant] and New Covenants is not primarily in the specific duties demanded, but in the difference between law and grace as covenants."<sup>4</sup>

The key idea in Reisinger's understanding of *law* is the notion of the Mosaic dispensation and revelation as a *legal* covenant.<sup>5</sup> That Both the Mosaic covenant as a whole and the Ten commandments in particular are considered to be a legal covenant,

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., Jon Zens, "Is There a 'Covenant of Grace'?" *Baptist Reformation Review* 6, No. 3 (1977); See Wells and Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology*, 13.

<sup>2</sup> See also Tom Wells, "The Christian Appeal of a New Covenant Theology," in *New Covenant Theology: Description, Definition, Defense* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant, 2002), 31:

For Paul and the rest of the NT, *the law* is, generally speaking, the legislation and covenant that characterized the age in which God dealt primarily with Israel... *The gospel of the grace of God*, on the other hand, has both succeeded and replaced the law as good news to all men everywhere. The new has come and the old has passed away.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance Reisinger, *But I Say Unto You* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant, 2006), 204-210, Kindle.

<sup>4</sup> *Idem*, *Tables of Stone and the History of Redemption* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant, 2004), 832-833, Kindle.

<sup>5</sup> Reisinger, *But I Say Unto You*, 160-162; 961-962. Reisinger also refers to the Ten Commandments as "the law covenant" (see Reisinger, *Tables of Stone*, 1570-1576). Reisinger notes, however, that the Old Testament does make a distinction in talking about the Mosaic covenant and the Ten Commandments (*Ibid*, 424-430), but this makes no impact on his theology due to the doctrine of the understanding of the Mosaic covenant's law as an indivisible unit. Unfortunately, Reisinger unannotated use of the phrase *legal covenant* in reference to both the Mosaic covenant and the Ten commandments could easily be a cause for confusion when determining the nature of the relationship between the Old and New Covenants

that is, to be performance-oriented covenants “characterized by merit,”<sup>6</sup> exemplifies New Covenant Theology’s generalized negative attitude towards the Mosaic covenant. This covenant was only given “to bring conviction of sin and lead to salvation by faith in the gospel preached to Abraham.”<sup>7</sup> This understanding of the Mosaic covenant serves as the justification for the exaltation of the concept of grace as a covenant.

## Grace

Just as with the concept of law, the concept of grace in New Covenant Theology is primarily used in a covenantal fashion.<sup>8</sup> Reisinger argues that “the difference between Old and New Covenants” lies in their foundations as legal covenant and gracious covenant respectively,<sup>9</sup> since the grace covenant, i.e. the New Covenant, was given to provide “forgiveness of sin and, through assurance of that forgiveness, grace for holy living,”<sup>10</sup> what the Mosaic covenant could not provide.

As demonstrated above, *law* and *grace* in New Covenant Theology are constantly used in reference to the major historical covenants in the Bible. But more importantly, the

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<sup>6</sup> Reisinger, *But I Say Unto You*, 1152-1157. For Reisinger, the difference between the Mosaic Covenant and the New Covenant is a matter of merit, particularly, salvific merit. Also, for Reisinger, the 10 Commandments and the Mosaic covenant are not two different covenants, but the same *legal* covenant.

<sup>7</sup> Reisinger, *Tables of Stone*, 833-844; idem, *But I Say Unto you*, 160-161.

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Tom Wells, “The Christian Appeal of a New Covenant Theology,” in *New Covenant Theology: Description, Definition, Defense* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant, 2002), 21, where the new covenant is defined as “*the gospel of the grace of God.*”

<sup>9</sup> Lit. “law and grace as covenants,” Reisinger, *Tables of Stone*, 1205-1206.

<sup>10</sup> Idem, *But I Say Unto You*, 161.

way neocovenantal theologians explain their relationship serves as an anticipation of more fundamental uses of these terms in New Covenant Theology. For this reason, I will now turn to the investigation of the concepts of *Law* and *Grace* as they relate to the doctrine of salvation.

### Soteriological Aspects of the Concepts of Law and Grace

#### **Law**

Because of its implications, the most important use of *law* in New Covenant Theology is related to a soteriological category and not to a covenantal category that is so commonly referred to in New Covenant literature. In New Covenant Theology, *law* is the theological-hermeneutical term that identifies the *works* principle, a soteriological construct in which “conditional blessing[s]” are bestowed upon those who live up to the perfect standard established by the covenant Israelites used to live under, i.e., the Mosaic Covenant.<sup>11</sup> *Law*, then, is defined as a “performance oriented,”<sup>12</sup> legalistic and ungracious<sup>13</sup> soteriological category dependent “upon the people and what they would

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<sup>11</sup> See Fred Zaspel, “The Continuing Relevance of Divine Law,” in *New Covenant Theology: Description, Definition, Defense* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant, 2002), 145.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Reisinger argues that the *law* as Ten commandments was devoid of grace (except for the gracious intention of God by giving them, see *idem*, *Tables of Stone*, 1570-1576). He similarly argues about the Mosaic covenant as a whole (*idem*, *But I Say Unto You*, 1152-1157). Yet, in *Tables of Stone*, 1570-1576, he declares that grace was present in the Mosaic covenant and it is evidenced in the relationship between the Tables of Stone, i.e. the Ten Commandments, and the mercy seat: the broken law is covered by a blood-stained mercy seat, signifying the inability of the law (here, the Ten commandments) to satisfy the status of his broken righteousness and the efficacy of *grace* to hide away sin. Further:



do.”<sup>14</sup> In developing this idea with more specific elements from the Mosaic covenant itself, Reisinger argues:

The relationship of the law covenant (the stone tablets in the ark) to the mercy seat (the lid of the ark) is one of the clearest pictures of the gospel in the Old Testament Scriptures. It also sets forth the biblical relationship of law and grace. The tablets of the covenant (Ten Commandments) in the ark represent the just demands of the law covenant. *There you see the ‘just, holy, and good law’ of God.* The lid of the ark covers the broken covenant of law inside the ark with the blood of atonement. *There you see the free gospel of sovereign grace.* There is not an ounce of grace or gospel in the law covenant document in the box. It is pure law, demanding perfect obedience as the condition of blessing and death as the consequence of disobedience. The blood on the mercy seat covers and hides the broken covenant and the sins against that covenant. That is pure grace!<sup>15</sup>

Although Reisinger uses the *law covenant* idea in connection to the Ten commandments, he also applies the same concept to the Mosaic covenant as a whole. For instance, in *Tables of Stone*, Reisinger says:

The Old Covenant, which included the Ten Commandments, was a legal covenant based upon works as contrasted with the New Covenant based on the merits of Christ

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The Old Covenant, which included the Ten Commandments, was a legal covenant based upon works as contrasted with the New Covenant based on the merits of Christ given to us entirely by grace. The basic difference between the Old and New Covenants has nothing to do with “two different kinds of laws” but the basis of blessing: law and works or grace and faith (idem, *Tables of Stone*, 1214-1217).

The problem with this kind of reasoning about the Mosaic covenant lies in the similarities (not often stressed in New Covenant Theology) between the Mosaic covenant and the New Covenant. For instance, what is the difference between any given commandment in the Old Testament and those commandments given under the New Testament, other than a change of dispensation and, arguably, a different motivation (according to New Covenant theologians)?

<sup>14</sup> Zaspel, *The New Covenant and New Covenant Theology*, 42.

<sup>15</sup> Reisinger, *Tables of Stone*, 1570-1576. Reisinger is referring primarily to the 10 commandments, and as such, they did not have an ounce of grace or gospel” (Ibid, 1574). For Reisinger, this means that the Ten commandments were a works-based covenant: “The New Covenant, unlike the Old Covenant, is one of grace and not works” (Ibid, 1184).

given to us entirely by grace. The basic difference between the Old and New Covenants has nothing to do with “two different kinds of laws” but the basis of blessing: law and works or grace and faith.”<sup>16</sup>

Reisinger’s particular interpretation of merit and blessing as they relate to the Mosaic covenant serve as a presupposition for his understanding of the issue of law as a soteriological category, and presumably New Covenant Theology’s understanding also. Reisinger emphasizes that in the law covenant, the merits that generate blessings are those of the people rather than God’s. Personal achievable merits independent of grace seem to be the heart of the Mosaic Covenant in the writings of New Covenant theologians,<sup>17</sup> and because of such a behavioral focus (and the lack of some other New Covenant features such as the continuous presence of the Holy Spirit), the Mosaic Covenant could not “deal with the heart and inward motives.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Reisinger, *Tables of Stone*, 1214-1217. Reisinger further develops this idea in *But I Say Unto You*, 1152-1157, when arguing that:

The New, however, is characterized by grace in contrast to the Old, which was characterized by merit. The means by which God’s people profit under the terms of the New Covenant is through the work of someone else: specifically, the work of Christ. The means by which God’s people profited under the Old Covenant was through their own work. The benefits of Christ’s covenant come to his people because he has earned those benefits himself. This is why the New Covenant is a gracious covenant.

Reisinger argumentation is grounded on the concepts of substitution and intercession as the main advantages between the two historical covenants and the major differences between them. This argumentation goes to strengthen Reisinger’s understanding of the Mosaic covenant as being legalistic.

<sup>17</sup> See *Ibid*, 1152-1157.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 1756. While talking about the contribution of the Sermon on the Mount for the topics of law and grace, Reisinger states:

Are Israel and the church merely under the same covenant and therefore under the same moral canon of conduct, or did Christ establish a new and totally different

It is worth noting, however, that even though the Mosaic Covenant was “a legal covenant,”<sup>19</sup> it directed people “to faith in the gospel covenant given to Abraham.”<sup>20</sup> This is the *grace* New Covenant Theology finds in the Mosaic Covenant, i.e. the preaching of a gospel in a legalistic era.<sup>21</sup> Apart from such logical relationship, it could be argued from Reisinger’s (and other New Covenant theologians)<sup>22</sup> writings about the Mosaic Covenant, the same that was said about the Ten Commandments, namely, that “there was not an ounce of grace” in it.<sup>23</sup> This, however, poses several questions: how was a person saved during the Old Testament era? What was the relationship between faith and works in the Old Covenant? Was it by self-achieved merit? Or was it by faith in the gospel of the era to come? On the one hand, people have always been saved by faith, on the other, personal obedience was the means for the bestowal of salvific blessing during the Mosaic dispensation according to New Covenant Theology. Without a method for harmonizing

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covenant that demands much higher and more spiritual conduct from his people than the law of Moses demanded of the Israelites? (Ibid, 208-210).

<sup>19</sup> Reisinger, *But I Say Unto You*, 160-162; cf. 961-962.

<sup>20</sup> Reisinger, *Abraham’s Four Seeds*, 18. Reisinger argues that

The gospel of grace both precedes and continues after Abraham and circumcision. The gospel of grace was preached and believed before, during, and after the covenant of law given to Moses. There is only one gospel message and it is “salvation by grace through faith” (Reisinger, *Abraham’s Four Seeds*, 70).

<sup>21</sup> See Reisinger, *But I Say Unto You*, 961-962.

<sup>22</sup> See Jason Bearce, Paul Honeycutt and Geoff Volker, *The New Covenant Confession of Faith*, New Covenant Bible Fellowship, 8, where they seem to equate the Mosaic covenant with the 10 commandments just like Reisinger does, qualifying “it” as a non-gracious covenant.

<sup>23</sup> Reisinger, *Tables of Stone*, 833; see also 858, 1094, 1574.

such statements with the belief that there is only one way of salvation through the ages, like Charles Ryrie did,<sup>24</sup> there is a discrepancy that must be clarified in New Covenant writing.<sup>25</sup> That being said, it is pertinent to dedicate the following section to the investigation of *grace* as a soteriological category in neocovenantal theology.

## Grace

The principle of works that characterized the Mosaic dispensation is contrasted with grace as the basis for the New Covenant in New Covenant Theology.<sup>26</sup> In the minds of New Covenant theologians, the New covenant is grounded on substitutionary atonement and divine intercession, against a legalistic Mosaic covenant. New Covenant Theology highlights grace as the principle behind the existence of the new covenant,<sup>27</sup> a covenant that is both “unconditional and promissory.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> See the section on Dispensationalist hermeneutics in chapter 3.

<sup>25</sup> Reisinger argues that the Mosaic Covenant “only ministered grace as it effected the knowledge of sin and spiritual death in an Israelite’s heart and led him to faith in the gospel covenant given to Abraham” (*Abraham’s Four Seeds*, 18), and yet, there was a parallel basis for blessing (besides this “faith in the gospel covenant given to Abraham) during this covenant, i.e. self-achieved merit. This also poses the question on whether two apparently contradictory soteriological elements were working at the same time and, if so, how do we explain the inner workings of a *law-gospel* covenant dispensation during the time of Moses?

<sup>26</sup> See Fred Zaspel, *The New Covenant and New Covenant Theology*, 42: “The difference between these covenants is the difference between works and grace. The new is an explicitly *gracious* covenant;” see also John Reisinger, *Tables of Stone*, 1205-1206.

<sup>27</sup> See, for instance, Reisinger, *But I Say Unto You*, 1152-1157; 160-162

<sup>28</sup> Zaspel, *The New Covenant and New Covenant Theology*, 42.

According to New Covenant writers, the New Covenant is comprised of both law and grace (understood *à la* Luther): while being a *gracious* covenant, it also makes specific demands to all those under it.<sup>29</sup> In fact, Reisinger’s rhetoric further establishes the nature of the new covenant imperatives as an ethical system based on grace:

This question [is Christ giving the church a new canon of moral conduct, or is he merely reaffirming the law of Moses?] will ultimately involve the relationship between the nature of law and the nature of grace. Is Christ, in the Sermon on the Mount, saying the same thing that Paul taught in Romans 6: 14: “... you are not under law, but under grace”? Does Christ actually contrast the demands that grace can, and does, make of those under its rule with the demands that law, even the holy law of God, cannot make? Alternatively, is there really no contrast at all in the Sermon on the Mount between law and grace? Are Israel and the church merely under the same covenant and therefore under the same moral canon of conduct, or did Christ establish a new and totally different covenant that demands much higher and more spiritual conduct from his people than the law of Moses demanded of the Israelites?<sup>30</sup>

The New Covenant offers moral imperatives as the Mosaic covenant does, but its legislations are morally “higher” than those of the Old covenant.<sup>31</sup> The achievement of this new standard of conduct is possible because the New Covenant offers something the Mosaic covenant “could not,” namely, “the Holy Spirit function[ing] as both personal *pedagogue* and [...] *paraclete* of every believer, informing the conscience and empowering the life.”<sup>32</sup> As such, the New Covenant is a “gracious [...] ministration of

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<sup>29</sup> See Tom Wells, “The Relation of Law to the Work of Evangelism,” in Wells and Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology*, 271-273. Wells clarifies that “the law of Christ is not opposed to the gospel. It is part and parcel with it” (Ibid, 273); see also Fred Zaspel, “A Brief Explanation of ‘New Covenant Theology’”.

<sup>30</sup> Reisinger, *But I Say Unto You*, 204-210.

<sup>31</sup> See Ibid, 231-238; See also 160-162.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 243-245. Reisinger not only argues the New Covenant ethics surpasses the Mosaic ethics because it appeals to “higher demands,” but that it surpasses Old covenant (i.e. Old Testament) ethics by appealing to “higher motive[s]” and by “empower[ing] the fulfilment of those demands...by the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Ibid, 236), As such, the

life”<sup>33</sup> that offers effective inner transformation.<sup>34</sup> It is “constrained from within by love and a heart rejoicing in a covenant based on *grace*.”<sup>35</sup>

After discussing New Covenant Theology’s understanding of *law* and *grace* as soteriological categories, I will go on to explain the relationship of *law* and *grace* as seen in the neocovenantal hermeneutical and theological scheme.

### **Relationship of Law and Grace in the New Covenant Theological Scheme**

There are several elements that integrate into New Covenant Theology’s interpretation of the relationship between the old and the new covenant. On the one hand, the doctrine of progressive revelation serves as the historical rational for New Covenant Theology’s interpretation of the old-new covenant relationship. On the other, the covenant replacement doctrine serves as the rational for the exaltation of the new covenant.<sup>36</sup> The doctrine of progressive revelation<sup>36</sup> is the foundational concept behind the idea of covenantal succession (covenant replacement) in New Covenant Theology.

New Covenant Theology’s position on the relationship between the Mosaic covenant and the New covenant is one of distinction between the soteriological principles

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ethics of the New Covenant distances from that of Moses in that it presupposes the aid of the Holy Spirit and, for this matter, a higher level of morality to be achieved.

<sup>33</sup> Reisinger, *But I Say Unto You*, 162.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 244-245.

<sup>35</sup> Reisinger, *Tables of Stone*, 1205-1208, italics supplied.

<sup>36</sup> See Reisinger, *The Law/Grace Controversy: A Defense of the Sword & Trowel and the Council on Baptist Theology* (Berryville, VA: Hess Publications, 1982), 16; see also *Ibid*, 17.

of grace and works as they relate to the concepts of merit and salvation. It is mostly one of discontinuity and contrast,<sup>37</sup> with Christology as an integrative tool for continuity between the two covenants.<sup>38</sup> It is also one of progression, with the Mosaic covenant as a necessary anticipation of the new covenant.<sup>39</sup> The contrast is clarified by Reisinger as “the difference between works and grace;”<sup>40</sup> it is a difference between two covenants, “a legal covenant” and “a gracious covenant,” and it is the difference between “a physical nation” and “a spiritual nation.”<sup>41</sup> This soteriological and ecclesiological distinction between the two major historical covenants is essential for the proper understanding of the theological-hermeneutical map of New Covenant Theology.

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<sup>37</sup> See, for instance, Reisinger, *Tables of Stone*, 1205-1208:

The difference between the Old and New Covenants is not primarily in the specific duties demanded, but in the difference between law and grace as covenants. It is the difference, in some cases, of identical duties being enforced from without by fear and force, as is the case of the Old Covenant, and being constrained from within by love and a heart rejoicing in a covenant based on grace.

Furthermore, Reisinger uses the Biblical connection between the Tables of Stone and the mercy seat in the Pentateuch as an analogy for the proper understanding of the relationship between law and grace as antithetical categories (see idem, *Tables of Stone*, 1570-1576). What is interesting is that Reisinger’s analysis seems to suggest an interdependent relationship between these two categories in the soteriological realm, which is something he disregards when explaining the relationship between law and grace as covenants (i.e., old and new covenant) or even when explaining the new covenant while employing Lutheran terms (i.e., law as rule, grace as gift).

<sup>38</sup> Reisinger, *But I Say Unto You*, 325-328.

<sup>39</sup> Reisinger, *Tables of Stone*, 832-834.

<sup>40</sup> Zaspel, *The New Covenant and New Covenant Theology*, 42.

<sup>41</sup> Reisinger, *But I Say Unto You*, 961-962; see also 1152-1157.

Another aspect of contrast between the Mosaic and the new covenant in New Covenant Theology is found in the area of ethics. First, Reisinger argues that there is equivalency in terms of moral authority between the old covenant and the new covenant:

Can any honest person deny that the clear imperatives in the New Testament epistles do not carry the same degree of authority over the conscience of a believer today as does the so-called “moral law” or Ten Commandments[?].<sup>42</sup>

The concept of parallel authority is one of the perspectives from which New Covenant theologians argue for the succession of the old and new covenant. For them, each covenant incorporates its own set of moral rules that are binding on the believers living under that covenant. Furthermore, by nature, the laws of the new covenant are morally “higher,” since they appeal to a higher standard than mere external actions.

Another aspect of discontinuity between the moral *imprimatur* of the old covenant and the new is pointed out by Wells when stating:

Unlike the Mosaic Law, which was clearly codified in the Pentateuch, the Lord Jesus has not left us with a single, plainly delineated code of rules and regulations for us to follow... The situation under the New Covenant, then, is not precisely parallel to what we find under the Old.<sup>43</sup>

Even though both covenants offer canons of conduct for the individuals under them, and even though they possess the same respective moral authority for those under their general stipulations, they drastically differ in structure.<sup>44</sup> This ethical distinction is

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<sup>42</sup> Reisinger, *The Law/Grace Controversy*, 18.

<sup>43</sup> Wells, *The Priority of Jesus Christ* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant, 2005), 125.

<sup>44</sup> One might follow Reisinger’s logic here and argue that, perhaps, the situation is such because the old covenant law was given to govern “sinners,” needing to be particularly strict and articulated, while the new covenant law was given to govern “saints” under the control of the Holy Spirit, needing to be more generalized and even abstract in some cases. Whether this reasoning stands the scrutiny of the Scriptures is debatable, and Reisinger’s distinction between the nature of the laws of the old covenant



the biggest source of discontinuity between the *law* and the *grace* covenants, which suggests that ethics is at the core of the distinction between *law* and *grace* in New Covenant Theology.<sup>45</sup>

In New Covenant Theology, the current validity of any Mosaic ethical norms is determined by the New Testament's explicit corroboration. For instance, Reisinger declares: "We believe Christ raised nine of the ten commandments [sic] to a higher level and, through the Apostolic epistles, taught that the Sabbath was a type of salvation that has been done away along with the other ceremonial laws."<sup>46</sup> Reisinger's statement also clarifies part of the reasoning behind New Covenant Theology's position on the validation of Old Testament norms (explicit New Testament validation), namely, an attempt to be more consistent with basic Baptist theology in the rejection of the Sabbath and sanitary rules from the Old Testament. This also explains why Wells could accept the two great commandments ("to love God and to love our neighbor") as "moral law, precisely because they are capable of being filled with a great deal of further content," while rejecting the idea that Ten Commandments are in themselves, moral law (even if they are expansions of these two principles).<sup>47</sup>

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and the nature of the laws of the old covenant might prove to be superficial if one is to analyze the life of *the saints* in the Old Testaments in contrast with the life of those who did iniquity in the same Testament, and in connection with the life of both *saints* and evildoers in the New Testament.

<sup>45</sup> See, for instance, Reisinger, *But I Say Unto You*, 204-210.

<sup>46</sup> Reisinger, *The Law/Grace Controversy*, 21.

<sup>47</sup> Wells, *The Priority of Jesus Christ*, 136.

