

“Nothing shapes how we interpret and apply the Bible as much as our understanding of *covenant*. Richard Barcellos offers us a helpful blend of biblical exegesis and theological reflection on the implications of covenant theology for God’s relationship with Adam and for the Lord’s Day. Though this book’s discussion is framed by debates among Baptist brethren, the issues are of great consequence to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity. It serves as an effective antidote to New Covenant Theology, which, though saying many good things, can still do considerable damage to the church with regard to living out the Christian life practically and experientially. This is a welcome book written in an irenic spirit, and I pray that it will do much good in our day of great need to remain faithful to the biblically and carefully constructed covenant theology of our Puritan forebears. I am grateful that Dr. Barcellos underscores with clarity the vital importance of getting right the scriptural teaching on the covenant of works and on the Lord’s Day.”

**Dr. Joel R. Beeke**

President and Professor of Systematic Theology and Homiletics  
Puritan Reformed Theology Seminary  
and a pastor of the Heritage Reformed Congregation  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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“Richard Barcellos presents a compelling critique of New Covenant Theology. His work integrates biblical, historical, and systematic theology. His arguments are irenic but nevertheless potent as he demonstrates the important links between the covenant of works, the Sabbath, and eschatology. His research is deep, his exegetical spadework is thorough, and his arguments cogent. Anyone interested in uncovering the deficiencies in New Covenant Theology should definitely read this book.”

**J. V. Fesko**

Academic Dean  
Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology  
Westminster Seminary California

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“If exegesis is the queen of our biblically-birthered theology and practice, then biblically-formed hermeneutics is the king. There is a crisis in biblical hermeneutics today, both of ignorance and consistent application, which hinders agreement and unity among all evangelicals, but especially among reforming Baptists. What is needed is a clear voice to explain sound hermeneutics and irenically to examine the hermeneutical errors of New Cov-

enant Theology, which hinders the full reformation of grace-based Baptist churches. I find a loss of words to advocate the importance of Dr. Barcellos' work, *Getting the Garden Right*, concerning the present status of biblical and historical reformation today among reforming Baptist students, pastors, and churches. It should be required reading in every Baptist seminary. The 'Doctrines of Grace' doth not a full reformation make. The rise of New Covenant Theology from the 1970s to the present day has challenged the biblical and confessional tenets of the Reformed faith, both for credobaptists and paedobaptists (e.g., covenant theology, the law and the gospel, the Sabbath, sanctification, etc.). Having dealt with the spreading teachings of New Covenant Theology since the late 1970s to the present day, I believe that its faulty hermeneutic has truncated the full Baptist reformation of a return to the more biblical faith and practice of our forefathers which so many of us had hoped for in the 70s. Dr. Barcellos has given us an irenic and thorough examination of New Covenant Theology's hermeneutical errors, clear exegetical answers to most of its errors, and a robust defense of our historical Baptist faith. Therefore, first, I commend Dr. Barcellos himself for the highest level of Reformed hermeneutics, accurate biblical exegesis of texts involved, and an irenic theological correction to New Covenant Theology and some of its leaders. Second, I recommend Dr. Barcellos' work with the highest commendation I can give: (1) I wish that I possessed the gifts and energy to have written it; (2) I believe every Baptist student and pastor should read it in light of today's theological differences and confusion; and (3) I believe that it brings glory to our triune God for the cause of His revealed Truth. Dr. Barcellos' thorough research and composition has given Reformed Baptists (and all evangelicals) a convincing apologetic for the faith of our Reformed Baptist forefathers which would advance a robust unity and reformation in our Baptist churches today. We have needed this work for a long time."