For New Covenant writers, the concept of progressive revelation suggests the logical priority of the New Testament over the Old in terms of doctrine and ethics.<sup>48</sup> This, combined with the concept of covenantal succession, results in an abandonment of the Ten Commandments as codified in the Mosaic law in favor of the *Law of Christ*, which includes nine out of ten commandments. This *Law of Christ* is the new categorical imperative for God's people,<sup>49</sup> and yet, the New Covenant requires "moral effort"<sup>50</sup> just as the Old Covenant did. Reisinger again contrasts the Mosaic and the New covenant, he argues:

It is impossible to read the turn-the-other-cheek principle of the law of Christ back into the law of Moses or to read the eye-for-eye and tooth-for-tooth law of Moses forward into the New Covenant. We can find clear examples in the Old Testament Scriptures where people's actions proved that the grace of God was operating in their hearts, but the law of Moses neither demanded those actions nor produced the motivation for them.<sup>51</sup>

New Covenant Theology's argumentation concerning the relationship between the two major covenants of the Bible stresses the inability of the old covenant to meet the new covenant blessings and glory. Nevertheless, it neglects the similarities the New Covenant has with the Mosaic Covenant, including the New Covenant implementation of the *lex talionis*.<sup>52</sup> For instance, both in the books of Hebrews and Revelation, the concept

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<sup>48</sup> Reisinger, *The Law/Grace Controversy*, 18.

<sup>49</sup> See Ibid, 54.

<sup>50</sup> Wells, *The Priority of Jesus Christ*, 130.

<sup>51</sup> Reisinger, *But I Say Unto You*, 705-708.

<sup>52</sup>E.g. Revelation 18:4-6 (NA28):

Καὶ ἤκουσα ἄλλην φωνὴν ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ λέγουσαν·

of *retribution* is the basis for divine judgment. Even though Reisinger will argue that “we cannot find any New Testament Scriptures that reaffirm the absolute duty of eye-for-eye and tooth-for-tooth without pity or mercy,”<sup>53</sup> it is clear that the principle of *retribution* (which is the principle behind the *lex talionis*) is still in place under the new covenant. Further, to say that the *lex talionis* was presented “without pity or mercy” in the Old Testament might be a misrepresentation of the character of Old Testament law.<sup>54</sup> But in order to more clearly establish the relationship between the concepts of *law* and *grace* in New Covenant Theology and how they relate to the rest of this developing system, it is important to compare and contrast New Covenant Theology’s proposal on the relationship of law and grace with those of Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism.

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“ἐξέλθατε ὁ λαός μου ἐξ αὐτῆς [i.e., from Babylon] ἵνα μὴ συγκοινωνήσητε ταῖς ἁμαρτίαις αὐτῆς, καὶ ἐκ τῶν πληγῶν αὐτῆς ἵνα μὴ λάβητε, ὅτι ἐκολλήθησαν αὐτῆς αἱ ἁμαρτίαι ἄχρι τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καὶ ἐμνημόνευσεν ὁ θεὸς τὰ ἀδικήματα αὐτῆς. ἀπόδοτε αὐτῇ ὡς καὶ αὐτὴ ἀπέδωκεν καὶ διπλώσατε τὰ διπλᾶ κατὰ τὰ ἔργα αὐτῆς, ἐν τῷ ποτηρίῳ ᾧ ἐκέρασεν κέρασατε αὐτῇ διπλοῦν, ὅσα ἐδόξασεν αὐτὴν καὶ ἐστρηνίασεν, τοσοῦτον δότε αὐτῇ βασανισμὸν καὶ πένθος. ὅτι ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ αὐτῆς λέγει ὅτι κάθημαι βασίλισσα καὶ χήρα οὐκ εἰμι καὶ πένθος οὐ μὴ ἴδω. διὰ τοῦτο ἐν μιᾷ ἡμέρᾳ ἤξουσιν αἱ πληγαὶ αὐτῆς, θάνατος καὶ πένθος καὶ λιμός, καὶ ἐν πυρὶ κατακαυθήσεται, ὅτι ἰσχυρὸς κύριος ὁ θεὸς ὁ κρῖνας αὐτήν.”

<sup>53</sup> Reisinger, *But I Say Unto You*, 710-711.

<sup>54</sup> Arguing that the *lex talionis* as retributive justice was executed “without pity or mercy” does not give adequate attention to one of the purposes of this law, namely, the restitution/liberation of those who have been afflicted by an oppressor (either deliberately or accidental). Not only that, it was also accompanied by supplementary provisions for those who fall under the punishment of such laws (e.g. the Cities of Refuge, Joshua 20:1-6).

## **Neocovenantal and Covenantal *Law* and *Grace* Interpretations**

The uses of the term law in Covenant Theology are more intricate than those of Dispensationalism and New Covenant Theology. For one, Covenant Theology validates the tripartite division of the law (i.e., ceremonial, civil and moral) as a means to explain the relationship between the Mosaic and the New Testament. On this note, the

*Westminster Confession* adds:

Beside this law, commonly called moral, God was pleased to give to the people of Israel, as a church under age, ceremonial laws, containing several typical ordinances, partly of worship, prefiguring Christ, his graces, actions, sufferings, and benefits; and partly, holding forth divers instructions of moral duties. All which ceremonial laws are now abrogated, under the new testament....

To them also, as a body politic, he gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the State of that people; not obliging any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require.<sup>55</sup>

In this interpretation of *law* as *command*, there is both continuity and discontinuity. From a quantitative perspective, the relationship between the old and the new covenant is interpreted mainly as one of discontinuity. At the ethical core, however, the 10 Commandments (usually referred to as *moral law*) function as a unifying element for both dispensations.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms: As Adopted by the Presbyterian Church in America: With Proof Texts* (Lawrenceville, GA: Christian Education & Publications, 2005), 19:3-4.

<sup>56</sup> This point is further established in *Ibid*, 19:5:

The moral law doth forever bind all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof; and that, not only in regard of the matter contained in it, but also in respect of the authority of God the Creator, who gave it. Neither doth Christ, in the gospel, any way dissolve, but much strengthen this obligation.

The most important use of *law*, however, is that which relates to the concept the covenant of works. In essence, the covenant of works combines the idea of self-attainable benefit (even salvation) through obedience to one or many covenantal imperatives.

Herman Witsius highlights this idea when saying:

We find two covenants of God with man in Scripture: *the covenant of works*, otherwise called the *covenant of nature*, or *the legal*; and *the covenant of grace*. So the apostle teaches us to distinguish, Rom. iii. 27 [sic], where he mentions *the law of works*, and *the law of faith*: by *the law of works* understanding that doctrine, which points out the way, in which, by means of works, salvation is obtained; and by *the law of faith*, that doctrine which shews the way, in which, by means of faith, salvation is obtained.<sup>57</sup>

And again, in 1:401:

Here we are to observe a remarkable difference between *the promises of the covenant of works*, and those of *the covenant of grace*. The same eternal life is promised in both, which can be but one, consisting in the communion and enjoyment of God; but it is promised in a manner quite different in the one, from what it is in the other. In the covenant of works God promised life to man, on condition of perfect obedience, but he did not promise to produce or effect this obedience in man. In the covenant of grace, he so promises life eternal, as at the same time to promise faith and repentance, and perseverance in holiness, without which life cannot be attained; and which being granted, life cannot but be obtained. And even in this sense it may be said, that the covenant, of which Christ is the mediator, is *more excellent, and stablished on better promises*; because it does not depend on any uncertain condition, but being founded on the suretyship and actual satisfaction of Christ, does infallibly secure salvation to the believer, and as certainly promise faith to the elect.

The *works* principle is emphasized in the statement “by means of works, salvation is attained,” and yet again in the phrase “[eternal] life [is promised], on condition of perfect obedience.”<sup>58</sup> Interestingly, Witsius argues that God implemented (replicated, perhaps) the covenant of works in his dealings with Israel with the intention of creating a

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<sup>57</sup> Witsius, *The Oeconomy of the Covenants*, 1:56.

<sup>58</sup> See also *Westminster Confession* 19:6.

faith-oriented conscience in the minds of the Israelites.<sup>59</sup> This means that the covenant of works, at least in the case of the Israelites,<sup>60</sup> was indeed divinely designed to fail, and yet it was implemented nevertheless just as a teaching-moral mechanism. It is also worth mentioning that the “legal covenant” designation of Covenant Theology and its implications correspond with the Dispensationalist’s and New Covenant Theology’s understanding of the Mosaic covenant. The main difference lies in the fact that Dispensationalism and New Covenant Theology apply the *works* principle to the historical covenant made between God and Israel in the times of Moses while Covenant Theology applies the concept to what has been referred to as a theological covenant.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> For instance, Herman Witsius (in *The Oeconomy of the Covenants, Between God and Man: Comprehending a Complete Body of Divinity* [New York, NY: Lee & Stockes, 1978: 3:33]) states:

The Israelites were, therefore, thus put in mind of the covenant of works, in order to convince them of their sin and misery, to drive them out of themselves, to shew them the necessity of a satisfaction, and to compel them to Christ. And so their being thus brought to a remembrance of the covenant of works, tended to promote the covenant of grace.

<sup>60</sup> I specify the Israelites here because of Covenant Theology’s position on the covenant of works in Eden:

Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace; wherein he freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ; requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life his Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe (*Westminster Confession* 7:3).

<sup>61</sup> See Witsius, *The Oeconomy of the Covenants*, 1:434-435; on the reference to these covenants as theological covenants, see Fred G. Zaspel, “A Brief Explanation of ‘New Covenant Theology’”. Witsius clarifies on the concept of the legal covenant in Covenant Theology:

The diversity of these economies is comprised under two principal heads, which the apostle calls by the names of the *Old* and *New Testament*. Where we are to note, that

The concept of grace in Covenant Theology directly applies to the covenant, dispensation and divine gift related to Christ, and it is usually explained *vis-à-vis* the covenant of works. While both covenants entitle both blessings and conditions for such blessings, the covenant of grace differs from the covenant of works by *offering* eternal life on the *condition* of faith (against the *works* principle of the covenant of works).<sup>62</sup> One feature that distinguishes the covenant of works for the covenant of grace in relation to this *condition-blessing* scheme is the mediatorial work of Christ in the covenant-of-grace relationship.<sup>63</sup> Since the covenant-of-works relationship is based in direct human merit and corresponding divine blessing, there is no place in it for any real substitutive mediation. The covenant-of-grace, on the other hand, is completely based on substitutionary atonement, thus resulting in a faith-affirming, grace-empowered holy life.<sup>64</sup>

The relationship between *law* and *grace/gospel* is a complex one in Covenant Theology. For instance, the *Westminster Confession* states that the *law* as moral rule (guide) is complimentary to the grace of the gospel, since it is being lived out by the

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by *the Old Testament*, we are by no means to understand *the legal covenant*, concerning obtaining salvation by our own works; which is very different from the covenant of grace. But, according to us and Paul, the Old Testament denotes the testament [or covenant] of grace under that dispensation, which subsisted before the coming of Christ in the flesh, and was proposed formerly to the fathers under the vail of certain types, pointing out some imperfection of that state, and consequently that they were to be abolished in their appointed time (Witsius, *The Oeconomy of the Covenants* 1:434-435).

<sup>62</sup> See *Ibid*, 1:56, 57.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid* 1:57; 1:401.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*.

empowerment of the “Spirit of Christ.”<sup>65</sup> These covenants were also logically (not historically) successive, the covenant of works being the necessary condition for the establishment of a new covenant of grace as means of blessing.<sup>66</sup> And in terms of the structure of both the covenant of works and the covenant of grace, there is a common requirement of a *condition* for the bestowal of blessings, even when such condition for each covenant is different (i.e., the *works* principle in the covenant of works and faith in the covenant of grace).<sup>67</sup>

The relationship between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace in Reformed theology correspond more or less to the relationship between law and gospel in Luther’s theology. Although the covenant-of-works relationship was, for all practical purposes, unable to bestow eternal life upon humanity due to disobedience, it is still παιδαγωγὸς ἡμῶν [...] εἰς Χριστόν (Ga 3:24, NA28), this is, the principal vehicle to

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<sup>65</sup> *Westminster Confession* 19:7:

Neither are the aforementioned uses of the law contrary to the grace of the gospel, but do sweetly comply with it; the Spirit of Christ subduing and enabling the will of man to do that freely, and cheerfully, which the will of God, revealed in the law, requireth to be done.

<sup>66</sup> See, for instance, Witsius, *The Oeconomy of the Covenants*, 3:33:

if the Israelites were taught to seek salvation by the works of the law, then the law had been contrary to the promise made to the fathers many ages before. But now says the apostle, Gal iii. 17. *The covenant that was conformed before of God in Christ, the law, which was four hundred and thirty years after, cannot disannul, that it should make the promise of non effect.* The Israelites were, therefore, thus put in mind of the covenant of works, in order to convince them of their sin and misery, to drive them out of themselves, to shew them the necessity of a satisfaction, and to compel them to Christ. And so their being thus brought to a remembrance of the covenant of works, tended to promote the covenant of grace.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 3:31-32.



produce saving faith.<sup>68</sup> For this reason, Reformed theologians emphasize “that salvation has always been by grace alone through faith alone” and that “all believers, from the beginning of time until its end, are part of the family of God.”<sup>69</sup> And just like in Luther’s theology, the distinction between law and gospel in relation to justification is thoroughly maintained in Reformed Theology. Unlike New Covenant Theology, Covenant Theology emphasizes the validity of *law* in the sense of *moral law* as still normatively valid for Christian ethics today. In Myron Houghton’s words:

In much Reformed thinking, the gospel includes more than the death and resurrection of Christ. It also includes his perfect keeping of the law on behalf of believers. It is this human righteousness of Jesus that is credited, they teach, to the believers’ account in justification. Christ’s keeping the covenant of works (i.e. the law) on behalf of the believer is incorporated into the covenant of grace.<sup>70</sup>

Houghton seems to point out that this reasoning in favor of *ethical* continuity is, for some (and perhaps for himself), an inconsistency in the exposition of the Biblical teaching concerning salvation. Houghton explains:

This is the view of the majority of Reformed theologians, that Christ’s atoning work as substitute for the elect includes not only His passive obedience (His suffering and death), but also His active obedience (His keeping of the law as our substitute). Since the law is identified with the covenant of works, the relationship of the covenant of grace to the covenant of work is complimentary rather than antithetical. Christ is our substitute, not only in the covenant of grace but also in the covenant of works.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Cf. *Ibid*, 3:33. As observed before, Witsius argumentation here points toward the necessity of a covenant-of-works relationship to help in the development of a spiritual conscience in the Israelites in preparation for grace-achieving faith.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 84.

<sup>70</sup> Myron Houghton, *Law and Grace* (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Book, 1982), 138.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, 65-66.

Houghton's criticism suggests that in Covenant Theology law and grace are distinguished in relation to justification, but their function is complimentary in terms of sanctification. In summary, the covenant of works (understood as an ethical norm rather than as a relationship) not only serves as the necessary background for the covenant of grace, but also serves as the ethical norm for believers living under the covenant of grace in the New Testament era.

This concludes the comparative analysis of the neocovenantal and the covenantal interpretation of *law* and *grace*. The following section will explore the similarities and differences between neocovenantal and the dispensational interpretation of *law* and *grace*.

### **Neocovenantal and Dispensational *Law* and *Grace* Interpretations**

It has been noted elsewhere<sup>72</sup> that distinction between *law* and *grace* are at the core of Dispensational hermeneutics. It seems to be prudent, then, to explore Dispensationalism's understanding of the relationship between (usage of the concepts of) *law* and *grace* in order to properly determine New Covenant Theology's particular contribution against that of Dispensationalism. For this reason, I will now turn to a succinct analysis of the classical Dispensational view on *law* and *grace*.

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<sup>72</sup> See Daniel P. Fuller, *Gospel & Law: Contrast or Continuum: The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 3. In fact, part of Fuller's thesis "is that dispensationalism draws a sharp distinction between Israel and the Church in order to keep the teachings of grace in Scripture free from the teachings of the law."

The most evident use of the words *law* and *grace* in Dispensationalism is directly related to the idea of a covenant found in Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism, the difference being that in Dispensationalism, the word *dispensation* is more commonly integrated into the system. For instance, Ryrie states “[the Law] dispensation was operative over a long period of time if it was inaugurated with Moses and continued until the crucifixion of Christ.”<sup>73</sup> *Law*, then, identifies the *covenant/dispensation*<sup>74</sup> brought about by the giving of the law at Sinai,<sup>75</sup> while *grace* identifies the *covenant/dispensation* brought about by Christ.<sup>76</sup>

Another use of *law* and *gospel* that it is not so obvious and yet of immense important is related to soteriology just as in New Covenant Theology. On the subject, Houghton adds:

In dispensational [sic] theology, Law and Gospel are carefully distinguished. While salvation has always been based upon Christ’s death and resurrection (in the mind of God) and always by grace alone through faith alone, the law functioned in the Old Testament to guide a believer’s life. With Christ’s death, the law as a rule of life has

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<sup>73</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 901-902; see also Ibid, 860-862, 906-907. More specifically, he states: “already we have accounted for five dispensations: (1) Pre-Fall, (2) Post-Fall to the time of Moses, (3) the Law, (4) Grace, and (5) the Millennial Kingdom” (ibid, 863-864).

<sup>74</sup> Ryrie defines the term *dispensation* as “a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God’s purpose. If one were describing a dispensation, he would include other things, such as the ideas of distinctive revelation, responsibility, testing, failure, and judgment” (Ibid, 475-477; see also ibid, 482-484). The five dispensations identified by Ryrie in ibid, 863-864 include both “the Law” and “Grace,” but I would like to clarify that even though the concepts of covenant and dispensation are mostly equivalent, not all *dispensations* correspond to Biblical covenants, thus not having a one-to-one correspondence in every case.

<sup>75</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 906-907.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 1033-1036.

been abolished, while the Spirit enables a believer to fulfill the righteous standard of the law.<sup>77</sup>

The key word of Houghton's statement is the word "distinguished," and it points toward an antithetical nature of the relationship of the two concepts in their soteriological aspect. For Houghton, as it is for the rest of classic Dispensational theologians, *law* is a negative concept, a "ministry of death and condemnation (2 Cor. 3:7,9) to unbelievers," while *gospel* is the epitome of "unconditional blessings of salvation."<sup>78</sup> Ryrie also distinguishes *law* and *grace* as covenants from the soteriological concepts of law and grace when saying:

To be sure, the dispensationalist does not say that there was no grace ever displayed before the coming of Christ (any more than he says there is no law after His coming), but the Scriptures do say that His coming displayed the grace of God in such brightness that all previous displays could be considered as nothing.<sup>79</sup>

Here, *law* and *grace* are integrated into both, the Mosaic dispensation (and earlier dispensations, perhaps) and the *grace* dispensation or new covenant. Such statement could possibly clear Dispensationalism from any accusation of teaching two methods of salvation (that is, if we consider *law* and *grace* like Luther, and not like soteriological categories). Nevertheless, we find statements from dispensationalists that seem to be pointing towards two methods of salvation,<sup>80</sup> even when in other instances they

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<sup>77</sup> Houghton, *Law and Grace*, 138.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, 125.

<sup>79</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 1034-1036

<sup>80</sup> Ryrie, in *Ibid*, 2084-2089, has summarized this point when saying:

Not so incidentally, nondispensationalists have made a few unguarded statements themselves about salvation under the Mosaic Law. Oswald Allis wrote, "The Law is a declaration of the will of God for man's salvation." Louis Berkhof wrote in one place,

categorically argue there is only one method of salvation.<sup>81</sup> In a dissertation entitled *Grace Under the Mosaic Covenant*, H. Chester Woodring comments on this issue and warns dispensationalists about covenantal presuppositions as the source for much of the confusion:

Lamentable is the practice of dispensationalists who imagine that a simple categorical statement about salvation by grace through faith under the law suffices to meet the exigencies of the situation.... What dispensationalists must appreciate is that those who are not dispensationalists have difficulty understanding how they can hold salvation by faith and yet say what they say about the clean-cut distinction between grace and law. In other words, how is salvation by grace in the Old Testament to be

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“Grace offers escape from the law only as a condition of salvation,” and in another place, “From the law ... as a condition of salvation,” and in another place, “From the law ... both as a means of obtaining eternal life and as a condemning power believers are set free in Christ.” If, as these covenant theologians clearly state, the law was a means of salvation and of obtaining eternal life, then covenant theology must teach two ways of salvation—one by law and one through Christ!

<sup>81</sup> See, for instance, Houghton, *Law and Grace*, 12: “Dispensational theology teaches that believers today are not under the law [sic], either as a way of salvation or as a rule of life.” Houghton is clearly talking about the Mosaic covenant as *law*, and he distinguishes the “way of salvation” of the “law” with that of “believers today;” See also C. I. Scofield’s commentary on John 1:17 in *The Scofield Reference Bible: Containing the Old and New Testaments* (New York: Oxford, 1909), 1115:

Law is connected with Moses and works; grace with Christ and faith (John i:17; Rom. x. 4-10). Law blesses the good; grace saves the bad (Ex. xix. 5; Eph. ii. 1-9). Law demands that blessings be earned; grace is a free gift (Deut. xxviii. 1-6; Eph. ii. 8; Rom. iv. 4, 5)

[...] As a dispensation, grace beings with the death and resurrection of Christ (Rom. iii. 24-26; iv. 24, 25). The point of testing is no longer legal obedience as the condition of salvation [the supposedly Mosaic way], but acceptance or rejection of Christ, with good works as a fruit of salvation [sic].

Scofield also distinguished between law and grace as soteriological categories, highlighting law as a works principle and grace as “a free gift.” Even more clear, Lewis Sperry Chafer stated:

A distinction must be observed here between just men of the Old Testament and those justified according to the New Testament. According to the Old Testament men were just because they were true and faithful in keeping the Mosaic law (*Systematic Theology* [Dallas, TX: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1948], 7:128).

reconciled with the Mosaic law viewed as an antithetical system of legal obedience and merit? This question must be answered not by expostulation but by exhibition, not by theoretical statements but by systematic theology. Moreover, any solution that omits the clear-cut distinction between law and grace will immediately be declared suspect by critical covenant controversialists.<sup>82</sup>

Ryrie has offered an explanation to this problem, arguing that what Scofield (and most likely other dispensationalists) argue about when referring to *law* and *grace* in relation to soteriology are but different *tests* of faithfulness according to “distinctive revelation[s]” in different “dispensations” (seven, to be precise).<sup>83</sup> These *tests*, Ryrie

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<sup>82</sup> H. Chester Woodring, “Grace Under the Mosaic Covenant” (ThD Dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1956), 208.

<sup>83</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 355-630; In Ryrie’s words: “Whenever God gives revelation concerning His method of running the affairs of the world, there is also given a corresponding responsibility or test to people as to whether or not they will align themselves with God’s economy and the revelation of it” (ibid, 607-608); see also Scofield, *Scofield Reference Bible* 5. In this respect, Chafer (in “Inventing Heretics Through Misunderstanding,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 102, no. 405 [Jan-Mar 1945], 2) adds:

There is, therefore, but one way to be saved and that is by the power of God made possible through the sacrifice of Christ... That God has assigned different human requirements in various ages as the terms upon which He Himself saves on the ground of the death of Christ, is a truth of Scripture revelation and is recognized as true by those who receive their doctrine from the Sacred Text rather than from man-made creeds... When the various human requirements of the different ages are investigated it is found that they come alike in the end to the basic reality that faith is exercised in God. And that one basic element of trust in God doubtless answers that which in every case God must require.

In trying to explain this *works-versus-faith* hermeneutic in relationship to the doctrine of salvation, some dispensationalists have argued that “[Israelites] had received grace, they needed grace. With the vow they made, they had put themselves under law” (A. C. Gaebelein, *The Annotated Bible* [Wheaton, IL: Van Kampen, 1913], 1:152). On the same note, Chafer adds: “Israel deliberately forsook their position under grace, which had been their relation to God until that day, and placed themselves under the law” (*Systematic Theology*, 4:162). Concerning this reality, Houghton comments: “Though earlier dispensationalists may have called the law a retrogression into a legal system that

argues, “are not for the purpose of enlightening God but for the purpose of bringing out what is in people, whether faith or failure.”<sup>84</sup> So grace is manifested in the exposing of human faith (where possible) by means of a different *test* particular to each dispensation.<sup>85</sup> What is puzzling about Ryrie’s proposal is that all these distinctive tests are based upon Christ’s meritorial death and resurrection as true source of blessings, and yet the Mosaic dispensation subjects believers to access *Christ’s future merits* through obedience of the *law*, making the access to salvation one of legalistic means. Though Ryrie and other dispensationalists have dedicated a considerable amount of time to refuting the charge of two-ways-of-salvation in Dispensationalism while pointing out the covenantalists suffer from the same confusion they are criticizing in Dispensationalism, yet their answers are still unsatisfactory.<sup>86</sup> Arguing that the Mosaic covenant was a *legal(-istic)* covenant that also offered faith as true means of salvation suggests a contradiction, even if we suggest that the Israelites chose the wrong method of salvation,

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the Israelites imposed upon themselves, in reality, God wanted them to stay under grace” (*Law and Grace*, 113).

<sup>84</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 612-613.

<sup>85</sup> See Ryrie’s table on the different dispensations and their respective responsibilities (*tests*) and judgments in *Ibid*, 1003.

<sup>86</sup> The article V of the *Dallas Theological Seminary Doctrinal Statement* (Dallas Theological Seminary, Dallas, TX) fairly summarizes the dispensational understanding on the relationship between law and grace as soteriological categories when adding:

We believe that according to the “eternal purpose” of God (Eph. 3:11) salvation in the divine reckoning is always “by grace through faith,” and rests upon the basis of the shed blood of Christ. We believe that God has always been gracious, regardless of the ruling dispensation, but that man has not at all times been under an administration or stewardship of grace as is true in the present dispensation (1 Cor. 9:17; Eph. 3:2; 3:9, asv; Col. 1:25; 1 Tim. 1:4, asv) [sic].

i.e. salvation by works, and God went along with it.<sup>87</sup> Contrary to Woodring's claim, even if this distinction makes sense within the structural scheme and cultural logic of Dispensationalism, the confusion transcends classic covenantal presuppositions.

In that which relates to *law* and *gospel* as dispensations/covenantal categories, Dispensationalists emphasize categorical distinctions between the different dispensations. These distinctions cover aspects from “distinctive revelation, [human] responsibility, testing, failure and judgment [for failure].”<sup>88</sup> In fact, this distinction is what defines a dispensation according to Ryrie.<sup>89</sup> Dispensations in Dispensationalism are understood as being “chronologically successive,”<sup>90</sup> just like the understanding of the historical covenants in New Covenant Theology. Despite the distinctions between dispensations, Dispensationalism “asserts the basic unity of the unfolding plan of God in the Scriptures [based on God's glory in salvation history I assume].”<sup>91</sup>

Another important aspect of dispensational theology that is also found in New Covenant Theology is the understanding of progressive revelation between the historical dispensations (or covenants, in the case of New Covenant Theology). Each dispensation

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<sup>87</sup> See Gaebelien, *The Annotated Bible*, 1:152; Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:162.

<sup>88</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 475-477; see also *Ibid*, 482-484.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, 521-523.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, 664-665.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, 555-556; *Ibid*, 635-636: “The distinctive governmental arrangement that distinguishes the various dispensations in no way conflicts with the unity of Scripture.”



“is a stage in the progress of revelation.”<sup>92</sup> In relation to the Mosaic covenant, Ryrie argues:

At the giving of the law to the Israelites through Moses, God’s government was mediated through the various categories of the law. This does not mean that He never spoke directly, but it does mean that His principal mode of government was the Mosaic code, which was a *new thing introduced at that time*. It also means that the responsibility upon mankind was conformity to that code—again a *new responsibility*, for prior to the giving of the law, people were obviously not held responsible for *something that did not exist*.<sup>93</sup>

Ryrie intends to demonstrate the progressiveness of God’s plan through historical dispensations as exemplified by the Mosaic covenant. The importance of such statements in Dispensational theology cannot be underestimated. It is precisely this notion that allows dispensationalism to harmonize the idea of change, i.e., change of dispensation, of revelation, of human responsibility (ethics),<sup>94</sup> and this is also the way in which the concept of progressiveness in God’s plan is used in New Covenant Theology.

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<sup>92</sup> Paul David Nevin, “Some Major Problems in Dispensational Interpretation” (ThD Dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1963), 97.

<sup>93</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 590-593, italics supplied.

<sup>94</sup> A summary statement on the Dispensational systematic development of the concept of progression is found in the Article V of the *Dallas Theological Seminary Doctrinal Statement*:

We believe that the dispensations are stewardships by which God administers His purpose on the earth through man under varying responsibilities. We believe that the changes in the dispensational dealings of God with man depend on changed conditions or situations in which man is successively found with relation to God, and that these changes are the result of the failures of man and the judgments of God. We believe that different administrative responsibilities of this character are manifest in the biblical record, that they span the entire history of mankind, and that each ends in the failure of man under the respective test and in an ensuing judgment from God. We believe that three of these dispensations or rules of life are the subject of extended revelation in the Scriptures, viz., the dispensation of the Mosaic Law, the present dispensation of grace, and the future dispensation of the millennial kingdom. We believe that these are distinct and are not to be intermingled or confused, as they are chronologically successive.

## Summary

In New Covenant Theology, both *law* and *grace* are primarily used to describe the two major historical covenants of the Bible and the *blessings* principle behind them. As a soteriological category, *law* refers to the *works* principle of conditional blessing bestowed upon the obedient as a reward. It highlights the grace-deprived and the external performance orientation of a covenant that requires humanly-fabricated merits (through obedience) as means to achieve salvation. *Grace*, however, is presented in striking contrast to the *legalistic* nature of the *works-principle* characteristic of the Mosaic covenant. New Covenant theologians highlight the glory of the substitutionary atonement (*versus* self-attained merits) and intercession as distinguishing elements between *law* and *grace* as soteriological categories, further establishing the *grace* covenant as both “unconditional and promissory.”<sup>95</sup>

Even though *law* and *grace* (understood in the Lutheran sense) coexisted throughout the time of Moses and currently in the Christian dispensation, they are, in the soteriological sense, mutually exclusive principles of how to approach God, thus making the two historical covenants (that are understood in connection with such soteriological distinction) mutually exclusive. This exclusion is further explained by means of the principle of progressive revelation and covenant replacement, thus adding a sense of organic continuity and structural cohesion to salvation history. The relationship between *law* and *grace* (as soteriological categories, and subsequently, historical covenants) in

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<sup>95</sup> Zaspel, *The New Covenant and New Covenant Theology*, 42.

New Covenant Theology is one of basic discontinuity and contrast, with the *Christ* principle as the main element of cohesion.

In practical terms, the distinction between *law* and *grace* also reflects particular sets of rules within the structure of each historical covenant, that affect those believers that have achieved a relationship with God based on different salvific principles (i.e., the *works* principle *versus* the *grace* principle). The set of rules in the new covenant are of higher morality than those given under the Mosaic covenant, and explicit corroboration of a given moral rule by the New Testament is necessary, at least in Reisinger's thought, to determine whether a Mosaic norm/rule applies to the lives of new covenant believers.

In Covenant Theology, the uses of the term *law* are more intricate than those found in New Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism. This is evidenced in Covenant Theology's validation of the tripartite division of the law as a necessary context to explain the relationship between the Mosaic covenant and the new covenant. Aside from this, Covenant theologians use *law* as command (like Luther) to demonstrate both aspects of continuity as well as discontinuity in explaining the relationship between Moses' and Christ's covenants. Yet the most important use of *law* in covenant theology is related to the concept of the covenant of works. This covenant that validates that *law* principle emphasizes works/obedience as a means to blessings/salvation. This understanding of *law* corresponds to New Covenant Theology's understanding of the Mosaic covenant. The difference between Covenant Theology's approach and that of New Covenant Theology in this respect lies in that neocovenantalists apply the *works* principle to the historical covenant of Moses while covenantalists apply the concept to theological

covenants in a dialectic relationship that operate within both major historical covenants in the Bible.

*Grace*, on the other hand, applies to the covenant, dispensation, and divine gift related to Christ, and it is usually explained in contrast to the covenant of works. The covenant of grace, just like the covenant of works, involves both blessings and conditions for such blessings, but they differ from each other in that the covenant of works validates the *works* principle as a condition for attaining eternal life while the covenant of grace validates faith. As such, one of the features that distinguishes the covenant of works and the covenant of grace in relation to this *condition-blessing* scheme is the mediatorial works of Christ in the covenant-of-grace relationship. Since the covenant-of-works relationship is based in self-attained human merit and corresponding divine blessing, there is no place in it for substitutive mediation. The covenant-of-grace, on the other hand, is completely based on substitutionary atonement, thus resulting in a faith-affirming, grace-empowered holy life.

The relationship between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace correspond, more or less, to the relationship between *law* and *gospel* in Luther's theology. Although the covenant-of-works relationship was ineffective in delivering the eternal life due to human failure, it is still the principal vehicle to produce saving faith in Covenant Theology.

The most evident use of the words *law* and *grace* in Dispensationalism are related to the idea of covenant already present in Covenant Theology and more recently in Dispensationalism, but dispensationalists choose the term *dispensation* over the term *covenant* as being suited for their theology. The ideas of *law* and *grace* (*à la* Luther) are

integrated into both the Mosaic dispensation and the new covenant dispensation, and yet, *law* as dispensation (and the soteriological principle behind it) is seen in negative terms as a “ministry that brought death...[and] condemnation” (2 Cor 3:7-9), while the *grace/gospel* dispensation epitomizes the “unconditional blessings of salvation.”<sup>96</sup> For this reason, dispensationalists emphasize a categorical distinction between the dispensation of Moses and the dispensation of Christ.

This distinction between the two dispensations cover aspects from “distinctive revelation, [human responsibility], testing, failure and judgment [for failure].”<sup>97</sup> Despite the distinctions between dispensations, dispensationalists argue for the unity of Scriptures based on God’s glory in salvation history. Dispensationalists have also intended to demonstrate the progressiveness of God’s plan through historical dispensations. This notion allows dispensationalists to harmonize the idea of change (i.e. change of dispensation, of revelation, of human responsibility) with that of unity of the covenants, and this is also one of the ways in which the concept of the progressiveness of God’s plan is used in New Covenant Theology.

### **Conclusions**

New Covenant Theology’s understanding concerning the nature of the new covenant springs naturally from a predefined contrast with the Mosaic covenant. It is to be commended for going the extra mile in the attempt to avoid any kind of legalism in its systematic structure, and for undertaking the development of a method that develops the

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<sup>96</sup> Houghton, *Law and Grace*, 125.

<sup>97</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 475-477.

premise of vetero-testamentary *legal* covenant more consistently. This logical enterprise seems to be well executed from a logical perspective, although in reality the starting point for the characterizing of the major Biblical covenants in New Covenant Theology is the nature of the new covenant itself and not the other way around.

New Covenant Theology incorporates foundational aspects of both Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism into a system *de novo*, since its *legal* covenant concept is not strange to either Covenant Theology or Dispensationalism. New covenant Theology is just developing the idea within a more evident frame of progression and discontinuity (unlike Covenant Theology) for the sake of the unity of the Bible (against Dispensationalism) and for the sake of theological coherence and clarity. Also, it strives to avoid the *two-ways-of-salvation* charge, although not completely satisfactory. The concepts of progressive revelation and covenant replacement are also brilliant ways to further establish the internal logic of the system, contributing to its philosophical-theological consistency (although not necessarily to its Biblical consistency or accuracy).

Ultimately, the theological tip of the spear of the New Covenant Theological agenda is an ethical distinction between the Mosaic covenant and the new covenant. It is the difference between the Ten Commandments as “tables of stone” and the Law of Christ as spiritual law. It could be said that New Covenant Theology is a highly-developed execution of the idea that the 10 Commandments (and the Sabbath commandment, to be more specific) are no longer applicable to Christians today.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE LAW-GRACE RELATIONSHIP AND SYSTEMATICS IN NEW COVENANT THEOLOGY

#### **Introduction**

It has been observed elsewhere that New Covenant Theology is not a monolithic movement.<sup>1</sup> Being developed mostly from the trenches of local congregations, this theological method presents itself as the result of several distinctive, yet related, developments in the last four decades.<sup>2</sup> An exploration of such developments in connection with the concepts of *law* and *grace* is essential for the understanding of the nature of the movement, and for establishing with a degree of certainty the basic principles that underlie New Covenant Theology's exegetical and theological hermeneutics.

Since New Covenant Theology has existed for less than four decades, it is my intention to investigate the developments found in the writings of first generation New Covenant theologians as sufficient data for establishing a solid foundation for the system.

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<sup>1</sup> See Denis M. Swanson, "Introducing New Covenant Theology," 157; Trinity Baptist Church Discipleship Training, "Covenant Theology Versus New Covenant Theology," Trinity Baptist Church Baton Rouge, Louisiana (May 2006), 6; Richard Barcellos, *In Defense of the Decalogue*, 8.

<sup>2</sup> Swanson, "Introducing New Covenant Theology," 149. Swanson argues that "[New Covenant Theology] began in local churches and has slowly moved its way up in the academic world" (Ibid, 152).

I will proceed diachronically in what pertains to the analysis of each author's particular contribution as shown in their major publications and subsequent treatises. I will also analyze each author's contribution under separate subheadings in an attempt to acknowledge the distinctiveness of each author's approach to neocovenantalism, and yet attempting to exhibit clear relationships between them.

I will compare the basic aspects of both Dispensational and Covenant Theology's hermeneutics with the New Covenant proposal with the goal of establishing the basis for further dialog between these movements concerning the law-grace relationship. Since much has been written about both Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology from a plethora of perspectives, both critical and a non-critical,<sup>3</sup> I will be focusing on information necessary for points of comparison and contrast between these movements.

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<sup>3</sup> To mention a few: For Dispensationalism, see Daniel P. Fuller, "The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism" (ThD dissertation, Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1979); Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2007); Craig A. Blaising and Darrel L. Bock, *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992); Darrell L. Bock and Elliott Johnson, *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1999). For Covenant Theology, see Michael Horton, *Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009); Peter Golding, *Covenant Theology: The Key of Theology in Reformed Thought and Tradition* (Scotland, UK: Mentor, 2004); Andrews Woosley, *Unity and Continuity in Covenantal Thought: a Study in the Reformed Tradition to the Westminster Assembly* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2012); Larondelle, *Our Creator Redeemer: An Introduction to Biblical Covenant Theology* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2005); Mark W. Karlberg, *Covenant Theology in Reformed Perspective: Collected Essays and Book Reviews in Historical, Biblical and Systematic Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2000); Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Covenants* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1948); Jeong Koo Jeon, *Covenant Theology: John Murray's and Meredith G. Kline's Response to the Historical Development of Federal Theology in Reformed Thought* (Lahman, MD; University Press of America, 2004).



## Development of New Covenant Hermeneutics and Theology

### Early Developments

#### Jon Zens

The basic tenants of New Covenant theology first appeared in 1977 in an article published by Jon Zens, titled *Is There a “Covenant of Grace”?*<sup>4</sup> Zens wrote this incisive article as an attempt to challenge Covenant Theology as the supporting framework for the practice of Paedobaptism (infant baptism).<sup>5</sup> By quoting several Covenant theologians, he shows Covenant Theology’s central pillar (i.e., the Covenant of Grace) and its contribution to the relationship between the Testaments (i.e., foundational continuity) to be the main justification for the practice of infant baptism.<sup>6</sup> For this reason, he calls for a Biblical sharpening of the understanding of “the ‘covenant of grace.’”<sup>7</sup>

To accomplish this task, Zens develops four foundational principles in logical sequence, the first of which is a philosophy of Biblical history. For him, Biblical history is essentially salvific, with the exaltation of Christ as God’s main purpose in history.<sup>8</sup> By positioning the *Christ* principle at the beginning of the argumentation and as the basis for

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<sup>4</sup> Jon Zens, “Is There a ‘Covenant of Grace’?” *Baptist Reformation Review* 6, No. 3 (1977): 45–53. In this investigation, I will be quoting from the electronic version (<http://www.searchingtogether.org/articles/zens/covenant.htm>).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. Zens argues that the practice of infant baptism is based on an interpretation of the continuity of God’s plan in the history of the Biblical covenants developed from the perspective of one “covenant of grace [that] stands above history.” This theological principle forces an antitypical replication of the covenant conditions and signs presented in the Mosaic covenant in the New Covenant.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

his other principles, Zens is able to discard Covenant Theology's understanding of the theological center for salvation history. In this article, Zens does not clarify what suggested to him the idea of placing Christology as the integrative element of salvation history, but in view of his interest to diminish Covenant Theology's foundation, it is safe to assume that this first principle is prompted by the need to establish a system that validates the distinction between the Mosaic covenant's ethical presentation and that of the new covenant.

The second principle qualifies salvation history as one of progressiveness towards the previously established goal of history (i.e., the exaltation of Christ). Such progressiveness is understood from the underlying presupposition of radical change (i.e., discontinuity) between historical-covenantal eras, giving Zens the means to offer an explanation for the way in which the Testaments relate to each other. It also allows him to break with the continuity principle applied to both covenants as Covenant Theology does. Since under Covenant Theology's framework the inclusion of infants under the old covenant justifies the application of the same principle under the new covenant,<sup>9</sup> the idea of the progressiveness of salvific history enable Zens to reject it on a redemptive-historical basis.

With the third principle, Zens describes the New Covenant as the historical period encompassing the history after Christ, the "pivotal point in redemptive history."<sup>10</sup> Zen's

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. In other words, "Since infants were included in the Abrahamic administration of the 'covenant of grace,' why should we think that infants are excluded from the new administration of the same 'covenant of grace'?"

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

understanding is that in this new covenant, both “the eternal purpose of God” and “the historical process” leading to it reach fulfillment.<sup>11</sup> This covenant- is, then, the historical realization of God’s purpose with salvation history (first principle), the pinnacle of God’s dealing with humankind. The new covenant is radically “different” to the Mosaic Covenant (according to his interpretation of Jeremiah 31:32-33),<sup>12</sup> and the idea of an *overarching* covenant of grace (as suggested by Covenant Theology) does not “make justice” to a clear distinction between the old and new covenants.

The fourth principle is presented as a further way of qualifying the nature of each major covenant in salvation history. In essence, this principle states that each covenant should be considered as an indivisible unit with its own particular moral code. It approaches the covenantal bodies of literature as theological and ethical units binding for the people living under each respective covenant. In other words, the ethics of the Old Testament literature is binding on the people corresponding to the Mosaic Covenant; and the ethics of the New Testament literature is binding on the people living under the new era, of the New Covenant. Zens argues that this distinction should be kept clear: “we cannot isolate the Law from its context and purposes in the history of redemption.”<sup>13</sup> Zens’ intentions with this principle is to further his case for the distinction between the Mosaic covenant and the new covenant and for the superseding of the Mosaic covenant by the new (progressive revelation).

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

## Structuring and Incipient Systematization

### John Reisinger

Another important figure in the development of New Covenant Theology is John G. Reisinger. In *Abraham's Four Seeds*,<sup>14</sup> Reisinger takes on the task advanced by Zens to reject the practice of *paedobaptism*, but chooses to do so by rather exploring the motif of Abraham's seed as heir to the covenant promises made to Abraham.<sup>15</sup> As such, Reisinger's *Abraham's Four Seeds* stands as both a criticism of contemporary Protestant ecclesiology<sup>16</sup> and as a new proposal. His understanding is that ecclesiology "is a key to

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<sup>14</sup> John G. Reisinger, *Abraham's Four Seeds* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, i. These promises are bases in the *prediction* of Genesis 3:15 (see Ibid, 41-42). In Reisinger's words: "God...is merely choosing and designating the seed line that will bring to pass the promise of Genesis 3:15 and the goal of Revelation 13:8" (Ibid, 43).

<sup>16</sup> Mainly covenantalist and dispensationalist. Reisinger summarizes this point as follows:

Both the Dispensationalist and the Covenant Theologian want to bring "the promise of Abraham and his seed" into the present age in a physical sense via the lineage of their physical children. They both insist that "the promise made to Abraham and his seed" is an "unconditional covenant" and is therefore still in effect for "physical seeds." The Dispensationalist naturalizes the seed to mean physical Israel, and the Paedobaptist naturalizes the seed to mean the physical children of believers. The Paedobaptist wants to make the Abrahamic covenant to be a special covenant with believers concerning the salvation of their physical children that is still in effect today. The Dispensationalist wants the same covenant to be a special covenant still in force with Jews concerning the land of Palestine. In the end, the Paedobaptist does exactly the same thing with "Abraham's seed" as the Dispensationalist does! He merely does it for a different purpose (Ibid, 94).

harmonizing Scripture”<sup>17</sup> and the very topic both Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism fail to interpret correctly.<sup>18</sup>

Like all the other first generation New Covenant theologians (and even Tom Wells), Reisinger develops the idea of the centrality of Christ, but chooses to do so through a fourfold presentation of Abraham’s seed. He states that “the true promise that God made, and the real inheritance of that promise, are given to Abraham as the father of Christ and not to Abraham as the father of the Jews or the Church.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, Abraham’s prominence, and consequently, the promises that were made to him, are related to God’s historical purpose in Christ.<sup>20</sup>

Reisinger also argues that Israel was central to the historical fulfillment of God’s purpose in history. As a nation, Israel entered into a “special” covenantal relationship with God at Sinai,<sup>21</sup> but this relationship was “finally nullified by God because of Israel’s

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, i.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 47; see also *ibid*, 5-6, 24-25, 94. Reisinger adds, “both of these systems use ‘the unconditional promise that God made to Abraham and his seed’ as a basic building block in their respective systems” (*Ibid*, 35-36).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>20</sup> The argument seems to be connecting Gal. 3:10 with Gen 3:15 and 22:1-19. Reisinger develops his ecclesiology in connection with a basic Christology influenced by a particular New Testament theology.