**Fred A. Malone, Ph. D.**

Pastor of First Baptist Church, Clinton, Louisiana

Author of *The Baptism of Disciples Alone*

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"Pastors and theologians have been called 'God's water treatment specialists,' protecting the churches from bad water and subsequent bad health. In the history of Christianity, faithful pastors and theologians who have engaged and critiqued bad theology were doing 'polemical theology.' All pastors and theologians are called to serve the churches in this way and protect them from both bad doctrine and wrong teachers. Sadly, in our postmodern culture, few pastor-theologians engage in polemics and even

fewer still do it well. Dr. Richard Barcellos is a welcome exception. He puts the churches in his debt in this *tour de force* examination of how God's revelation in the garden of Eden plays itself out through the rest of the Bible. Irenically, and yet firmly, the author examines New Covenant Theology and finds it wanting in regards to the biblical revelation and the history of Reformed theology. I find this a great example of Christian scholarship in service to the churches. It is methodologically sound, respectful to those with whom it disagrees, and clearly written. The chapter on hermeneutics alone is worth the price of the book. I highly commend this book to all Reformed pastors and theologians, especially Baptist and 'New Covenant' pastors and theologians. I pastored for over 30 years in Reformed churches and this book would have helped the people of my church wanting to know why we were different from the church down the road and it would have been great to give to my New Covenant brethren with whom I dialogued for over 25 years. If all works of polemics were done like this, there would be more light on problematic doctrinal issues and greater unity and joy in the churches."

**Steve Martin**

Coordinator of the Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America (ARBCA)

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"*Getting the Garden Right* is no garden-variety theology book. More fruitful than fault-finding, it produces the biblical testimony lushly, apprehended best in the tradition of Reformed orthodoxy, that God is blessing His creation toward a redemptive end which is indeed better than the beginning. The seeds of His purpose were all sown in Eden. The light of all Scripture helps us see them now. They bud, flourish, and flower in the Promised Seed, even our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the abundant fruition of God's righteousness, gracious presence, and Sabbath rest. Even without a special interest in New Covenant Theology, reverent readers will appreciate this meditation on the paradise God has prepared for those who love Him. Were more dialogue about doctrinal differences conducted this way, more light would illumine our hearts, the breaches among brothers would decrease, and God would be more glorified. I would especially urge pastors to plow through these verdant fields of theological insight and to reap a harvest of enrichment for their own ministries of the Word."

**D. Scott Meadows**

Pastor of Calvary Baptist Church (Reformed)  
Exeter, New Hampshire

“This book will serve the reader well from several vantage points. It provides a clean window into present discussion concerning New Covenant Theology and Covenant Theology. This issue has deeply important implications for understanding aspects of coherence, continuity, and discontinuity over the whole biblical corpus. Barcellos speaks to friends, not to enemies, and makes a transparently honest attempt to present the New Covenant view according to its own best arguments. He then seeks to focus the discussion around places where he discerns missteps or inconsistencies in interpretation or theological development. Although there is agreement on a multitude of doctrines—very important Reformation doctrines—among the adherents of both parties in the discussion, Barcellos isolates the issues of the covenant in the garden of Eden and the theme of Sabbath rest, Christologically perceived, as keys to sorting out differences, with the hope that greater agreement can be attained. Barcellos provides a model of how to integrate tight contextual issues, broadly conceived hermeneutics, biblical theology, and systematic theology into a covenantal framework, an important issue for both groups participating in this discussion. I believe this is a great step forward in defining Covenant Theology *vis a vis* New Covenant Theology and will help establish a foundation for more focused and edifying interaction.”

**Tom Nettles**

Retired Professor of Historical Theology  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary  
Louisville, Kentucky

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“Polemical writings frequently are like well-honed blades. An author enters the fray with his sword honed to a fine sharp edge and wields it seeking to destroy his opponent. But occasionally, one finds a writer who seeks to win his battle with kind and gracious words. In this polemical work, Dr. Richard Barcellos does just this. Examining some of the key tenets of a recently proposed system called ‘New Covenant Theology,’ he presents a well-considered, carefully constructed, and thoughtful engagement with several of the proponents of that system. Barcellos carefully exegetes Scripture in conversation with the past and present, presenting an evaluation and refutation, along with an exhortation to its adherents, of several central ideas of New Covenant Theology. Both friend and foe will profit from this book.”