<sup>21</sup> Reisinger, *Abraham’s Four Seeds*, 28. Reisinger affirms this relationship was based on a “legal covenant,” namely, a covenant that “ministered grace as it effected the knowledge of sin and spiritual death in an Israelite’s heart and led him to faith in the gospel covenant given to Abraham.” Reisinger argues that the Israelites “did not need a rule of sanctification,” meaning they did not get one, but “a law covenant to kill their conceit and pride,” and that is exactly what God gave them (*Ibid*, 18). The covenant at

continual failure to keep the covenant.”<sup>22</sup> Such nullification of the Mosaic covenant and of Israel’s privileged position before God was brought about by Christ and by the inauguration of the New Covenant, and the promises made to Abraham are now property of the believers through Christ. This explanation allows Reisinger to continue Zens’ tradition not only in the distinction between the nature of the two covenants, but also in the supersession of the Mosaic covenant by the new.

One of the main arguments advanced by Reisinger is that both Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism fail to understand the Biblical portrait of Abraham’s seed throughout salvation history, and for that reason they develop theological systems based on erroneous presuppositions and principles. As suggested before, this is particularly true in the doctrine of the church.<sup>23</sup> Both systems handle the concept of Abraham’s seed in a similar fashion according to Reisinger, that is, they both naturalize it, though they do so for “different purpose[s]”.<sup>24</sup>

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Sinai was gracious in the sense that it was created after a strong relationship between God and his people.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Reisinger also argues that covenantal ecclesiology is based on an illegitimate typological method. He adds: “Their [covenant theologians] whole doctrine of the church is built on making a one-on-one comparison of Israel and the church” (*Abraham’s Four Seeds*, 72).

<sup>24</sup> See *ibid*, 94. This seems to suggest that the concept of covenant and the concept of community is closely related in all three hermeneutics/theologies.

Reisinger's analysis of Covenantal and Dispensational ecclesiology leads him to conclude that "Dispensationalism cannot get Israel and the church together in any sense whatsoever, and Covenant Theology cannot get them apart."<sup>25</sup> Reisinger adds:

The Dispensationalist naturalizes the seed to mean physical Israel, and the Paedobaptist naturalizes the seed to mean the physical children of believers. The Paedobaptist wants to make the Abrahamic covenant to be a special covenant with believers concerning the salvation of their physical children that is still in effect today. The Dispensationalist wants the same covenant to be a special covenant still in force with Jews concerning the land of Palestine. In the end, the Paedobaptist does exactly the same thing with "Abraham's seed" as the Dispensationalist does! He merely does it for a different purpose.<sup>26</sup>

This means that for dispensationalists, the Church could not be the remnant of the "Israel of God,"<sup>27</sup> and consequently, could not be the heir to "the promises that God made to Abraham and the fathers."<sup>28</sup> For covenantalists, however, it means that the church existed before Pentecost (thus avoiding the understanding of Israel and the Church as two separate entities). In doing so, Covenant Theology "totally loses the true

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 19. This sentence is commonly used by other New Covenant theologians. Again, the distinction between the Mosaic covenant and the new covenant is affirmed, but it is also intertwined with the Christ principle that springs from Reisinger's interpretation of Abraham's seed in order to provide both aspects of continuity and discontinuity (the dominating factor) in the interpretation of the relationship between *law* and *grace* as covenants.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 94

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 9, 19.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 19.

‘newness’ of the New Covenant,”<sup>29</sup> while Dispensationalist “totally loses the unity of the Scriptures and God’s single plan of redemption.”<sup>30</sup>

Reisinger emphasizes that the new nature of the new covenant is directly related with “a new and distinct work from that which He did in the Old Covenant.”<sup>31</sup> This seems to point out to the obvious distinction between the principles of “works and grace”<sup>32</sup> as demonstrated by each covenant respectively. Further, the New Covenant “replaced everything that the old covenant had brought into being.”<sup>33</sup> This new and distinct “work must be in direct response to the ascension of Christ to the Father’s right hand.”<sup>34</sup> The “ministry of the Spirit [that characterizes the new covenant era] is contingent upon the victorious ascension of Christ to David’s throne.”<sup>35</sup>

### **Fred Zaspel**

Though indebted to both Zens’ and Reisinger’s developments, Fred Zaspel establishes a different plan for theological developments concerning the new covenant. Zaspel starts by making a case for the covenant concept as the basic structural principle

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 94.

<sup>32</sup> Zaspel, *The New Covenant and New Covenant Theology*, 42.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 89.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 94.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.



for the arranging of salvation history.<sup>36</sup> Following Zens and Reisinger, Zaspel presents the covenants in the Bible as historical covenants leading to the culmination of God's purpose in history: the fulfilment of the divine promise centered in Christ.<sup>37</sup> Like Zens, Zaspel's development starts with the *Christ* principle, which proves to be a solid (and even Bible-based) background for both the critical and the constructive part of his contribution.

Zaspel, then, proceeds to analyze the Old Testament for evidence concerning the promise of the new covenant. From his analysis, he extracts three central elements that define/qualify the new covenant. The investigation on the new covenant demonstrate, in Zaspel's view, first and foremost a *pronounced Christocentricity*. Christ and his ministry is the person and principle through which the Law of Moses should be understood. As such, it is the new covenant that actually fulfills God's plans in history. The Biblical metanarrative is salvific in nature, having Christ as its conceptual center. This means that everything must be "filtered" through the information we have concerning Christ and his ministry.<sup>38</sup>

The second element establishes the priority of the New Covenant revelation over the old covenant revelation. This principle makes reference to the hermeneutical

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<sup>36</sup> Zaspel, *New Covenant and New Covenant Theology*, 1-4, 31. All others would agree with him, but he seems to be one of the first to clarify the centrality of this concept for a system.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 8-9. Zaspel argues for "the *unity* of God's purpose in human redemption" rather than the unity (meaning continuity) of the historical covenants. For more on this remark, see idem, "A Brief Explanation of 'New Covenant Theology'"

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 31.

relevance of the New Testament over the Old. Since divine revelation “has reached its zenith” with Christ (and the New Testament), it “surpasses” and even “replaces” the old revelation in authority.<sup>39</sup> This is clearly manifested in the general replacement of the old covenant with the new covenant, of the Law of Moses with the Law of Christ, and of the Jewish Sabbath with the rest manifested in Christ.<sup>40</sup>

The third element emphasizes “discontinuity between the old and new covenants.”<sup>41</sup> This principle establishes the uniqueness of the new covenant as a “new” covenant.<sup>42</sup> The failure of the old covenant, according to Zaspel, and its subsequent replacement for the new points toward a radical distinction between them.<sup>43</sup> He argues that the New Covenant is a “renewal” of both the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants, and at the same time an antithesis (literally, “a replacement”) of the Mosaic Covenant according to his understanding of Jeremiah 31, Galatians 3 and Hebrews 8.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 32; See also Fred Zaspel, “A Brief History of Divine Revelation,” in Tom Wells and Fred Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology: Description, Definition, Defense*, 35, 39.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 34-39. In fact, there is a common identification (in Zaspel and other New Covenant theologians) of the Old Covenant with the Decalogue as directly related, the latter being the summary and ethical basis for the former. See Fred Zaspel, “The Continuing Relevance of Divine Law,” in Wells and Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology*. 151-152.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 39.

<sup>42</sup> See Ibid, 40.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 40.

Zaspel presents several aspects that point to the new covenant as “replacement” rather than as a “renewal” of the Mosaic covenant.<sup>44</sup> One of them being the particular nature of each covenant. Both the Abrahamic covenant and the new covenant are *grant treaty* covenants in which God assumes all the responsibility for the existence and development of the covenant.<sup>45</sup> Yet, the Mosaic covenant is a conditional one in which the existence or preservation of the covenantal relationship depends on the obedience of the human party.<sup>46</sup> This difference is explained by Zaspel in the following words: “In simple terms, the old covenant was a works covenant; the new covenant is a grace covenant ... the difference between these covenants is the difference between works and grace. The new covenant is an explicit *gracious* covenant.”<sup>47</sup>

Zaspel affirms the law of God to be a moral code written in “man’s heart naturally.”<sup>48</sup> As such, this law “exists quite independently of Mosaic legislation.”<sup>49</sup> The Mosaic Law “is founded upon the law of God and [it] makes specific applications from it.”<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, he clarifies that the Law of God and the Law of Moses “are neither

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>48</sup> Fred Zaspel, “The Continuing Relevance of Divine Law,” in Wells and Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology*, 143.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 143-144. Zaspel further adds: “[The Mosaic Law] formally stated the principles of divine law and also gave specifics as to how those laws were to be carried out in that economy” (Ibid, 144).

identical nor altogether different,” and this because “the one formed the basis of the other and the second required more than the first.”<sup>51</sup>

When asked about the nature of the Old Covenant, Zaspel argues it was “very much performance oriented” in the light of passages such as Leviticus 26, Exodus 19:5, 18:5 and Deuteronomy 27:26, Romans 10:5; Galatians 3:10.<sup>52</sup> In other words, “the agreement was one of conditional blessing, and the obedience it required was absolute and allowed no exception.”<sup>53</sup>

### **Tom Wells**

Tom Wells has also made several contributions to the movement. The two most outstanding ones are *The Priority of Jesus Christ*,<sup>54</sup> and *New Covenant Theology* (which he coauthored with Fred Zaspel). Wells explores the concept of the primacy of Jesus and its implications for hermeneutical, theological and ethical<sup>55</sup> endeavors. One of his intentions is to clarify the *meaning* of the priority of Christ, as, presumably, proposed by New Covenant Theology.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 144; see also Ibid, 149.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 145.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 147.

<sup>54</sup> Tom Wells, *The Priority of Jesus Christ* (Frederick, MD, New Covenant, 2005).

<sup>55</sup> Tom Wells, “The Cristian Appeal of a New Covenant,” in Wells and Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology*, 8. Here Wells describes how there is a difference in the way the Old and New covenants relate to war. He argues that, if we give the Old Testament logical priority, then we would be forced to condone or practice war.

<sup>56</sup> See Fred Zaspel, review of *The Priority of Jesus Christ*, by Tom Wells (Frederick, MD: New Covenant, 2005), *Hope’s Reason: A Journal of Apologetics* 2, No.

Both hermeneutically and theologically, Wells favors the priority of the New Testament data over the Old against a diachronic approach to the canon.<sup>57</sup> He argues that those who do otherwise “are, however, taking a stance that would have put off their own conversion to Christ and, hence, a vital knowledge of the very God they sought to know.”<sup>58</sup> As a source of revealed knowledge concerning God’s character, “the Old Testament is demonstrably the best [in relation to conscience and nature], but all must take second place to the Lord Jesus.”<sup>59</sup> Wells extends Christ’s priority to include the New Testament, since “the New Testament writers, generally speaking, give evidence

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1 (2011): 72-73. I agree with Zaspel’s evaluation of the Tom Well’s theological agenda as “commendable and his primary thesis necessary,” yet I disagree with Wells’ implementation of his Christological principle in the interpretation on the relationship between the Testaments. I will argue in the following chapter that there is a better way to develop a Christotelic hermeneutic than that presented by New Covenant Theology so far.

<sup>57</sup> Tom Wells, “The Cristian Appeal of a New Covenant,” in Wells and Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology*, 7. Furthermore, Wells adds: “the NT [sic] holds logical priority over the rest [of Scripture] in determining theological questions upon which it speaks” (Wells, “The Christian Appeal of a New Covenant,” in *Ibid*, 8).

<sup>58</sup> Wells, *The Priority of Jesus Christ*, 9. As it relates to salvation, Wells argues, “to be saved [in this messianic age], one must come to God as he is revealed in Jesus Christ” (*Ibid*, 10). Furthermore, Well points out that the God portrayed in the Old Testament is the same God portrayed in the New Testament (*Ibid.*, 45), and the proper response to him is, and always has been “faith, confidence and trust” (*Ibid.*, 45). Nevertheless, in the New Testament, the idea of “faith in the Lord Jesus Christ” is developed (*Ibid.*, 45). It could be argued, however, whether this was not a soteriological requirement in the Old Covenant regardless of the explicitness of the theme as found in the New Testament.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 12. He further adds, “in this age, the revelation of God and his redemptive program is found in Jesus Christ. What is God like? We must look to Jesus for the answer” (*Ibid*, 17).

that...they think of themselves as speaking in the place of Christ.”<sup>60</sup> So, the priority of Jesus means primarily a conscious attempt to look for knowledge of God and Christian ethics in the New Testament before going anywhere else in the Bible.

Wells advances the idea of the priority of Jesus as portrayed in the New Testament as a package deal revealing the *newness* of God’s salvific acts in history. This *newness*, like the Mosaic age before, encompasses a new age, a new covenant, a new law, a new revelation. In this new age, Jesus “is both the subject and spokesman [...] Prior to anything else, we must hear him.”<sup>61</sup> On the practical application of this principle, Wells adds, “we must not create problem texts in the New Testament by giving the Old Testament logical priority. On the contrary, we must read the Old in the light of the New, so that the Lord Jesus has the first and the last word.”<sup>62</sup>

Wells’ understanding of Biblical ethics is one of covenantal bond, where moral norms given under a particular covenant are only are binding on the people that are under that covenant, and this is particularly true for Mosaic Law. In other words, “the Mosaic Law code was covenantal, meaning, it was given to govern the nation of Israel under the Old or Mosaic Covenant.”<sup>63</sup> As a consequence, “no part of that [Mosaic] law can bind Christians, since that covenant is not their covenant,”<sup>64</sup> even though there are parts of

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 39.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 71.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 75.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 75.

such a law “that we must obey.”<sup>65</sup> For a Mosaic law to be binding in the New Covenant, there should be a particular validation of such a law, either by Jesus or by any of the New Testament authors.<sup>66</sup> There is, however, a possibility for the validation of the Ten Commandments in Wells’ thought:

I want to say as plainly as possible that a person may adopt the position for which I contend and still wind up believing that the Ten Commandments are God’s moral Law. If they conclude it on the basis that they believe the Lord Jesus teaches it in the New Testament, they will have adopted the principle for which I am contending [namely, the logical priority of Christ and the New Testament as a revelation of/from Him].<sup>67</sup>

Like Zaspel, Wells classifies the nature of Mosaic Law differently than New Covenant law. For him, the former set of laws was directed towards “outward performance,” while the latter was “address[ed] to the heart.”<sup>68</sup> This is also the basic

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 76.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 82. There is a possibility that this validation could be implicit, but there should be enough New Covenant evidence to validate it. In Wells’ words: “Are the Ten Commandments *the* moral law? Perhaps they are, but the Lord Jesus must tell us. The answer can only be “obvious” when he makes it so” (Ibid). The fact that all New Testament writers are to be considered as speaking in the name of Christ, see Ibid, 132-135. This is a hermeneutical-ethical guide for the evaluation of an Old Covenant law as binding on Christians. The alternative to this key for the validation of Covenant law states that all laws that are not clearly abrogated in the New Covenant are still binding on Christians.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 85-86.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 103. Further,

The presence or absence of regeneration affects the kinds of laws that men can obey... [the hardness pointed out by Jesus in Matt. 19:8 concerning the people under the Old Covenant] was their lack of spiritual life or regeneration. When we come to the New Testament, we leave this problem behind (Ibid, 139).

Wells suggests one of the main purposes of Mosaic Law was to maintain order among the congregation of Israel to preserve “society for many generations.” He adds: “This maintenance of society was one important function of Mosaic Law, and in that it

difference found between Old Testament and New Testament ethics. He notes: “to the writers of the New Testament, the New Covenant era and the priority of the Lord Jesus are two truths that belong together, each complementing the other.”<sup>69</sup> I believe this statement fairly summarizes the basic tenants of first generation New Covenant theology, presenting the heart and mind of the movement.

Wells considers the transformation of character to the likeness of Christ as the main goal of life.<sup>70</sup> And since Jesus is the image of God, and thus the best revelation of God’s character,<sup>71</sup> Christians should take Jesus’ “display [of the divine] as a command ... from Christ to be like him.”<sup>72</sup> They should also consider His implicit (moral indicative, namely, the “descriptions of Christian character”<sup>73</sup>) and explicit demands, as well as the moral demands (presumably implicit or explicit) made by the Apostles as Christ’ “agents”<sup>74</sup> as binding law.

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succeeded. For that reason (to mention one), Paul pronounces it ‘holy, righteous and good’ (Romans 7:12).”

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 117.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 127.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 126-127.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 127. Wells adds: “the indicatives (what a Christian is) are accurate enough, but they are not the whole story He must also become what he is, by moral effort. Jesus and Paul agree: this is law from Christ for the Christian’s life” (Ibid, 130). By using “moral effort” terminology, Wells is able to connote the idea of *works of righteousness* without *salvation-by-works* connotation.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 132.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 137.



To supplement the clarification of the neocovenantal theological scheme, it is necessary to compare it and contrast it with those of Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism. Such an attempt will demonstrate how these systems develop from similar interpretations of *law* and *grace*, and how they diverge into completely independent hermeneutical and theological systems. The following section will be focused on the relationship between neocovenantal and covenantal hermeneutics.

### **Neocovenantal and Covenantal Hermeneutics**

Covenant Theology is directly responsible for the centrality of the redemptive-historical hermeneutics in modern Christian theology. As Goldworthy points out, “it was the emergence of covenant theology within the federal theology of men like Cocceius in the seventeenth century that really established salvation history in Protestant theology.”<sup>75</sup> This is the kind of hermeneutics that is found in the *Westminster Confessions*,<sup>76</sup> and it is usually referred to as “*salvation history* or *history of redemption* or *history of salvation*.” Like in New Covenant Theology, the covenant concept serves as the structural basis for Covenant Theology’s hermeneutical and theological framework. Also, in both systems, the redemptive-historical approach to hermeneutics recognizes some degree of covenantal progression. Yet, in contrast to New Covenant Theology, Covenant Theology’s tricovenantal framework is not directly derived from Biblical covenants.

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<sup>75</sup> Graeme Goldworthy, *Christ-Centered Biblical Theology: Hermeneutical Foundations and Principles* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012), 57.

<sup>76</sup> William D. Denninson, “The Redemptive-Historical Hermeneutics and Preaching,” *Kerux – The Journal of Northwest Theological Seminary* 21, No. 1 (May 2006): 11-39.

Rather, they are derived from theological constructs that are subsequently applied to the major Biblical covenants.<sup>77</sup>

Covenant Theology is commonly referred to as *federalism* due to “its emphasis on solidarity in a representative head,”<sup>78</sup> an idea that is highlighted in the covenant of creation (also called covenant of works). This covenant is based upon a conditionality that “presupposes a righteous and holy human servant entirely capable of fulfilling the stipulation of God’s law.”<sup>79</sup> Simply put, it “promises blessing on the basis of obedience and curse upon transgression.”<sup>80</sup> The multifaceted importance of the covenant of works is shown when related to the so-called covenant of grace. As Geerhardus Vos puts it,

It was merely the other side of the doctrine of the covenant of works that was seen when the rank of the Mediator was also placed in this light. A *Pactum Salutis*, a Counsel of Peace, a Covenant of Redemption, could then be spoken of. There are two alternatives: one must either deny the covenant arrangement as a general rule for obtaining eternal life, or granting the latter, he must also regard the gaining of eternal life by the Mediator as a covenant arrangement and place the establishing of a covenant in back of it. Thus it also becomes clear how a denial of the covenant of

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<sup>77</sup> Nevertheless, Reformed theologians seem to view these major covenants as Biblical in the sense that they emerge from the data of Scripture. As Michael Horton suggests in *Introducing Covenant Theology*, 78:

A broad consensus emerged in his Reformed (federal) theology with respect to the existence in Scripture of three distinct covenants: the covenant of redemption (*pactum salutis*), the covenant of creation (*foederus naturae*), and the covenant of grace (*foederus gratiae*)

<sup>78</sup> Horton, *Introducing Covenant Theology*, 11.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 83

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* Horton further suggests the conditionality of the “works-principle [is] explicitly set forth in the Sinai Covenant,” (*Ibid.*, 21). Among the blessings promised in this covenant is eternal life. As such, it suggests a pre-fall soteriological category that might be connected with the ideas of divine sovereignty and predestination.

works sometimes goes hand in hand with a lack of appreciation for the counsel of peace.<sup>81</sup>

Vos' declaration clarifies how the covenant of works and the covenant of grace relate to each other interdependently in Covenant Theology. It is precisely this conditional nature of the covenant of works that made necessary, under the circumstances of the corporative fall of humanity (and so forth), the installment of another covenant, i.e. the covenant of grace. Further commenting on the nature of these covenants and their relationship to each other, Michael Horton adds:

By no means are these distinct covenant (redemption, creation, grace) to be seen in chronological terms. This is the tendency of approaches in which the Old Testament is identified as "law" and the New Testament as "gospel." Nor are the principles of "law" and "promises"—when applied either to the original covenant of creation or its republication at Sinai—to be given merely negative and positive connotations, respectively, as if they are static categories of damnation and justification. In creation (and in the institution of the theocracy at Sinai), law as the basis for the divine-human relationship is wholly positive. In fact, this republication of the law is itself *gracious* even if the principle of the two covenants (works and grace) fundamentally differs.<sup>82</sup>

This historical dynamic between the two Covenants, the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace, could be summarized as follows: the Mosaic Covenant is the covenant of grace in preparation, while the new covenant is the covenant of grace in fulfilment.<sup>83</sup> This dynamic further explains the difference between the historical-

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<sup>81</sup> Geerhardus Vos, *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 245.

<sup>82</sup> Horton, *Introducing Covenant Theology*, 88.

<sup>83</sup> See C. K. Campbell, *God's Covenant* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 23-62; see also J. Oliver Buswell, *Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1962), 307:

The theological system which rests upon the conception that before the fall, man was under the Covenant of Works, wherein God promised him (through Adam, the federal

redemptive approaches employed by New Covenant Theology and Covenant Theology. While in Covenant Theology the covenant of works and the covenant of grace are also designated by the protestant concepts of law and grace, in New Covenant Theology, however, the ideas behind the covenant of works and the covenant of grace are somewhat preserved, yet the structural categories are lost in favor of a more literal-grammatical approach to Biblical covenantalism.<sup>84</sup>

The definition of redemptive history in New Covenant Theology is considerably similar to that of Covenant Theology. Gary Long, for instance, defines redemptive history as “the Biblical record of the progressive outworking of God’s acts in history or brining to realization on earth his plan of Salvation.”<sup>85</sup> Richard Gaffin, suggests that

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head of the race) eternal blessedness if he perfectly kept the law; and that since the fall man is under a Covenant of Grace, wherein God, of His free grace, promises the same blessings to all who believe in Christ (the federal head of the Church).

<sup>84</sup> New Covenant Theology finds the use of explicit Biblical language to be essential in the task of doing descriptive and constructive theology. This is especially true when concerning the covenant concept. This is one of the arguments New Covenant theologians use against the three-covenantal framework of Covenant Theology. See, for instance, White, *What is New Covenant Theology? An Introduction*, 6; Gary D. Long, *New Covenant Theology*, 106-108; Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology: Questions Answered*, 37; John Reisinger, *Abraham’s Four Seeds*, 20, 45-46.

<sup>85</sup> Gary D. Long, *Context! Evangelical Views on the Millennium Examined* (North Charleston, SC: BookSurge, 2002), 316. As Benbrooks (“An Analysis of the Seed of Abraham in New Covenant Theology,” 93) points out, there are similarities between New Covenant Theology’s definition of salvation history and that of Covenant Theology. Offering a definition from the side of Covenant Theology, Gerhardus Vos writes: “It has to do with the pattern of decisive divine activity...by which God is exercising his lordship over the whole of history in the interest of accomplishing his eternal purpose for the entire creation” (*Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. Richard B. Gaffin [Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2012-2014], 1:xxi). Yung Hoon Hyun puts it, “the history of the Triune God’s redemption of His people and the created world through His Son Jesus Christ, which was revealed in the Scriptures and fulfilled in space and time, but is to be fully accomplished at the end time” (idem, *Redemptive-Historical Hermeneutics and Homiletics: Debates in Holland, America, and Korea from 1930 to 2012*, WEST Theological Monograph Series

redemptive-historical interpretation could be seen as a “covenant-historical” (or covenant-conditioned) hermeneutics,<sup>86</sup> and calls it “biblical-theological exegesis.”<sup>87</sup> As such, the redemptive historical hermeneutics of New Covenant Theology is directly concerned with the exegetical task rather than with theology,<sup>88</sup> yet it assumes several presuppositions from it: 1) divine self-revelation, 2) revelation as a historically-, culturally- and linguistically-conditioned process, 3) an interpretation of the divine self-revelation in history.<sup>89</sup>

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[Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015], 5); see also Denninson, “The Redemptive-Historical Hermeneutics and Preaching,” 11-39.

<sup>86</sup> Gaffin, “The Vitality of Reformed Dogmatics,” in *Vitality of Reformed Theology: Proceedings of the International Theological Congress June 20-24<sup>th</sup> 1994*, 25-26.

<sup>87</sup> Gaffin Jr., “Redemption and Resurrection,” 230, 245.

<sup>88</sup> See Denninson, “The Redemptive-Historical Hermeneutics and Preaching.”

<sup>89</sup> Both New Covenant and Covenant theologians will agree with these points, and even call the last one proper “Biblical Theology.” (see Gerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 23: “Biblical Theology is that branch of Exegetical Theology which deals with the process of the self-revelation of God.” Also in “The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Interpretation,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1980), 15: “Biblical Theology, rightly defined, is nothing else than the exhibition of the organic progress of supernatural revelation in its historic continuity and multiformity;” Benjamin B. Warfield, “The Idea of Systematic Theology,” in *Inauguration of the Rev. Benjamin B. Warfield, D.D., as Professor of Didactic and Polemic Theology*, Princeton Theological Seminary [New York, NY: Anson D. F. Randolph & Company, 1888], 25:

The task of biblical theology, in a word, is the task of co-ordinating [sic] the scattered results of continuous exegesis into a concatenated whole... [Its chief objective] is to reproduce the theological thought of each writer or group of writers in the form in which it lay in their own minds, so that we may be enabled to look at all their theological statements at their angle, and to understand all their deliverances as modified and conditioned by their own point of view.

As previously mentioned, New Covenant Theology insist that Christ is the center of salvation history, thus justifying the hermeneutical, theological and ethical priority of Christ and the New Testament.<sup>90</sup> While in New Covenant Theology the Christ principle guides and informs the Biblical-historical covenants of Moses and the New,<sup>91</sup> in Covenant Theology the macrostructural principle that gives meaning and cohesion to both the covenant of works and the covenant grace is the covenant of redemption (also

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See also idem, “Century’s Progress in Biblical Knowledge,” in *The Homiletic Review* 39, No. 3 (March, 1900): 202: “[Biblical Theology makes] known to us the revelation of God genetically—that is, by laying it before us in the stages of its growth and its several stadia of development.” Such “stages of growth” also demonstrate “maturity” of the “counsel of the Most High,” i.e. God’s self-revelation in Scriptures (ibid.); Richard B. Gaffin Jr., “The Vitality of Reformed Dogmatics,” in the *Vitality of Reformed Theology: Proceedings of the International Theological Congress June 20-24<sup>th</sup> 1994, Noordwijkerhout, The Netherlands*, eds. J. M. Batteae, J. W. Maris and K. Veling [Kampen: Uitgeverij Kok, 1994], 25-26; idem, “The Redemptive-Historical View,” in *Biblical Hermeneutics: Five Views*, eds. Stanley E. Porter, Beth M. Stovell [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012], 89-98).

<sup>90</sup> Wells, *The Priority of Jesus Christ*, 105; cf. Benbrooks, “The Seed of Abraham in New Covenant Theology,” 100. Benbrooks states that

[Reisinger, Lehrer and Zaspel] may take a slightly different approach [concerning Israel’s future] at times during their writings; however, all believe that the unity of Scripture is centered in Christ and redemptive history (idem, “The Seed of Abraham in New Covenant Theology,” 104; see also 161).

<sup>91</sup> Gary D. Long, *Context! Evangelical Views on the Millennium Examined* (North Charleston, SC: BookSurge, 2002), 316:

Since redemptive history has its fulfillment in the person and work of Christ, biblical theology must be based upon a Christ-centered interpretation of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. It must be based upon the way in which the New Testament interprets the Old and the priority of clear over unclear texts. The principle of interpretation that the risen Christ sets forth in the gospel of Luke for the Emmaus disciples must become ours. Christ’s redemptive exposition “in all the Scriptures” of “the things concerning Himself” must become the pattern for our understanding of Moses and all the prophets (Luke 24:27). The difficulty arises in how to go about developing this pattern of biblical theology.

called the covenant of grace). As Matthew Stamper explains, “this covenant does entail [...] the totality of God’s plan of redemption that covers all of human history, both before the Fall and until Christ’s second advent.”<sup>92</sup> The covenant of redemption suggests a pact among the persons of the Trinity to save the elect through “the son as their mediator to be brought to saving faith through the Spirit.”<sup>93</sup> It “underscore[s]” both “God’s sovereignty and freedom in electing grace” and “the Trinitarian and, specifically, Christ-centered character of that divine purpose.”<sup>94</sup>

Now that I have compared and contrasted the basic features of New Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism, I will move to delimit New Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism in relation to each other in search for a better understanding of the overall theological and hermeneutical presentation of the neocovenantal paradigm. This will take place in the following section.

### **Neocovenantal and Dispensational Hermeneutics**

Dispensationalism came to fruition in the nineteenth century, “in a time when much orthodox theology, and particularly systematic theology, did not bring to the fore

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<sup>92</sup> Matthew Stamper, *Covenantal Dispensationalism: An Examination of the Similarities and Differences Between Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism* (Bloomington, IN: WestBow, 2010), 43.

<sup>93</sup> Horton, 78.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid*, 80. Horton argues the concept of the covenant of redemption is undisputable if “the doctrine of the Trinity and unconditional election” are held (*Ibid*, 79).

enough the historical and progressive character of Biblical revelation.”<sup>95</sup> As such, dispensationalism appears as a hermeneutic within the historical-redemptive paradigm that seeks to be true to the nature and phenomena of Biblical revelation, especially against Covenant Theology. It has been suggested elsewhere that this theological-hermeneutical system should be better called “‘Darbyism’ (after its first proponent), ‘dual destinationism’ (after one of its principal tenets concerning the separate destinies of Israel and the church), or ‘addressee bifurcationism’ (after the principle of hermeneutical separation between meaning for Israel and significance for the church).”<sup>96</sup> I chose the classic term “dispensationalism” because it is widely used, whether rightfully or not, in theological circles.

John Nelson Darby is generally considered to be the father of the movement. In United States, however, it was popularized by Cyrus Ingerson Scofield through the dissemination of his Reference Bible.<sup>97</sup> In essence, Dispensationalism claims a distinction between God’s dealings with Israel and the church in salvation history. It argues that “throughout the ages God is pursuing two distinctive purposes: one related to the earth with earthly people and earthly objectives involved while the other is related to heaven with heavenly people and heavenly objectives involved.”<sup>98</sup> This distinction, that

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<sup>95</sup> Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalism*, 14

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

<sup>98</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, “Dispensationalism,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 93 (October 1936): 448. The same point is made by Poythress in *Understanding Dispensationalism*, 9:

What these men [Lewis Sperry Chafer, Charles L. Feinberg, Arno C. Gaebelein, J. Dwight Pentecost, Charles C. Ryrie, and John F. Walvoord, following J. N. Darby



of Israel and the church, is the apex of dispensational hermeneutics. Poythress points out that, for Darby, this distinction was “primarily a ‘vertical,’ static distinction between heaven and earth and between two people inhabiting the two realms.”<sup>99</sup> This distinction is also related to law and grace.<sup>100</sup>

Second to the distinction between Israel and the church, a literal interpretation is essential to Dispensational hermeneutics.<sup>101</sup> In fact, there is a clear relationship between the literal interpretation and the distinction between Israel and the church.<sup>102</sup> Poythress

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and C. I. Scofield] primarily have in common is a particular view of the parallel-but-separate roles and destinies of Israel and the church.

And again, while talking about Scofield’s theology-hermeneutics: “the more fundamental element in Scofield’s approach is his distinction between Israel and the church” (Ibid, 22)

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 16. He continues his assertion by saying:

He did not entertain the possibility that the difference was primarily a historical one, a “horizontal” one, between the language of promise, couched in earthly typological terms, and the language of fulfillment, couched in terms of final reality, the reality of God’s presence, the coming of heaven to human beings in Jesus Christ (Ibid, 16).

Poythress believes the distinction between Israel and the church came from Darby’s inability to foresee the “changes involved in the historical progression from promise to fulfilment” (Ibid, 17). This lack of reckoning forced him “into an untenable ‘vertical’ dualism between the parallel destinies of two people of God” (Ibid, 17); see also John Nelson Darby, *The Collected Writings*, ed. William Kelly (London, UK: G. Morrish, 1867-83; reprint, Oak Park, IL: Bible Truth Publishers, 1971-72), 2:35.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 16: “[In Darby’s view] Israel and the church are as different as heaven and earth, law and grace.”

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 9: “Accompanying this view is a particular hermeneutical stance in which careful distinction is made between what is addressed to Israel and what is addressed to the church.”

<sup>102</sup> Poythress claims that dispensationalists

Insist, however, upon a rigid application of an exact literal interpretation, particularly as it has to do with Israel and the church. They insist on an unconditional literal

argues that “[at least in Scofield’s hermeneutics] the dualism of Israel and the church is, in fact, the deeper dualism determining when and where the hermeneutical dualism of ‘literal’ and ‘spiritual’ is applied.”<sup>103</sup> Dispensationalism’s “rigid literalism” rejects the concept of a “spiritual Israel” that heirs Israel’s promises.<sup>104</sup> And it is precisely here that Dispensationalist diverge from covenantalism. Dispensationalist argue that covenant theologians read “the NT [sic] into the OT [sic] and thus denying progressive revelation,”<sup>105</sup> thus “embracing a dual hermeneutic [supposedly both allegorical and

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fulfillment of all prophetic promises, failing to realize that by its very nature prophetic utterances are sometimes allegorical or symbolic (Ibid, 22).

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 24; the same seems to be argued by Bass, in *Backgrounds*, 22, when saying:

Dispensationalists insist, however, upon a rigid application of an exact literal interpretation, particularly as it has to do with Israel and the church. They insist on an unconditional literal fulfillment of all prophetic promises failing to realize that by its very nature prophetic utterances are sometimes allegorical or symbolic.

Nevertheless, later he writes:

Out of such literalness comes a dichotomy between Israel and the church, so that there exists no parallel between the two. The universal and mediatorial kingdom are two distinct entities; and the whole pattern of dispensational division follows (Ibid, 23).

I believe the second statement should be interpreted in light of the first, thus suggesting that Bass believes the literal hermeneutics is the result, the application even, of the distinction between Israel and the church. What is clear, however, is that both Poythress and Bass seem to understand that the literal hermeneutics dispensationalists employ is directly connected (justified, or based, in the case of Poythress) to the distinction between Israel and the church; See also Darby, *The Collected Writings*, 2:35.

<sup>104</sup> Bass, *Background*, 18.

<sup>105</sup> Jeremy Thomas, “A Comparison of Classic Dispensationalism, Covenant Theology, and Progressive Dispensationalism,” <http://www.oocities.org/jeremyandrobin/systemsoftheology.htm> (accessed December 30,

literal] inconsistent with the literal method.”<sup>106</sup> This dualistic hermeneutic covenant theologians supposedly employ generates ethical confusion, argue the dispensationalists.

As Fuller puts it,

But dispensationalism, Walvoord affirms [Fuller is quoting John E. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Findlay, Ohio: The Dunham Publishing Company, 1959), 81-91], with its emphasis that the Church and Israel are always distinct, avoids the legalistic error to which covenant theology exposes the Church. By quarantining the Church from God’s dealings with Israel in the Mosaic era and the future millennial era, he believes that dispensationalism, rather than covenant theology, can be protect the Church from the lethal virus of legalism and Galatianism which (apparently) is central to God’s dealing with Israel in the dispensations bracketing the Church age.<sup>107</sup>

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2015). This point is also made by Charles L. Feinberg, *Millennialism: The Two Major Views* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1980), 79.

<sup>106</sup> Thomas, “A Comparison of Classic Dispensationalism, Covenant Theology, and Progressive Dispensationalism.”

<sup>107</sup> Fuller, *Gospel and Law*, 48-49. Against Walvoord, Fuller (Ibid, 49) asks:

But how can Walvoord regard God’s dealings with Israel as “essentially legal and nongracious,” when the *New Scofield Bible’s* revision committee, of which he was a member, affirmed that in both the Mosaic and kingdom dispensations salvation was by faith in the gracious part of the revelations comprising the test for those dispensations? And how can he talk of “the great contrast between the legalism as found in the Mosaic dispensation and grace as revealed in the present age,” when the *New Scofield Bible* declares that law is part of the revelation of the Church age, because the legal revelation both in the age of conscience and in the Mosaic law is not discarded but is cumulatively part of the deposit of truth that confronts men now? When the *New Scofield Bible* makes such affirmation, and when Charles C. Ryrie in saying that “there are *many*” other tests [besides those which save] in *every* dispensation” (Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* [Chicago, IL: Moody, 1965], 125, italics added), is stating that there is a legal revelation *to* (and not just “for”) the present Church age, then all efforts to quarantine the Church from the legalism of other dispensation is futile. The virus of legal revelation is now as much in the isolation ward for the Church as it is for the wards of the Mosaic and kingdom ages. If the Church was put in the isolation ward to keep it away from such a virus, and now this virus is in the isolation ward, the great reason for placing the Church into that ward no longer exists.

For covenant theology, however, the dispensational error lies precisely in the compartmentalization of the Scriptures. This compartmentalizing justifies not only the Israel and the church, but also “those Scriptures relating to Israel and those relating to the Church,”<sup>108</sup> which in turn validates the Protestant heritage of the law/grace dichotomy. In other words, Dispensationalists “are convinced that covenant theology is unable to keep law and grace separate because it insists on maintaining a continuity between God’s dealings with Israel and the Church.”<sup>109</sup> Fuller argues covenant theology “in insisting with continuity [between God’s dealing with Israel and with the Church], must mix the law, *which characterizes God’s dealings with Israel*, with the message of grace and the gospel, *which is a unique characteristic of God’s dealings with the Church*.”<sup>110</sup>

The covenant concept also plays an important role in dispensational hermeneutics. Dispensationalist believe that the “principle of covenantal relationship clearly divides between Israel and the church as to their relation to God.”<sup>111</sup> Furthermore, Bass argues that “it lays the groundwork for the dispensationalist concept of the church as being parenthetical to God’s ongoing purposes for mankind.”<sup>112</sup> The same is argued by Darby

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Bass, *Backgrounds* 26.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

when saying: "...I believe it to be the one true Scriptural ground of the church."<sup>113</sup> The covenant concept, together with the law-grace distinction, work as foundational principles for the distinction between Israel and the church.<sup>114</sup> By employing this concept, dispensationalists separate the revelation of God at Sinai from the revelation of God in Christ in a way that allows them to set two distinctive models for divine operation. In other words, dispensationalists (like New Covenant theologians) characterize the nature of the Mosaic covenant as a legal covenant, which is another point of conflict between covenantalists and dispensationalists.<sup>115</sup> As Oswald T. Allis wrote in the second quarter of the twentieth century:

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<sup>113</sup> John N. Darby, *Letters of J. N. D.* (London, UK: G. Morrish Publishers, 1917; reprint, London, UK: Stow Hill Bible & Track Depot, n.d., 1970) 1: 343.

<sup>114</sup> In *Background*, 30, Bass suggests that both the literal hermeneutics and the covenant concept serve as grounds for the distinction between Israel and the church. I believe the covenant concept is used by dispensationalist to further clarify the law/grace dichotomy, and that literalism is used as a development springing from both principles. On page 25, Bass writes:

Herein lies another distinguishing feature of dispensationalism: that the whole of God's redemptive relation to man is centered in His covenantal relation to Israel. The implications of this division of God's redemptive relations are apparent: Israel as a nation is related to God by one principle (the unconditional covenant), while the church, as the body of Christ, is related to Him by an entirely different principle. *The covenant is the key to the interpretation of all God's purposes in history...* (Italics added).

<sup>115</sup> It should be clarified that both dispensationalists and neocovenantalists believe the Mosaic covenant (not only the theological concept of the covenant of works) to be a legal covenant. Covenantalists, however, argue about the Mosaic covenant as a promissory covenant of grace, which allows them to retain certain characteristics of a legal covenant while still being able to interpret the covenant as a gracious one. There are those covenantalists, however, who take a more aggressive stand on the topic by affirming that the Mosaic covenant is a "republication," at least to some extent, of the covenant of works made with Adam before the fall. See, for instance Bryan D. Estele, John V. Fesko and David VanDrunen, eds., *The Law is Not Faith: Essays on Works and Grace in the Mosaic Covenant* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2009). These

the fundamental error in the attitude toward the Sinaitic covenant which is shown in the Scofield Bible is the failure to distinguish between the law as a covenant of works and the law as a ministration or dispensation in the covenant of grace, in other words in the failure to recognize that the Sinaitic covenant belongs to the covenant of grace.<sup>116</sup>

The characterization of the Mosaic covenant as a legal covenant forces dispensationalism into an unwarranted (in the best case) polarization of soteriological

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authors argue that by making obedience to the legal requirements of the covenant the condition for the “inheritance” and the “continuance within” Canaan, Moses was revalidating the “works principle” stated in the Garden of Eden, and that by doing so his covenant pointed toward a covenant mediator/substitute that would secure eternal life for “all who are members of the covenant of grace” (Cornelis P. Venema, “The Mosaic Covenant: A Republication of the Covenant of Works? A review Article: The Law is not Faith: Essays on Works and Grace in the Mosaic Covenant,” *Mid-American Journal of Theology* 21 [2010]: 35-101; see also Mark W. Karlberg, “Republication: A Doctrinal Controversy Four Decades in the Making” *The Aquila Report* [Blog], September 4, 2014, <http://theaquilareport.com/republication-a-doctrinal-controversy-four-decades-in-the-making/> [accessed January 27, 2016]; R. Scott Clark, “The Context of the Republication Debate: Why is Such an Old Doctrine So Controversial Now,” *The Heidelblog* [Blog], February 1, 2013, <http://heidelblog.net/2013/02/the-context-of-the-repu/> [accessed January 27, 2016]; Jeon Koo Jeon, *Covenant Theology: John Murray's and Meredith G. Kline's Response to the Historical Development of Federal Theology in Reformed Thought* [Laham, MD: University Press of America, 2004]). The topic of republication will be carefully considered in chapters 4 and 5.

<sup>116</sup> Oswald T. Allis, “Modern Dispensationalism and the Law of God,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 8 (July 1936): 280. In Allis’ understanding, this covenant of grace is rather the gracious way in which God relates to humans after the fall. In this sense, it seems necessary to clarify that after the fall, every covenant that God made with humankind is based upon the clear note of a gracious offering for the redemption of humankind (Genesis 3:15); similarly, Fuller, in *Gospel and Law*, 21 asserts:

Although the legal element demanding meritorious works prevailed in the Old Testament, and although it continues to be heard in the New Testament, Hodge still confidently affirmed that “we learn that the plan of salvation has always been one and same; having the same promise, the same Savior, the same condition, and the same salvation [Quoting Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, (New York, NY: Charles Scribner and Company, 1871-1873; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1940), 2:368].

systems. This has been clearly pointed out by Fuller.<sup>117</sup> Chafer writes, for instance, that the nature itself of different covenants (whether “lacking” or “imposing” imperatives) serve as a catalyst for the determination of the destiny of any human being:

whatever God does for sinful man on any terms whatsoever, being made possible through the death of Christ, is, to that extent, an act of divine grace; for whatever God does on the ground of Christ’s death is gracious in character, and all will agree that a divine covenant which is void of all human elements is more gracious in character than one which is otherwise.... On the human side ... the human requirements which the divine covenant imposes may be either absolutely lacking, or so drastically imposed as to determine the destiny of the individual.<sup>118</sup>

And again, in *Systematic Theology*:

The law stands as the representation of the merit system—that divine arrangement which, according to the New Testament, is held as the antipodes of God’s plan of

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<sup>117</sup> Fuller, *Gospel and Law*, 21:

Chafer’s statements [in *Systematic Theology*, Reprint ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1940), 2:117: “The Scriptures know nothing of any other than two methods of attaining eternal life: on the one which demands perfect obedience, and the other which demands faith”] in make it clear that, depending on the dispensational period out of which a biblical book was speaking, there were two ways of salvation set forth in Scripture. For the Jew under the Mosaic dispensation, salvation came by trying to keep the law and by faithfully offering sacrifices; for the Christian under grace, salvation is simply by faith in Christ’s finished work.