**James M. Renihan, Ph.D.**

Dean and Professor of Historical Theology  
Institute of Reformed Baptist Studies  
Westminster Seminary California  
Escondido, California

“In *Getting the Garden Right*, Richard Barcellos not only draws a clear line of hermeneutical differences between New Covenant Theology and Covenant Theology, but so thoroughly dismantles the former while defining and defending the latter that the reader is left with one direction in which to move—toward a more biblical understanding of the garden of Eden, and therefore of the Christian faith. Careful exegesis, precise theology, and a kind spirit make this book a challenging and joyful read.”

**Joe Thorn**

Lead Pastor of Redeemer Fellowship  
St. Charles, Illinois

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“Richard Barcellos has given us a real gem in his *Getting the Garden Right*. I know of no contemporary book like it. It is worth its weight in gold. Barcellos defends the confessional understanding of the covenant of works and the Sabbath rest through hermeneutics, exegesis, biblical theology, historical theology, and systematics. While the context for the book is discussion of these central doctrines with theologians within the New Covenant Theology movement, the book should be of interest to the wider Reformed community beyond Baptist circles. Barcellos has written theology as it ought to be written. *Getting the Garden Right* is polemical theology at its gentle best. I heartily recommend this volume for its depth of theological argumentation seasoned with grace, for its delineation and vindication of the doctrine of the covenant of works and the continuing validity of a Sabbath rest in this age, and for its clear example of theological method. You must not only read the cover of this book. Get the book, consume it, digest it, and then return to it annually and as often as you need.”

**Rev. Jeffrey C. Waddington, Ph.D.**

Stated Clerk & Archivist—Presbytery of Philadelphia  
The Orthodox Presbyterian Church  
Stated Supply & Ministerial Adviser—Knox OPC  
Lansdowne, Pennsylvania

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“Contentions about issues like covenant theology and the first day of the week, the Lord’s Day, are too often bitter and negative, not to mention complex and confusing. Rich Barcellos’ newest offering on these topics is careful without being pedantic, thorough without being exhausting, thoughtful without being speculative, academic without being abstruse, fair without being soft, and pointed without being nasty. Rich builds grad-

ual momentum through his book, digging ever deeper through the various strata of biblical, historical, and systematic theology to develop his case. Those who more or less agree with him will find this a helpful confirmation and a useful prompt to further careful study. Those who more or less disagree will find that this is no casual contribution, but a significant effort and a serious challenge to any who overlook, neglect or even carelessly dismiss the patterns, purposes, and privileges of the Lord's Day as it is understood in the context of creation, fall, redemption, and coming glory.”

**Jeremy Walker**

Pastor of Maidenbower Baptist Church

Crawley, England

# Getting the Garden Right

Adam's Work and God's Rest  
In Light of Christ

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By  
Richard C. Barcellos

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# Contents

Foreword . . . . .	3
Preface . . . . .	5
Introduction . . . . .	9
1. What Is New Covenant Theology . . . . .	13
2. The Importance of Hermeneutics in Theological Formulation . . . . .	19
<b>Part I: Adam's Work in Light of Christ</b>	
3. A Covenant of Works in the Garden: The New Covenant Theology Perspective . . . . .	31
4. A Covenant of Works in the Garden: The Confessional Formulation . . . . .	38
5. A Covenant of Works in the Garden: The Scriptural Arguments . . . . .	53
<b>Part II: God's Rest in Light of Christ</b>	
6. The Doctrine of the Christian Sabbath: The New Covenant Theology Perspective . . . . .	81
7. The Doctrine of the Christian Sabbath: The Confessional Formulation . . . . .	99
8. The Doctrine of the Christian Sabbath: Adam's Identity and Vocation . . . . .	110
9. The Doctrine of the Christian Sabbath: The Beginning and the End . . . . .	145
10. The Doctrine of the Christian Sabbath: Genesis 2:1–3 . . . . .	156
11. The Doctrine of the Christian Sabbath: Exodus and the Prophets . . . . .	181