<sup>118</sup> Chafer, “Dispensationalism,” 430. Fuller argues that “according to this statement, even where human requirements are “drastically imposed” (as in the Mosaic and kingdom dispensations), salvation was available only because Christ died. But this emphasis on “human requirements” that are “drastically imposed” in some dispensations was what the Southern Presbyterians were objecting to” when, according to Fuller, “in the preamble to the final recommendation, it was stated that President Chafer taught “a dispensational view of God’s various and divergent plans of salvation for various groups in various ages” (Fuller, *Gospel & Law*, 30, quoting *Minutes of the Eighty-Fourth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, 1944* [Richmond, Virginia: Presbyterian Committee for Publication, 1944], as quoted by L. S. Chafer, “Dispensational Distinctions Denounced,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 101 [July 1944], 259).

salvation by grace. Beyond the one truth that both systems are ordained of God for application in such ages as He may elect, they set up contrast at every point.<sup>119</sup>

Chafer's understanding of the relationship between law and grace explains (according to Fuller)<sup>120</sup> why John W. Bowman claims dispensationalist are "left with two methods of salvation," since "if any man is saved in any dispensation other than those of Promise and Grace, he is saved by *works* and not by faith!"<sup>121</sup> And to counter such arguments concerning Dispensationalism, Charles C. Ryrie developed an explanation to rid dispensationalism of any charge of teaching two methods of salvation. He argued that there was only one method of salvation, that is, by faith (through Christ sacrifice), but being that such faith is tested differently in every dispensation, or in the words of Fuller: "since the content of [...] revelation changes," the "conscious object of faith and the experience of the believers also change from age to age."<sup>122</sup> He adds:

There was a way of salvation revealed in each dispensation, and man's response to that particular revelation was *a* test of that economy. But there are many other tests in

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<sup>119</sup> Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 3:343.

<sup>120</sup> Fuller, *Gospel and Law*, 33.

<sup>121</sup> John W. Bowman, "II. Dispensationalism," *Interpretation* X (April 1956): 178.

<sup>122</sup> Fuller, *Gospel and Law*, 40, 41:

According to Ryrie, God saved men in all dispensations by grace made possible by the death of Christ, but the content of the revelation of this grace, which a man must believe to be saved, changes from dispensation to dispensation. Since the content of that revelation changes, the conscious object of faith and the experience of believers also changes from age to age. [...] By basing the contrast on the clarity by which grace is revealed, Ryrie has no need to say, as Did Scofield and Chafer, that salvation during the Mosaic age depended in part upon works.



every dispensation. Every bit of revelation carries with it a test of whether men will respond positively to the particular thing revealed.”<sup>123</sup>

It is fair to assume, then, that dispensational hermeneutics is based upon three principles: 1) the distinction between law and gospel, which in turn brings the necessity for 2) a literal interpretation of scriptures that justifies 3) an eternal and distinctive covenant with Israel. In conclusion, the most distinctive aspect of Dispensationalism, i.e. the dichotomy between Israel and the church, can be explained by the existing relationship of the three principles mentioned above.

### **Summary**

New Covenant Theology is the result of several theological developments in the last four decades. The exploration of such developments is necessary for a proper understanding of the underlying principles of New Covenant Theology’s exegetical and theological hermeneutics. New Covenant Theology stands in contrast to both Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism.

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<sup>123</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 125. And again, in page 126:

Men were saved under the law economy but not by the law. . . . And yet the law [i.e., all the revelation during the age of law] contained the revelation which brought men to a realization that their faith must be placed in God the Saviour [sic]. How did it do this? Primarily through the worship which it instituted through the sacrificial system. The sacrifices were part of the law [word used in same sense as previously]; the keeping of them did not save; and yet a man could respond to that [the sacrifices] taught so as to effect eternal salvation.”<sup>123</sup>

I believe the sacrificial system is key to understand the nature of the Mosaic covenant, but I do not believe Ryrie’s use of the concept to justify dispensationalism’s understanding of the Mosaic covenant as a legal covenant while avoiding developing two different ways of salvation is the best possible way to understand the place of the sacrificial system in the context of the Mosaic covenant.

New Covenant Theology came to fruition with Jon Zens' criticism against Paedobaptism and its theological justification in Covenant Theology. Zens argues the covenantal continuity that results from Covenant Theology's hermeneutical scheme does not validate the progressiveness of salvation history and a proper redemptive-historical approach to hermeneutics. As an alternative to the continuity principle of Covenant Theology, Zens proposes a Christotelic hermeneutic that deals with the Biblical covenants (i.e. old/Mosaic and new covenants) as indivisible units with their own particular ethical code that is binding only on the people that live directly under each one of them.

John Reisinger is another important figure in the development of New Covenant Theology. He presents ecclesiology as the "key to harmonizing Scriptures,"<sup>124</sup> and the very topic that exhibits the errors in both Covenantal and Dispensational hermeneutics. Like Zens and the other new covenant theologians after him, he develops a Christotelic hermeneutics, but chooses to do so through an exploration of the seed of Abraham throughout Scriptures. His analysis of covenant and dispensational ecclesiology leads to him to conclude that neither group handles the Israel-church relationship properly. Furthermore, Covenant Theology "loses the true 'newness' of the New Covenant" while Dispensationalism "loses the unity of Scripture and God's single plan of redemption."<sup>125</sup> Reisinger concludes the most poignant implication of his study is that New Covenant "replaced everything that the old covenant had brought into being."<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Reisinger, *Abraham's four seeds*, i.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid*, 20.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid*, 89.

Fred Zaspel, indebted to both Zens and Reisinger, explores the centrality of the covenant concept in salvation history. He contends that since the Biblical metanarrative is salvific, and salvation has Jesus and his ministry as the center, every Biblical and theological question must be answered in relation to Him. For this reason, the New Testament revelation (which is directly related to Christ) replaces the Old Testament revelation in authority. For him, the failure of the old covenant and the inauguration of the new covenant suggests radical discontinuity between the two and between the Testaments. For him, at least, the distinction between the old and new covenants is one “between works and grace,” with the Mosaic covenant being a works/legal covenant and the new covenant being a gracious one.<sup>127</sup>

Tom Wells, the last of the first-generation covenant theologians I discuss, explores the idea of the primacy of Jesus and its implications for hermeneutics, theology and ethics. Wells claims that any revelation of God “must take second place to the Lord Jesus.”<sup>128</sup> For him, the priority of Jesus means going to the New Testament for answers before going anywhere else in the Bible. Wells also distinguishes between the old and new covenants, and between the Mosaic Law and the new covenant law. He maintains the Mosaic Law is focused on external forms while the new covenant law is focused on the inner self.

New Covenant hermeneutics share both similarities and differences with the hermeneutics of Covenant Theology. In both systems, the covenant concept plays an

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<sup>127</sup> Wells and Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology*, 42

<sup>128</sup> Wells, *The Priority of Christ*, 12

important structural role. But in the case of Covenant Theology, their covenantal structure is not directly derived from Biblical covenants. In Covenant Theology, the concepts of “solidarity in a representative head”<sup>129</sup> is emphasized by means of the covenant of creation (also called covenant of works). The nature of the covenant and the events of the fall made necessary the installment of another covenant, the covenant of grace. This covenant is manifested in two dispensations: under the Mosaic Law as promise; under the new covenant as fulfillment. Although this tri-covenantal structure proposed by Covenant Theology is rejected New Covenant Theology, these systems share a similar understanding of redemptive history, including a belief in self-revelation–inspiration understood as a historically-, culturally- and linguistically- conditioned process and interpretation of the divine self-revelation in history.

New Covenant Theology also appears as an alternative to Dispensationalism. Dispensationalism develops a historical-redemptive paradigm that seeks to be true to the phenomenon of progressive revelation. It argues for a distinction between God’s dealings with Israel and His dealings with the church in salvation history. This distinction brings forth a literal hermeneutic that rejects the concept of a spiritual Israel as the heir of God’s promises. Dispensationalists argue covenantalists are unable to keep law and grace separated. Like in New Covenant Theology, the covenant concept plays an important role in Dispensational hermeneutics. It furthers the case for the distinction between Israel and the church. By applying this concept, Dispensationalists are able to separate the revelation of God at Sinai from the revelation of God in Christ, also separating the way in which God deals with his people in two different historic eras.

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<sup>129</sup> Horton, *Introducing Covenant Theology*, 11.

## Conclusions

New Covenant Theology stands as an attempt to put the Biblical text before any theological constructions. The reduction (if not elimination) of inappropriate theological terms that distort the development of a Bible-based theology is one of its primary concerns. The Bible's metanarrative is the history of salvation, and this history is to be understood from the perspective of an expectation-reality that has Christ as the point of reference for both the promise and the fulfillment of Old Testament revelation. Furthermore, the most important and encompassing promise of the Bible is also the first one, Genesis 3:15. New Covenant theologians develop the concept of the promise in the *protoevangelium*, yet a proper exploration of the old covenant in its Old Testament context is lacking in all first-generation writers up to this point. Also, an exploration of the Messianic promise of Genesis 3:15 in its basic context (namely, the cosmic conflict theme) is lacking.

In New Covenant Theology, both covenants share (1) the advancing of God's single redemptive purpose, (2) the obligation of obedience to God's law. Nevertheless, both covenants differ essentially in their approach to the God-humanity relationship: it is works (in the Old Testament) versus grace (in the New Testament). The inauguration of the New Covenant is a climatic event in New Covenant Theology. It is the culmination of the Messianic promise of Genesis 3:15. In fact, "the New Covenant was instituted to reveal God's final plan for redemptive history."<sup>130</sup>

The redemptive-historical hermeneutics of New Covenant Theology works as a distinctive hermeneutical paradigm that intends to maximize the advantages of both

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<sup>130</sup> Benbrooks, "The Seed of Abraham in New Covenant Theology," 178.

covenantal and dispensational hermeneutics while avoiding their respective pitfalls. On one hand, New Covenant Theology shares the textual and historical emphases of Dispensationalism, together with its typological interpretation, but rejects the dispensational literalism. On the other, it shares Covenant Theology's redemptive-historical hermeneutics while rejecting the theological and hermeneutical implications of the covenant of grace as well as its ontics. In the presentation of New Covenant Theology, the redemptive-historical approach offers an understanding of Biblical history in intrinsic connection with a central theological theme, namely, the centrality of Christ. Thus, the Christological principle works as a central structural element, justifying the logical priority of the New Testament over the old in matters of theological and ethical interpretation. However, the New Covenant particular application of the Christological principle imposes a particular interpretation of the New Testament into the Old Testament. An all-exclusive application of the Christological principle forces a kind of hermeneutics that limits the value of the Old Testament as a Christian book.

## CHAPTER 4

### EVALUATION OF THE NEW COVENANT UNDERSTANDING OF THE LAW AND GRACE RELATIONSHIP

I will now present my criticism of New Covenant Theology. In an attempt to make my case against some of the elements of New Covenant Theology, I will divide the first part of this chapter into several sections. In these sections, I will (1) evaluate New Covenant Theology's understanding of the nature of the Mosaic covenant as a *legal* covenant; (2) evaluate New Covenant Theology's understanding of the Christocentric purpose of salvation history; (3) evaluate New Covenant Theology's application of the hermeneutical priority of the New Testament; (4) evaluate New Covenant Theology's understanding of the nature of the new covenant. Finally, in the second half of this chapter, I will lay the foundations for a new proposal for the understanding of the law-grace relationship.

#### **The Mosaic Covenant as a *Legal* Covenant**

My biggest criticism of New Covenant hermeneutics and theology has to do with their understanding of the Mosaic covenant as a purely legal covenant and how this concept relates to soteriology. This is a reminiscence and a development of early Protestant theology still present in the covenant-of-works relationship of Covenant Theology and in the understanding of the Mosaic covenant in Dispensationalism. Nevertheless, I would like to suggest that although full of Pauline language, New

Covenant Theology's interpretation (and even Covenant Theology's and Dispensationalism's respective developments) fails to make justice to the totality of the Pauline writings on the subject and it does not reflect the understanding Old Testament people concerning the Mosaic covenant.

Reisinger suggests that the Mosaic covenant as a whole was not a gracious covenant.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, he clearly states that the Mosaic covenant “only ministered grace as it effected the knowledge of sin and spiritual death in an Israelite's heart and led him to faith in the gospel covenant given to Abraham.”<sup>2</sup> Reisinger, and other first generation New Covenant theologians, seem convinced that the Mosaic covenant could not “deal with the heart and inward motives”<sup>3</sup> (language probably taken from texts such as Hebrews 10:1-4; Romans 8:2-4). But then a number of questions arise: If the Mosaic covenant was exclusively performance-oriented, and if it could not deal with “the heart and inward motives,” was regenerative power unavailable in the Old Testament? And if such power was available, was it offered from outside the Mosaic covenant itself? Even if New Covenant theologians suggest that such power or salvific gift was available during historical span of the Mosaic covenant by means of a parallel gracious covenant (the Abrahamic covenant), their presentation will not be without challenges. They will have to answer concerning the Old Testament the same question Dispensationalists have to answer concerning the relationship between Israel and the church, namely, how and why

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<sup>1</sup> Reisinger, *But I Say Unto You*, 1152-1157

<sup>2</sup> Reisinger, *Abraham's Four Seeds*, 18

<sup>3</sup> Reisinger, *But I Say Unto You*, 1756.



is it that God is running two simultaneous plans (one destined to fail, of course) in order to achieve his ultimate goal to exalt Christ? If New Covenant theologians choose that route, they too will be charged with developing a dual soteriological hermeneutic, although in the Old Testament this time.<sup>4</sup>

I believe they have not only misrepresented, if not caricatured, the Mosaic covenant, but also downplayed the role of important soteriological data from inside the covenant itself. For instance, Reisinger argues:

The relationship of the law covenant (the stone tablets in the ark) to the mercy seat (the lid of the ark) is one of the clearest pictures of the gospel in the Old Testament Scriptures. It also sets forth the biblical relationship of law and grace. The tablets of the covenant (Ten Commandments) in the ark represent the just demands of the law covenant... There is not an ounce of grace or gospel in the law covenant document in the box. It is pure law, demanding perfect obedience as the condition of blessing and death as the consequence of disobedience. The blood on the mercy seat covers and hides the broken covenant and the sins against that covenant. That is pure grace!<sup>5</sup>

Reisinger might be correct when saying that the 10 Commandments as a legal/ethical document do not offer grace in a soteriological sense, and he is correct when saying that the relationship between the tables of stone and the mercy seat “is one of the clearest pictures of the gospel in the Old Testament,” but what Reisinger and other New Covenant theologians seem to miss is the idea that both the 10 Commandments and the mercy seat are part of the same covenant, i.e., the Mosaic covenant. And if the gospel is

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<sup>4</sup> See the sections “Neocovenantal and Dispensational *Law and Grace* Interpretations” in Chapter 2 and “Neocovenantal and Dispensational Hermeneutics” in Chapter 3.

<sup>5</sup> Reisinger, *Tables of Stone*, 1570-1576. Reisinger is referring primarily to the 10 commandments, and as such, they did not have an ounce of grace or gospel” (Ibid, 1574). For Reisinger, this means that the Ten commandments were a works-based covenant: “The New Covenant, unlike the Old Covenant, is one of grace and not works” (Ibid, 1184).

in effect during the Mosaic dispensation, even if it is a promise (as New Covenant theologians affirm), how biblically sound is their historical-redemptive hermeneutics to still validate the works principle as it relates to salvation in the mosaic covenant? I argue New Covenant emphasis on the Mosaic covenant as a *legal* covenant, and that of Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology for that matter, misses relevant data already present within the Mosaic covenant itself.

A second source of corrective data on the subject that springs from the Mosaic covenant itself can be found in the Biblical texts related to the sacrificial system and the Hebrew sanctuary service. For instance, in 1979, Angel M. Rodriguez wrote a dissertation entitled “Substitution in the Hebrew Cultus” in which he demonstrates how sacrificial substitution was a foundational component of the Hebrew cultus. Commenting on the meaning of Leviticus 17:11, Rodriguez argues:

This verse informs us that Yahweh has assigned to the blood of every sacrifice an expiatory virtue. Blood is there clearly identified with the life of the victim. Since life belongs to Yahweh it is to be returned to him. It is in the process of returning it to Him that expiation is achieved. Yahweh in His great love for His people is willing to accept it in place of the forfeited life of the sinner. The blood which is bearing the sin of the individual is accepted in exchange for him. Expiation is achieved through sacrificial substitution.<sup>6</sup>

Sacrificial substitution, then, was the way for Israelites to acquire forgiveness from God. Expiation made through a substitutional blood sacrifice was the basis for the blessing of salvation offered in the Mosaic covenant. Now, two things should be clarified at this moment. First, “The sinner is to rely on Yahweh’s graciousness and on his will to

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<sup>6</sup> Angel M. Rodriguez, “Substitution in the Hebrew Cultus” (PhD dissertation, Andrews University, 1979), 259.

forgive”<sup>7</sup> This leads to the second clarification, namely, that the sacrifice (or the whole sacrificial system, for that matter) in itself had not power whatsoever to produce forgiveness or purification of the heart (cf. Heb 10:1-2). It was, however, effective in the sense that being a “σκιὰν τῶν μελλόντων ἀγαθῶν”; it had salvific merit derived from the antitypical sacrifice, i.e., Christ, “ὁ ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ ὁ αἴρων τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τοῦ κόσμου” (John 1:29, NA28). As such, it was through faith in the One the sacrifices pointed to that Israelites could achieve salvation. In such sacrifices, “the only voice heard [...] is that of a sinner confessing his sin and asking the Lord to accept his substitute.”<sup>8</sup>

The sacrifices could not save the Israelites from sin, nor could they offer intrinsic forgiveness. They pointed to Christ as forgiver in virtue of his substitutional sacrifice. In the sacrificial system, the worshiper had to believe that it was the *antitype* that could achieve “εἰρήνην [...] πρὸς τὸν θεὸν” (Romanos 5:1), otherwise the sacrifice could not fulfill their purpose as shadows (Heb. 10:1; cf. Isa 1:10-13a). Furthermore, if we consider such an understanding of the sacrificial system together with the reality that the cultic system was an essential part of the Mosaic covenant, it is safe to assume that the *works* principle so much referenced to in New Covenant theology in a soteriological sense does not reflect Moses’ own understanding of the Old Covenant. For this reason, the Biblical data that points toward obedience as a mean to acquiring blessings in the Mosaic covenant should be understood from the perspective of faith in the promissory sacrificial substitution that God would provide in Christ. This understanding of the Mosaic covenant reflects a soteriological *already-but-not-yet* that was already present in the early stages of

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 308.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

development of the Old Testament. Now, the exploration of this last conclusion goes beyond the scope and limitations of this investigation, and for that reason I will not be pursuing such an analysis. However, I would like to note that the sacrificial system highlights God's loving and gracious character while also demonstrating the far-reaching implications of sin and forgiveness, of law (as moral rule) and grace (as a historical-soteriological system), of justice and mercy. On the subject, Roy Gane comments:

As the divine king, lawgiver, and judge of his people, YHWH possesses full authority to punish or pardon those who violate his law. But as an ideal ruler who desires a reputation for justice and the social stability that goes with it, YHWH cannot abandon his justice when he condemns or when he forgives. He must maintain balance and harmony between justice (e.g., צדק) and kindness/mercy (e.g., רחום and words from the roots רחם and חנן), the two sides of his character (Exod 20:5-6; 34:6, 7; Ps85:11[10]; 89:14[15]). Attempting to uphold kindness without justice would have the unkind results of chaos and unchecked evil. Canceling culpability for wrongs without at least a token reminder of the just retribution that the sinner would otherwise face could beget wantonness rather than reformation.

The system of expiatory sacrifices addressed the need for YHWH to balance injustice and kindness... Even if a price could be attached to restoration of the divine-human relationship that is damaged by violation of YHWH's law, an animal sacrifice could not pay it because it does not transfer to YHWH anything that he does not already own or that he needs (Ps 50:9-13). So when he grants forgiveness following sacrifice, he does so as an act of grace in response to a ritual expression that is incapable of purchasing his clemency (cf. Ps 49:8-9[7-8]). In other words, when YHWH accepts sacrifices as tokens, it is he who bears the real cost of sin.<sup>9</sup>

Gane's statement on the meaning of the Hebrew sacrificial system points toward a more positive understanding of salvation in the Mosaic dispensation. I am aware it does not clarify all the moral elements present in the Mosaic covenant, but it does suggest that New Covenant Theology's soteriological interpretation of the Mosaic covenant does not respond to all the data on the subject that the Old Testament has to offer. It is evident that New Covenant Theology is a New Testament movement, but since an important part of

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<sup>9</sup> Roy Gane, *Cult and Character: Purification Offerings, Day of Atonement, and Theodicy* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 320-321.

its theology is based on an interpretation of the Old Testament, it seems prudent to incorporate the expertise of Old Testament scholars more abundantly.

Now, concerning New Covenant Theology's understanding of the contribution of the New Testament for the understanding of the Mosaic covenant, there is one aspect I would like to criticize. Although there are several observations I could make on the subject, I will be limiting myself to the meaning of νόμος in the writings of Paul. My criticism of New Covenant theologians on this topic is that despite their strong reliance on Pauline theology concerning the law-grace relationship, they have not shown sufficient linguistic-exegetical attention concerning the term νόμος to support their conclusions about the Mosaic covenant. For instance, Michael Winger's research on the meaning of νόμος in Pauline writings<sup>10</sup> demonstrates that in investigating the meaning of νόμος in Paul we should consider not only sense but also reference. He identifies a Jewish νόμος as: "Those words given to and possessed by the Jewish people, which guide and control those who accept them and according to which those who accept them are judged."<sup>11</sup> He also demonstrates that the distinct references to νόμος in Paul are intricate, and the task of determining sense and reference is a complicated one.<sup>12</sup>

New Covenant theologians should consider a more proper examination of the term νόμος (and related words) in all the instances that are relevant to the discussion (and

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Winger, "BY WHAT LAW? The Meaning of *Νόμος* in the Letters of Paul," SBL Dissertation Series 128 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1992).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 104. For a brief treatise on how this definition could be useful in the interpretation of Pauline writings, see *ibid*, 108-11, 157-158, 194-196

<sup>12</sup> See *Ibid*, 19, 78, 86, 95-97, 103-104.

perhaps beyond) to determine whether Pauline theology really justifies New Covenant Theology's conclusion at more than a superficial level. Such investigation might confirm New Covenant Theology's suspicions about the Mosaic covenant (like the *covenant-is-a-unit* theory) and other subjects, although I suspect it will not.<sup>13</sup>

### **Christocentricity as the Purpose of Salvation history**

New Covenant Theology sees redemptive history as “the central theme of Scriptures,”<sup>14</sup> and the *Christ* principle as the core and purpose of it. It is true that the exaltation of Jesus Christ for salvation is God's main purpose in history<sup>15</sup> that purpose

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<sup>13</sup> Winger appropriately summarizes the reasons that led me to disagreeing with New Covenant Theology's proposal:

To describe Jewish *νόμος* by identifying distinct objects such as the Sinaitic Code (or the Pentateuch, or Scripture in general) raises three kinds of problems. First, such an approach suggests that these distinct objects correspond to distinct senses of *νόμος* and gives no account of the relations among these senses, but Paul (e.g., at Gal 4:21) evidently considered these senses either part of one *νόμος*, or at least closely related.

Second, the identification of Jewish *νόμος* with distinct objects fails to indicate the respects in which this *νόμος* resembles or differs from other *νόμοι* whether liberal (*ὁ νόμος τῶν Ῥωμαίων*) or metaphorical (*ὁ νόμος τῆς ἁμαρτίας*).

Third such an identification of Jewish *νόμος* is fundamentally inadequate because (1) it evades the need to specify so far as possible the concepts on which any connection between a term and its objects depends, and (2) it fails to indicate, so far as may be done, the life setting from which—rather than from any physical objects—the term fundamentally derives its significance (Ibid, 93).

<sup>14</sup> Benbrooks, “The Seed of Abraham in New Covenant Theology,” 183; see also *ibid*, 93, 178, 108.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*.

being first announced as a *parole* (promise)<sup>16</sup> in Genesis 3:15.<sup>17</sup> I believe a Christocentric hermeneutic is not only viable, but necessary.<sup>18</sup> After all, it was Jesus himself who said “ἐραυνᾶτε τὰς γραφάς, ὅτι ὑμεῖς δοκεῖτε ἐν αὐταῖς ζωὴν αἰώνιον ἔχειν· καὶ ἐκεῖνα εἰσιν αἱ μαρτυροῦσαι περὶ ἐμοῦ” (John 5:39, NA28), and γραφάς here identifies either the Old Testament writings or the Mosaic covenantal writings. Luke also recalls Jesus’s teaching on the subject elsewhere: “καὶ ἀρξάμενος ἀπὸ Μωϋσέως καὶ ἀπὸ πάντων τῶν προφητῶν διερμήνευσεν αὐτοῖς ἐν πάσαις ταῖς γραφαῖς τὰ περὶ ἑαυτοῦ” (Luke 24:27, NA28). Yet, I argue that New Covenant Theology’s interpretation of the Christological principle lacks the incorporation of a foundational element that if considered, could alter their

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 8-9; Zaspel argues for “the *unity* of God’s purpose in human redemption” rather than the unity (meaning continuity) of the historical covenants. For more on this remark, see idem, “A Brief Explanation of ‘New Covenant Theology.’”

<sup>17</sup> See Benbrooks, “The Seed of Abraham in New Covenant Theology,” 93. On the fulfillment of this promise throughout salvation history, Benbrooks goes as far as to argue that “The Abrahamic Covenant is central to the discussion of redemptive history for New Covenant Theology. This covenant guides the entire redemptive plan” (Ibid, 187). He argues this on account of Reisinger’s affirmation (and from other sources) of such idea in *Abraham’s Four Seeds*, 2. I am not convinced, however, about the transcendence of this topic for a historical-redemptive development within New Covenant Theology other than just a working proposal within basic *neocovenantal* structure but I do respect Reisinger’s (and Benbrooks for that matter) development of New Covenant Theology, and Reisinger proves this is a viable way of doing New Covenant Theology.

<sup>18</sup> Benbrooks highlights Gary Long’s statement concerning the hermeneutical consequence of the *Christ* principle in New Covenant Theology when saying:

First, as Long emphasizes in his title, the importance of the redemptive approach to history is first seen in its ability to lead to a better hermeneutic. New Covenant Theology holds to what they call a Christ-centered hermeneutic with a priority given to the New Testament based on this view (Benbrooks, “The Seed of Abraham in New Covenant Theology,” 98, expanding on Long, *Context*, 323).

I do believe a Christological emphasis leads to better hermeneutics and better theology. And this is precisely one of the reasons New Covenant Theology should be praised.

interpretation of salvation history, namely, the historical-theological background of Genesis 3:15.

The text of Genesis 3:15 in the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (וַאֲיִבָּהּ אֲשִׁית בְּיַדְךָ) (וַיִּגְדֹּן הָאֱלֹהִים וַיִּגְדֹּן זָרַע וַיִּגְדֹּן זָרַע וַיִּגְדֹּן זָרַע וַיִּגְדֹּן זָרַע וַיִּגְדֹּן זָרַע) seems to suggest that the determining (אשית) and the crushing (ישופ) are two separated aspects of God's work in salvation history. And although they are also grammatically separated by their pronoun (first and third respectively), they are both connected by the term "seed" (זרע; God will separate זרע from זרע, and it is precisely a definite זרע that will crush the serpent's head).<sup>19</sup> As a theological climax to Genesis 1:1-Genesis 3:14, Genesis 3:15 presents the salvation history in the context of a historical-spiritual war (this is confirmed by the fact that the serpent had access to the garden somehow, and attempts to demoralize God's intentions with Adam and Eve).<sup>20</sup> Such an understanding of Genesis 1-3 might have been part of the collective theological thought of the New Testament writers. If this is so, and I believe it is, when Paul said "ἀπεκδυσάμενος τὰς ἀρχὰς καὶ τὰς ἐξουσίας ἐδειγμάτισεν ἐν παρρησίᾳ, θριαμβεύσας αὐτοὺς ἐν αὐτῶν" (Col 2:15), he was not testifying about a byproduct of the plan of salvation, namely, the public shaming of the rulers and powers in heavenly places (cf. Eph 6:12), but the fulfilment of an essential part of God's plan (cf. 1 John 3:8), one that historically precedes the soteriological aspect of it. The importance

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<sup>19</sup> On this last point, see Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *The Messiah in the Old Testament*, Studies in Old Testament Biblical Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 37-42.

<sup>20</sup> See Genesis 3:1-5.



of this theme and its implications for salvation history had been noted elsewhere.<sup>21</sup> But I would like to argue that this theme affects the Bible's presentation about the covenants, about the law, about grace, and more directly, about God. This spiritual warfare theme is also the background for the New Testament's presentation on the Kingdom of God. After all, the Kingdom of God appears as a historical reality to destroy and replace the Kingdom of Satan.

The combination of the *Christ* principle and the warfare-theodicy<sup>22</sup> theme in salvation history also leads me to a criticism of New Covenant Theology's (and even Covenant Theology's and Dispensationalism's) choice for a structuring principle for Biblical history. In emphasizing the importance of the covenant concept<sup>23</sup> in the Bible,

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<sup>21</sup> See, for instance, Ellen G. White, *The Story of Patriarchs and Prophets as Illustrated in the Lives of Holy Men of Old*, Conflict of the Ages Series, Volume 1 (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1890); idem, *The Story of Prophets and Kings as Illustrated in the Captivity and Restoration of Israel*, Conflict of the Ages Series, Volume 2 (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1917); idem, *The Desire of Ages*, Conflict of the Ages Series, Volume 3 (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1898); idem, *The Acts of the Apostles in the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*, Conflict of the Ages Series, Volume 4 (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1911); idem, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan*, Conflict of the Ages Series, Volume 5 (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1911); Gregory A. Boyd, *God at War: The Bible & Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997); idem, *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001).

<sup>22</sup> I am indebted to Boyd for this phraseology.

<sup>23</sup> As previously shown, the dispensational equivalent for the term covenant is dispensation.

they have missed key related Biblical themes that could guide their theology and hermeneutics to more Bible-affirming conclusions.<sup>24</sup>

In commenting on the function of the covenant theme in salvation history, Stek argued that “in Scripture covenants are always ad hoc instruments for advancing God’s kingdom purposes among his stumbling people. God’s kingship (-dom) is the Bible’s *primary* and *pervasive* theme—from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22.”<sup>25</sup>

While I believe it might prove a difficult task to present the direct relationship of the theme of the Kingdom of God to each one of the books of the Bible, I also believe Stek is on the right track suggesting the importance of the Kingdom of God over the covenant concept even though the importance of the covenant concept as an structural guide is obvious to both Testaments. There have been important theological proposals on the relationship of the covenant concept and the Kingdom of God, characterizing such a relationship in a similar fashion to Stek’s statement.<sup>26</sup> However, I argue that the neither

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<sup>24</sup> John H. Stek made a similar observation about Covenant Theology when saying:

Theologians in Reformed Tradition need to reassess the role that tradition has assigned to covenant [of grace], making it the key thematic concept for theological integration of Scripture’s word about how God has related himself to his creatures. In doing so, it has fastened upon a *secondary* Biblical theme and elevated it to preeminence (“Covenant’ Overload in Reformed Theology,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 29 [April 1994]: 40; see also *Ibid*, 41.).

While Stek’s criticism might appear at first as unnecessarily guttural, his observation concerning the place of the covenant theme in theology should be carefully considered in the search for a better interpretation of salvation history.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant: A Biblical Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012)

New Covenant Theology nor Kingdom-of-God theologies have yet paid sufficient attention to the spiritual warfare theme. I believe the kingdom-of-God concept needs the spiritual warfare worldview in order to properly explain salvation history.<sup>27</sup>

### **The Hermeneutical Priority of the New Testament**

The teaching concerning the hermeneutical priority of the New Testament is foundational for the correct understanding of the Biblical data. The neocovenantal application of this idea, however, might prove to be problematic while interpreting salvation history. Case in point, Wells declares: “we must not create problem texts in the New Testament by giving the Old Testament logical priority. On the contrary, we must read the Old in the light of the New, so that the Lord Jesus has the first and the last word.”<sup>28</sup> When reading the Bible doctrinally or ethically, Wells’ (and New Covenant Theology’s) idea of giving hermeneutical/logical priority to the New Testament is indeed useful, since Jesus’ ruling might sometimes overrule Old Testament precepts (as it is the case in the Sermon of the Mount). But the Bible was not written first and foremost as a doctrinal book in the classic systematic sense. It was written as a sequential narrative with a clear theological agenda. And in attempting to understand the metanarrative of salvation history, it is important to pay careful consideration to the historical progression without imposing an interpretative key to the whole that, though true for the most part of the narrative, could distort other parts.

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<sup>27</sup> For that reason, I prefer to refer to the Biblical presentation of the Kingdom of God as a *Kingdom in Conflict*

<sup>28</sup> Wells, *The Priority of Christ*, 71.

A similar criticism could be pointed out concerning the neovoential emphasis of New Testament validation of Mosaic rules for them to apply to new covenant believers. Notwithstanding the fact that the New Testament clearly shows aspects of discontinuity in regards to either Old Covenant law,<sup>29</sup> the development of a theory that incorporates all the data the New Testament has to offer on the subject (either implicitly or directly) is necessary. New Covenant Theology's hermeneutical framework agilely assumes ethical discontinuity in places where a careful investigation of the passages or sections in question might support a different conclusion.<sup>30</sup>

In connection with my previous point is the place of the 10 Commandments in the New Testament as they are understood through the application of the *hermeneutical priority* principle. Well's proposal for evaluating the validity of an Old Testament rule, if applied to the 10 Commandments, might support a different conclusion than that neocovenantal theologians have arrived to. For instance, New Covenant Theology validates nine out of the ten Commandments. They believe the Sabbath has been done away, fulfilled in our rest in Christ,<sup>31</sup> and since a validation for the literal keeping of the

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<sup>29</sup> Like the “ἠκούσατε ὅτι ἐρρέθη [...] ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν” formula (Matt 5:21-22) and similar dialectics (see Matt 5:27-28; 31-32; 33-34; 38-30; 43-44) used in the Sermon on the Mount that suggests some degree of discontinuity. I am aware of those who question the choice of interpretative reference of such passages by arguing that they are pointing to the Jewish tradition rather than the Old Testament (e.g., John Stott, Dale Larsen and Sandy Larsen, *A Deeper Look at the Sermon on the Mount: Living Out the Way of Jesus* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013], 66). Nevertheless, I am not convinced they are right about this since Jesus is clearly quoting Moses (see, for instance, Gregory K. Beale and Don A. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007], 21-29.), thus contrasting his teaching with some of the teachings in the Pentateuch.

<sup>30</sup> Like a degree or degrees of either continuity or discontinuity.

<sup>31</sup> E.g., Zaspel, “A Brief Explanation of ‘New Covenant Theology.’”

commandment since to be lacking in the New Testament, they believe they are rightfully doing so. Nevertheless, there is evidence in Gospels that might be suggesting a different path altogether.

In Matthew 24:20 Jesus said to his disciples: “προσεύχεσθε δὲ ἵνα μὴ γένηται ἡ φυγή ὑμῶν χειμῶνος μηδὲ σαββάτω.” The immediate context of the text suggests that at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman Empire (the referend of βδέλυγμα τῆς ἐρημώσεως in Matthew 20:15; see Luke 21:20) an attempt to “escape” in the Sabbath might prove to be an inconvenient, just as inclement weather (χειμῶνος) could too. Now, if Jesus’ warning about the circumstances of this φυγή could be interpreted in two different ways. One possibility is that Jesus was saying that Sabbath practices in Jewish territory might physically impede believers from leaving the urban areas of Judea just as winter could. The other points towards the difficulties believers might face in trying to keep the Sabbath while fleeing.<sup>32</sup> If we choose the first option under a neocovenantal framework, then we need to explain why would Jesus be concerned with Jewish tradition (either rabbinic or Mosaic) as something to be considered when thinking about the “fleeing.” Was Jesus concerned with such traditions physically impeding free movement out of Jerusalem? Or was he concerned with the keeping of the Jewish Tradition by the disciples? And if so, why would he be validating such traditions by expecting from his disciples to validate it even decades after his resurrection and well into the New Covenant era. If the second possibility is considered, then the implication is that Jesus was expecting his disciples after him, even decades after his resurrection, to still be keeping

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<sup>32</sup> Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word, Incorporated, 1998) 33b: 701-702.

the Sabbath commandment. It is my contention here that the second option should not be discarded in favor of the first, but that they could both coexist in a sound interpretation. And if the *hermeneutical priority* principle is applied in consideration of the second alternative, all Ten commandments (including the Sabbath commandment) are revalidated in the new covenant. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that the new covenant presentation of the Sabbath commandment would necessarily be exactly the same as that of the Mosaic covenant. What it means is that, regardless of adaptations of the Sabbath commandment to the immediate needs of the church, the Sabbath should still be kept by the Christian believers.

This previous point concerning the validity of the Sabbath commandment in relation to the *hermeneutical priority* principle leads me to another necessary, although simpler, observation concerning the Sabbath under the new covenant. New Covenant Theologians like Reisinger argue that the Sabbath validity as new covenant ethics has been abrogated by its supposed fulfilment in the spiritual rest of the believers. On this point, I would like to argue that even if the Sabbath is indeed a symbol of the rest the believers obtain when accepting Christ (and I am not convinced this is Hebrew's main line of argumentation), that would not disqualify it from still being in operation in contrast to the fulfilment of the Mosaic sacrificial system in the death of Christ (see Heb 10:1-2). My conclusion concerning the Sabbath existing (possibly) as a symbol of the Christian εἰρήνη and as an active divine ordinance springs from a comparison with the also primitive<sup>33</sup> institution of marriage. Just like the Sabbath rest referred to in Genesis

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<sup>33</sup> I use the word "primitive" in reference to the existence of the marriage pact, and the Sabbath for that matter, as being established very early in salvation history.

2:1-3, marriage is also referred to before sin in Genesis 2:24. When exploring the idea of marriage in the New Testament we find that is used in several places to describe the relationship of God and the church.<sup>34</sup> But that does not invalidate marriage as a literal agreement between humans before God.<sup>35</sup> As a parallel institution to the Sabbath, marriage offers a better point of comparison in regards to any interpretation of the Sabbath as a symbol that any aspect of the Mosaic legislation (specially better than the sacrificial system).

### **The Nature of the New Covenant**

My criticism of New Covenant Theology's understanding of the new covenant is that New Covenant Theology's understanding of the Mosaic covenant negatively affects its understanding of the nature of the new covenant. For instance, neocovenantalists like Zaspel argue that the new covenant is "unconditional and promissory."<sup>36</sup> And while this is true, it is also understood in relation to the Mosaic covenant as a temporal and legal covenant. I believe the new covenant is unconditional in the sense that God is both the producer (Jesus is the covenant-giving king-priest) as well as the recipient (Jesus as the corporate representative of the faithful Israel) of the covenant. And in that matter, the covenant itself could not possibly fail since a failure of the covenant could only be caused by Christ's failure, either as king-priest or as corporate faithful Israel. Nevertheless, the new covenant could be broken just as the Mosaic covenant could in the sense that people

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<sup>34</sup> See 2 Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 5:25-27; Revelation 19:7-8, cf. 21:9-10.

<sup>35</sup> See Matthew 19:4-6; 1 Corinthians 7:1-16; Hebrews 13:4.

<sup>36</sup> Zaspel, *The New Covenant and New Covenant Theology*, 42

could get cut off from it depending on their attitude towards its absolute demands. This point is made in several New Testament books, including the books of Hebrews and Revelation.<sup>37</sup>

In light of the possibility of being cut off from the new covenant, I argue in favor of the “newness” of the new covenant, but not necessarily as neocovenantalists do. When New Covenant theologians argue that the new covenant laws are addressed to the heart<sup>38</sup> in contrast to the Mosaic covenant law that was focused on “outward performance,”<sup>39</sup> the question rises as to what are the laws that are directed towards the heart in the New Testament? Is there not some overlap in the laws given in the Mosaic covenant and those given in the new covenant? If so, is there anything in the moral rule itself that distinguishes its application in one covenant from its application on the other? Are the laws of the new covenant requiring a certain attitude? And if so, was this attitude not requested/present in the moral rules given during the Mosaic dispensation? Perhaps the key question that springs from the neocovenantal interpretation is: How does one define “outward performance” versus “heart” in matters of the nature of the imperatives themselves. This question is foundational to explain the difference between the nature of the laws in the Mosaic covenant and the nature of the laws in the new covenant, and it has not yet been answered by New Covenant theologians. For Reisinger, then, the new

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<sup>37</sup> Matthew 24:13; Hebrews 2:1-3; 4:1-2; 10:19-31; 12:14-17; Revelation 2:5, 7; 11, 16, 17, 20-23, 26-27, 3:2, 5, 11-12, 18-21.

<sup>38</sup> See, for instance Wells, *The Priority of Jesus Christ*, 103.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. Wells argues this is so because of “the presence or absence of regeneration affects the kinds of laws that men can obey” (Ibid, 139), inferring that the Mosaic covenant was not provided with regenerative power while the new covenant was.



covenant is both *indicative* and *imperative* (Law of Christ), yet one might ask whether the old covenant and the new were similar on this respect, since the old was also comprised by *indicative* and *imperative*. This should be clarified by New Covenant writers.

That concludes my evaluation of New Covenant Theology's interpretation of the Law-Grace relationship and its implications as demonstrated in New Covenant Theology's own theological/hermeneutical system. I believe there is much that could be learned from New Covenant Theology in the development of a more Biblical theology/hermeneutics. I will now proceed to develop the basic structure for an alternative proposal that incorporates New Covenant Theology's contribution to the contemporary theological discussion while at the same time avoids most of its pitfalls.

### **Foundations for a New Proposal for the Interpretation of the Law-Grace Relationship**

The foundations for a new proposal for the interpretation of salvation history that incorporates the contributions of New Covenant Theology should start with a clear interpretation of Bible as source of data (subject-matter). I believe the Bible to be a divinely inspired witness and propositional self-disclose of the unfolding of God's plan and purpose in human history. As such, the Bible offers divinely-revealed information concerning God and his dealings in history that are essential for proper interpretation of salvation history.

Since such an understanding of the Bible suggests that God is actively involved in human history, even to the point of becoming  $\sigma\alpha\rho\xi$  (John 1:14), His actions must be understood historically, and progression is an essential aspect of a historical development that leads to a specific purpose: the history Gods saving of his people in history. Now, such a redemptive-historical understanding of the Bible also requires a proper

understanding of history's starting point as suggested by the Bible as found in the book of Genesis.

Even though any of the Hebrew words for kingdom or kinship do not appear in the first three chapters in reference to God, there is implicit theology in these books that justify the existence of the kingdom-of-God idea in the mind of Moses when writing Genesis, even if such theology was still in a primitive state. For instance, in the Pentateuch, the concept of God's kingdom/domain appears in direct connection with His act as creator. This idea of God being the Creator-King serves as the necessary background (see Gen 1:1-31) for God's ethical demand in Genesis 2:15-17. As such, the kingdom of God becomes an important part of the background of salvation history.

As previously suggested in this chapter, another idea that is developed in direct connection with the concept of God's kingdom in Genesis 1-3 is the idea of an active antagonist waging war on God, a *cosmic* conflict that has ethics at its core. This is confirmed by other passages in both the Old Testament and in the New Testament. As such, the necessary background for the understanding of salvation history presupposes, not only the existence of God, but His existence as God-Creator, being controverted by an opposite moral force, i.e. ὁ ὄφις ὁ ἀρχαῖος, ὁ καλούμενος Διάβολος καὶ ὁ Σατανᾶς (Revelation 12:9, NA28)

At the center of this cosmic conflict that is brought to earth in the event of the Fall is the Messianic promise of Genesis 3:15.<sup>40</sup> On the one hand, the Seed represents the

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<sup>40</sup> The microstructure of Genesis 3:8-19 places the promise of Genesis 3:15 at the very center of the section's exposition: (A) God's inquiry into Adam (vv. 9-12), (B) God's inquiry into Eve (13), (C) God's judgment against the Serpent (vv.14-15), (B') God's judgment against Eve (16), (A') God's judgment against Adam (vv. 17-19). A similar idea has been developed by Roberto Ouro in "The Garden of Eden Account: The

epitome of the divine plan for the restoration of human beings, that is, the creation of enmity. As such, this Seed is both an example of God's salvific power and a Deliverer of God's chosen ones. On the other hand, the Seed is the *crusher* of the serpent's head, the Victor over the "accuser of the brethren." The theme of the Seed connects, then, God's work of salvation with his work as a King at war. Genesis 3:15, then, presents the major theme of a Kingdom in conflict actively involved in the salvation of humans and in the eternal resolution of the moral dissension in the universe. Furthermore, Christ's coming to earth (which serves as the battleground for the war of the two kingdoms, the Kingdom of God and the Kingdoms of this world) is precisely what establishes God's Kingdom at a global and at a cosmic level (or at least, starts the taking back of the kingdoms of the earth). According to the Gospels, the Kingdom of God is established by God's work of salvation in favor of the human race. In Revelation, however, the idea is of the establishment of the Kingdom of God by the ending of the conflict.

The centrality of Christ not only develops into two parallel works, i.e. the salvation of humans and the ending of the cosmic conflict, it also links this two works together. Salvation is directly opposed to the works of the devil in salvation history (1 John 3:8). In John 8:44, such works involved homicide and rejection of truth, which in this context seems to be directly connected with the acceptance of Christ as God sent (see vv. 38, 45). As such, Christ's work of salvation appears as a reversion of the current moral state of affairs, in which the devil appears as the "God of this age" (2 Corinthians

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Chiastic Structure of Genesis 2-3," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 40, no. 2 (2002): 219-243. In placing the *protoevangelium* at the core of the micronarrative and mnemonic device, Moses highlights the importance of the dual purpose of God for the development of salvation history, and specially the book of Genesis.

4:4). It is, then, a restoration of the Edenic state where Adam and Eve “were not ashamed,” thus making the “hid[ing] themselves from the presence of the Lord God” (Genesis 3:8) completely unnecessary and *contra naturam*. This suggests that Christ’s work of salvation involves the restoration of humans to obedience in the same way that his final act of war ends in the restoration of “a new heaven and a new earth” (Revelation 21:1).

Since God’s purpose in history is divided into two distinct, yet related, categories, the implementation of his plan in salvation history should reflect this duality. The Biblical covenants, although of the utmost importance for the understanding of salvation history, were not ends in themselves. They were established as vehicles for the fulfillment of God’s dual purpose in history.<sup>41</sup> To understand them properly, it is necessary to consider how they relate to God’s dual purpose. For instance, the Noachic covenant, the first of all major Biblical covenants was established not only as a step towards the realization of God’s offer of salvation to the world, but also as an advancement in God’s plan to end the moral conflict that is affecting the universe. The same could be said about the Abrahamic covenant, the Mosaic covenant, the Priestly covenant, the Davidic covenant. The Abrahamic covenant, then was established among

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<sup>41</sup> For instance, Paul words in Galatians 3:15-22 support the ideas that both the Abrahamic covenant and the Mosaic covenant were established in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. In these verses, however, Paul does not clarify what part these covenants play in such preparation. It seems evident that Paul is equating the status of his deal with Abraham as covenant to his deal with Israel as covenant. The passive aorist προσετέθη suggests a direct relationship between the Abrahamic covenant and the Mosaic covenant. It shows a function of further development from one covenant to the other, indicating that the Mosaic covenant was a development of the Abrahamic covenant. The law comes as a subordination of the Abrahamic covenant (see WBC41, 138).

other things, to serve as a vehicle for the preparation for the coming of the Messiah according to Paul's argumentation in Galatians 3:15-22. The same is also argued by Paul about the Mosaic covenant. As such, they stand as important parts of God plan for accomplishing His dual purpose in history, and not as ends in themselves.<sup>42</sup>

The nature of the two major Biblical covenants clearly demonstrate that their overall function is to serve as guides for the θεός-ἄνθρωπος and the ἄνθρωπος-ἄνθρωπος relationships. In other words, both the Mosaic covenant and the New Covenant determine how their subjects are to approach God and how they are to relate to their covenantal co-participants and their neighbors. For instance, the *rîb* (covenant lawsuit) found in Psalm 50 combines both the θεός-ἄνθρωπος and the ἄνθρωπος-ἄνθρωπος relationships as part of the covenantal responsibilities that, being broken, create the need for God's trial against Israel. The same could be said about the structure of the whole book of Hosea as a *rîb*.<sup>43</sup> In chapter 2-3, God's covenant lawsuit addresses both Israel's idolatry (see 2:1-13; 4:10b-19) and Israel's abuse of their in-covenant members (4:1-3; 6:7-9). Also, Israel's covenantal responsibility springs from Abraham's covenantal blessing of being “וְהִתְבְּרָכְוּ”

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<sup>42</sup> Thus, the phrase “because of transgressions” may mean either that the law was given to bring about a knowledge of sin (cf. Rom 3:20) by identifying it as transgression before God (cf. Rom 4:15; 5:13; 7:7), or that the law was given to increase and multiply sin (cf. Rom 5:20). Both the immediate context and Paul's usual way of speaking about the function of the law favor a cognitive interpretation, that the law was given to bring about a consciousness of sin in sin-hardened humanity. For although “because of transgressions” can be understood in a causal fashion, “to bring about or multiply sin” makes little sense of the following temporal clause “until the Seed to whom the promise was given should come.” For why should God want an increase of sin building up to the coming of Christ? (Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, Word Bible Commentary [Dallas, TX: Word, Incorporated, 1998], 41:138).

<sup>43</sup> Michael David Coogan, *A Brief Introduction to the Old Testament: The Hebrew Bible in Its Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 265.

”כְּנִרְעָה לֵל גּוֹיֵי הָאָרֶץ” (Gen 22:1 BHS; cf. 12:2). All these points are also present in the Sermon of the Mount as prelude to new covenant ethics.

These suggestions appear as proposed guidelines for the understanding of each one of the major Biblical covenants in relation to God’s dual purpose in history. These covenants should be thoroughly investigated in their own context and in relation to this purpose and intertextually to properly elucidate how each one of this covenant advances God’s purpose set forth in Genesis 3:15.

The place of the 10 commandments in relation to God’s dual purpose in Genesis 3:15 is also of the utmost importance. I do not intend to present a definitive explanation on the subject, but rather to point to some important elements that should be considered when developing a new historical-redemptive proposal. That being said, I would like to point out that the basic elements of each one of the ten commandments can be found before God’s covenant with Moses at Sinai.<sup>44</sup> And they could also be found in the New Testament. New Covenant Theologians have no problem identifying 9 out 10 commandments in the New Testament, but the Sabbath is constantly rejected as a valid norm for Christians today. But it is important to consider the role of the Sabbath commandment (from the 10 commandments) is also evoked in the Gospels not only in the context of elucidation of erroneous practices (Mat 12:1-8, Mark 2:23-28 and Luke 6:1-5) but also as a concern for Christians living well beyond Christ’s death (Mat 24:20). Furthermore, the reference to the ark of the covenant in Revelation 11:8 and the allusion to the Sabbath commandment in 14:6-7 could justify the relevance of all the 10

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<sup>44</sup> See, for instance, Jo Ann Davidson, “The Decalogue Predates Mount Sinai: Indicators from the Book of Genesis,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 19, Nos. 1 & 2 (2008): 61-81.

commandments for the life of new covenant believer, regardless of whether they are taken as a unit or as individual commandments.

### **Summary**

My first intention with this chapter was to provide an evaluation of the basic elements that serve either as basis or implications of New Covenant Theology's interpretation of the law-grace relationship. I argued that New Covenant Theology's understanding of the Mosaic covenant does not do justice to either the totality of Pauline writing on the subject or to the Old Testament's self-understanding of the Mosaic Covenant. To see the Mosaic covenant as a non-gracious covenant appears as an oversimplification of the nature of this covenant.

New Covenant Theology's main assertion concerning the nature of the Mosaic covenant is that it is a legal, non-gracious covenant. This means that the Mosaic covenant was performance oriented, focused on outward behavior. In making such statement, New Covenant theologians fail to properly address the presence and source of salvation during the Mosaic era. Furthermore, they do not give proper attention to the nature and purpose of the sacrificial system and the intricacies of the Hebrew sanctuary. The theme of sacrificial substitution, which is at the heart of the Hebrew cultus, is displaced when New Covenant Theology affirms the absolute legality of the Mosaic covenant.

More complications arise when analyzing the neocovenantal use of New Testament data. Although New Covenant theologians rely heavily on Pauline theology, they have not demonstrated sufficient linguistic-exegetical concern for critical terms such as νόμος. Their presentation borders the same danger dispensationalists face when

explaining the soteriological development of soteriology in the Bible, namely, the danger of creating two methods of salvation while explaining this doctrine.

Christocentricity is also one of the most important theological emphases of neocovenantalism. In this respect, New Covenant theologians are advancing the field of Christian systematics to a better stance and giving biblical disciplines the appropriate contour from which to understand the contextualized text. They have demonstrated that a Christocentric hermeneutic is a viable Biblical-systemic project. Unfortunately, neocovenantal theologians have not yet considered the necessary background for the proper understanding of the *protoevangelium*.

The Christological promise of Genesis 3:15 is presented in relation to the temptation and the fall, and it integrates not only soteriology with metaphysics, but offers a clear worldview from which to understand all Christological developments in the Bible. This worldview is explained in terms of a historical-spiritual war between God and the Serpent, i.e. the Devil. This war is also given centrality in the collective theological thought of the New Testament. In fact, the warfare motif (*à la* Boyd) precedes the soteriological reality (see 1 John 3:8). Together with the Kingdom motif, it is the other side that comprises the theological coin that defines the times of salvation history and the times before that.

When understood from this perspective, the *Christ* principle put into perspective the place of the covenant concept as a structuring principle for salvation history. It presents the covenants as necessary steps in the development of God's dual plan in salvation history. What seems clear now is that the relationship of themes such as the



centrality of Christ, the spiritual warfare and the kingdom of God have not been yet fully explored.

The New Testament hermeneutical priority principle is foundational for the understanding of the progressive nature of salvation history. The problem rises, however, when the neocovenantal application of this principle is observed in practice. When reading the Bible as a doctrinal or ethical book, this principle is useful since it validates Jesus' ruling (which sometimes might overrule Old Testament ethics). But the Bible was given as a sequential metanarrative with a clear theological agenda. A particular interpretation of the hermeneutical priority principle (such as the one of New Covenant Theology) could distort the intended meaning of salvation history.

New Covenant Theology's emphasis on the New Testament validation of Mosaic rules for them to apply to new covenant believers could bring results that might contradict some of the neocovenantal conclusions. For instance, the Sabbath commandment that is usually interpreted as a type of the Christian rest in New Covenant Theology might have a different interpretation in lights of texts such as Matthew 24:20. In this passage, Jesus was warning about a *φυγή* that was to occur, and commanded His disciples to "pray" in order to avoid the apparent inconvenience of either inclement weather (*χειμῶνος*) or the Sabbath. The nature of this *φυγή* as it relates to the *ἡμέρη* could be interpreted as meaning either one of two things. The first one, Jesus was concerned that traditional Sabbath practices could physically impede believers from fleeing in the same manner as winter could. The second possibility points to the difficulties the believers might face to keep the Sabbath commandment in the circumstances of a *φυγή*. Regardless of what choice it is made, an explanation needs to be offered as of why was

Jesus really concerned with the relevance that Sabbath would have decades after his death (understanding that the historical fulfillment of the promise that serves as context for Matthew 24:20 is found in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A. D. If the second interpretation is chosen as the proper meaning for this passage (and I believe it should not be excluded even if the first option is regarded as the primary emphasis), then all Ten commandments are revalidated by the New Testament.

In relation to the Sabbath as a type of the rest Christians receive in Christ, I argue that even if we accept this premise, it does not necessary mean that the Sabbath is abrogated like the Mosaic sacrificial system at the death of Jesus. For instance, if we compare the two primeval institutions established by God in Genesis (the Sabbath and marriage), we find that marriage is used in the New Testament as a type of the relationship between Jesus and the church, yet this relationship does not diminish marriage as a literal-historical institution still valid today. The same could be said about the Sabbath.

My last criticism of New Covenant Theology focuses on its interpretation of the new covenant. I argue that New Covenant Theology's understanding of the old covenant negatively affects its understanding of the nature of the new covenant. The unconditionality and the promissory nature of the new covenant are understood over against the supposed legality and temporal character of the Mosaic covenant. The infallibility of the new covenant lies in the reality of God being both the Creator and, through the incarnation and death of Jesus, the receiver of the covenant. This means that the covenant will not be broken since God is upholding both ends of the agreement. But this does not negate the truth that individual members could break the covenant just as

the Israelites under Moses could. This is confirmed in several places in the New Testament (such as Matthew 24:13; Hebrews 2:1-3; 4:1-2; 10:19-31; 12:14-17; Revelation 2:5, 7; 11, 16, 17, 20-23, 26-27, 3:2, 5, 11-12, 18-21). As such, the “newness” of the new covenant should be interpreted differently than how New Covenant Theology does.

In light of the contribution made by New Covenant Theology, specially its “christocentricity,” it is necessary for the development of a new proposal to clarify the proper starting point of a new theological proposal. The starting point is the Scriptures as a divinely inspired witness and propositional self-disclosure of the unfolding of God’s plan and purpose in history. And since this witness/self-disclosure of God clarifies His involvement in human history (further established by the incarnation [see John 1:14]), His actions must be understood historically, and progressively.

The revelation of the Scriptures also clarifies a defined dual purpose that seems to guide God’s actions in history. On the one hand, His intention to *save* his people is evident throughout the Testaments. This is done in the context of a Creator-King that has lost his precious creation to sin (See Gen 3). This idea of God as King justifies God’s ethical demands in Genesis 2:15-17, and further clarifies the proper background to salvation history. Opposed to the Creator-King, there is an antagonist (Διάβολος) attempting a *coup* against God’s kingdom primarily represented as the organic and conscious life and environment related to Eden.

This twofold reality (the fall of humanity and a cosmic conflict) and this twofold purpose (the salvation of humankind and the defeat of Satan) are highlighted in Genesis 3:15. Furthermore, these twofold reality and purpose find their integrative element not

only in their own existence, but in the promise, *the* “Seed,”<sup>45</sup> that will change reality and fulfill God’s purpose. As such, Genesis 3:15 presents the major theme of a Kingdom in conflict actively involved in the salvation of humans and in the eternal resolution of the moral dissention in the universe while at the same time exalting the place of the coming “Seed” (i.e. Christ) in salvation history.

The works of Christ in salvation history could be described, at least in part, as a reversion of the current moral state of affairs and order (in the sense of government, or kingdom) of things. It is the restoration of the Edenic state where Adam and Eve enjoyed innocence and an uninterrupted relationship with God. For this reason, it is necessary to consider the place of the major historical covenants in salvation history as it relates to this dual reality/purpose. They served, among other things, to guide the θεός-ἄνθρωπος and the ἄνθρωπος-ἄνθρωπος relationships. Further investigation is still needed to determine how they function in relation to the advancement of God’s dual purpose set forth in Genesis 3:15. And pertaining to the discussion about the 10 commandments and the Sabbath, it is necessary to take into consideration the place given to these elements in eschatological-related literature (see, for instance Mat 24:20, Revelation 11:8, 14:6-7).

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<sup>45</sup> For a proper understanding of the “seed” in Genesis 3:15 as a singular entity, see Jack Collins, “A Syntactical Note (Genesis 3:15): Is The Woman’s Seed Singular Or Plural? *Tyndale Bulletin* 48, no. 1 (1997): 139-148.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this thesis was to evaluate New Covenant Theology's hermeneutical paradigm by means of an examination of the neocovenantal interpretation of the law-grace relationship. In doing so, I also aimed to clarify the place of New Covenant Theology's contribution to the current discussion on the subject, especially as it relates to both Covenant Theology's and Dispensationalism's presentations.

In the first chapter, I laid the foundations for this investigation by surveying the developments that have made possible the formation of the theological/hermeneutical system of New Covenant Theology. It was the Christian concern for hermeneutics, more specifically, the Christian concern for the relationship between the testaments, that made New Covenant Theology possible. This concern was embraced by important figures such as Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and other reformers. They contributed a more delineated interpretation of the law-grace relationship that would later on be used as a reference (either positive or negative) for the development of New Covenant Theology.

In the second chapter, I explored New Covenant Theology's interpretation of the law-grace relationship. The most important aspect of the neocovenant presentation of *law* lies in their historical-oriented interpretation of the Mosaic covenant as a *legal(-istic)* covenant. It is precisely this understanding of the Mosaic covenant (also called "law" because of the Pauline language) that guides the New Covenant emphasis on grace as the

new covenant (because it is based on “grace” rather than on “works”). Thus, the neocovenantal emphasis on the “newness” of the New Covenant springs, at least in part, from a particular interpretation of the Mosaic covenant as a legal covenant. Their hermeneutical and systematic attempt show consistency, although not necessarily a diachronic understanding of the progressiveness of God’s purpose/plan in history. Their theological system incorporates elements from both covenant theology and dispensationalism, but remains a distinctive system for emphasizing progression and discontinuity with more dedication than Covenant Theology, and the unity of salvation history more evidently than Dispensationalism.

Although New Covenant Theology stresses the similitudes between the Mosaic covenant and the New Covenant (namely, their part in advancing God’s purpose and the establishment of a formal structure from which to approach God) it stresses even more their difference in terms of the God-humanity relationship. For neocovenantalists, the Mosaic covenant encompasses the *works* principle while the New Covenant is grace-based. As such, the new covenant is the culmination of God’s plan in history, thus superseding the Mosaic covenant.

In the third chapter, I attempted to demonstrate the place of the law-grace relationship as an integrative principle in the development of the several neocovenantal proposals. It seemed from my investigation that New Covenant Theology’s theological agenda is to validate an ethical distinction between the Mosaic covenant and the new covenant. As such, New Covenant Theology’s *raison d’être* is to find a more consistent way to develop a Christian ethics without the apparent current reliance on the Mosaic covenant ethics while emphasizing the unity of God’s plan in history.

In doing so, first generation New Covenant theologians emphasize the elimination of inappropriate theological vocabulary that generates confusion while thinking about salvation history. Unfortunately, this does not save them from approaching the Old Testament with preconceived ideas extracted from a reading of the New Testament that, if done more carefully, or if postponed until a careful investigation of the Old Testament was completed, could have yielded different results.

The biggest contribution of New Covenant Theology to the theological arena was shown to be its emphasis on salvation history as the key to unlocking the Biblical truth. They have made a tremendous effort to point out the importance of the *protoevangelium* for the hermeneutical and theological enterprise to the point of developing a system that gravitates, at a coherent level, the centrality of Christ in God's purpose/plan in history. The Christ principle works as a foundational structural element that justifies the logical priority of the New Testament and the subsequent rejection of the so-called Mosaic ethical paradigm.

In terms of the relationship of the neocovenantal scheme to current theological affairs, it is clear that New Covenant Theology's redemptive-historical hermeneutics aims at maximizing the advantages of both Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism while avoiding their pitfalls. It shares the historical and textual emphases of Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology's general redemptive-historical approach, yet it rejects the dispensational literalism, and the overarching theological covenant of grace and its implications.

In the fourth chapter, I provided an evaluation of the neocovenantal interpretation of the law-grace relationship and its implications for the theological task. My main point

of contention with New Covenant Theology was that its understanding of the Mosaic covenant does not do justice to either the totality of Pauline writing on the subject or to the Old Testament's self-understanding of the Mosaic covenant. The neocovenantal assertion of the Mosaic covenant as a *legal* covenant demonstrates a failure to properly address important themes such as the Hebrew cultus (and its sacrificial substitution). Furthermore, New Covenant Theology's use of Pauline writings demonstrates a lack of sufficient concern for the meaning of important terms such as νόμος.

I also evaluated the neocovenantal Christocentric emphasis and found it to be praiseworthy for taking into consideration this foundational principle in salvation history. They have demonstrated the viability of the *Christ* principle as a proper integrative element for theology. In their implementation of this principle, however, they have not paid enough attention to the cosmic conflict scenario in which Genesis 3:15 takes place and its implications for salvation history.

On the implementation of the New Testament hermeneutical priority principle in New Covenant Theology, I found the danger of perhaps imposing a particular understanding of an element of salvation history into the whole, distorting the whole meaning of *heilsgeschichte*, which is the case in New Covenant Theology. Furthermore, this particular interpretation that I am referring to as a danger appears as the neocovenantal interpretation of the Mosaic covenant as a *legal* covenant, and its subsequent ethical implications. If one is to pay attention to some data found in the New Testament (such as Matthew 24:20) that has not yet received enough attention from New Covenant theologians, it is possible that the conclusions extracted from the text might lead the interpreter to a different interpretation of the issue altogether.



My last point of criticism of New Covenant Theology addresses one aspect of the neocovenantal understanding of the new covenant as an entirely “new” (meaning different) covenant. For one, the infallibility of the new covenant does not consider the clear presentation of the New Testament that one might be “cut off” from the covenant depending on our attitude towards God (see Matthew 24:13; Hebrews 2:1-3; 4:1-2; 10:19-31; 12:14-17; Revelation 2:5, 7; 11, 16, 17, 20-23, 26-27, 3:2, 5, 11-12, 18-21). This suggests that the neocovenantal interpretation of the nature of the new covenant needs to be revised.

The last section of the fourth chapter focused in my contribution to the discussion. It was my intention, too, to take the advantageous elements of New Covenant Theology, especially its “Christocentricity,” and develop the foundations for a system that takes into consideration all the revealed data of the Bible as far as is possible within the limits of this project. I started with the Bible as both divinely inspired witness and propositional self-disclosure of the unfolding of God’s plan and purpose in history. From there, I explored the nature of God’s purpose in history, namely a duality between His intentions to be the Savior of His people and His intentions to end the cosmic conflict that challenges to His Kingdom. These two elements that comprise God’s purpose in history are unequivocally present in Genesis 3:15, thus further clarifying the proper nature of the Biblical Christocentric-Christotelic purpose. The works of Christ to achieve the first aspect of God’s purpose, namely, salvation in history, could be described as a reversion of the current state of moral affairs and the current order of things. As such, the major historical covenants of the Bible should be understood as means to achieve this “reversion.”

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