12.	The Doctrine of the Christian Sabbath: New Testament Fulfillment . . . . .	198
13.	The Doctrine of the Christian Sabbath: Hebrews 4:9–10 . . . . .	231
14.	The Doctrine of the Christian Sabbath: Revelation 1:10 . . . . .	260
	Conclusion . . . . .	270
	Appendix . . . . . <i>A review of New Covenant Theology: Description, Definition. Defense by Tom Wells and Fred Zaspel</i>	273
	Index of Scripture References . . . . .	283
	Index of Names and Subjects . . . . .	295
	Bibliography . . . . .	301

# Foreword

*Dr. Thomas K. Ascol*

This is an important book. Dr. Barcellos tackles a subject that is crucial for a right understanding of the Bible and he does so in a very careful way. Both the conclusions that he advocates and the methods by which he reaches them are instructive. The Bible tells the story of God's salvation of sinners in Christ. But that story does not begin in Bethlehem. It begins, well, at the beginning. At creation. Misunderstand God's work at the beginning and you will not fully appreciate what He has done since.

Barcellos recognizes this and so takes a careful look at the garden of Eden. God's work in that place sets the stage for His work for the rest of history. With a scholar's eye and a pastor's heart, Barcellos carefully examines the relationship that God established with Adam in the garden with its stated stipulations and threat as well as its implied promise. The purpose of that covenantal arrangement, and Adam's failure to maintain it, establishes the trajectory for all subsequent revelation and the promise of eternity.

Barcellos writes as a Reformed Baptist who is convinced of the covenantal structure of biblical revelation. To get at key issues involved in this study, he interacts with other Calvinistic Baptists who do not share that conviction. Most of the proponents of this so-called "New Covenant Theology" (NCT), have, until recently, been hesitant to acknowledge that God established a covenant with Adam at the beginning. Barcellos gives their arguments a gracious hearing while exposing their weaknesses and failures to understand biblical and historical texts. One of the key points of disagreement between NCT and covenant theology (including the Reformed Baptist version) is the perpetuity of the weekly Sabbath. In acknowledgment of this, and because it is a crucial part of the order that God established at creation, Barcellos devotes the second half of the book to that question. His arguments for an abiding Sabbath principle in the Christian Lord's Day are exegetically sound, theologically robust and pastorally wise.

In a day when the idea that God calls us to set aside one day in seven as a Sabbath rest sounds archaic to the large majority of evangelical Christians, the case presented here needs to gain a wide hearing.

In this book Dr. Barcellos has given us a wonderful example of exegetical, historical, systematic, polemical and pastoral theology. He has served the church well by calling attention to an essential ingredient for reading the Bible rightly and by doing so with humility, rigor and grace. I hope that it will gain a wide reading not only by those who already hold his conclusions, but especially by those who, though they do not, nevertheless share his love for God's Word. May this book bring glory to the One who succeeded where Adam failed and whose life, death and resurrection guarantee that everything that was originally promised in the beginning will infallibly come to pass.

Thomas Ascol  
Cape Coral, Florida  
August 2017

## Preface

In 2001, my *In Defense of the Decalogue: A Critique of New Covenant Theology (IDOTD)* was published by Founders Press. In 2002, my friends Tom Wells and Fred Zaspel published *New Covenant Theology: Description, Definition, Defense*. Fred sent me a copy and signed it with these words:

Richard,

To the guy who made us go to all this work! Trust you will enjoy and learn!

Fred

I was very thankful for the book and for its attempt to set the record straight about what New Covenant Theology (NCT) asserts. A review of the Wells/Zaspel book has been included as an appendix to this book. The review was first published in the *Reformed Baptist Theological Review (RBTR)* in 2004. Since much has transpired since *IDOTD*, the Wells/Zaspel book, and my review, it was determined that a new book was needed.

The idea for a new book, a second and expanded edition of *IDOTD*, was presented to me several years ago. I had been content to let the first edition stand on its own (even with the faults I admit in the review of the Wells/Zaspel book), though realizing it was outdated at points. Since *IDOTD* is out of print, and since my own thinking and that of NCT has developed and matured, I thought it best to work on a second edition. As the work began, I came to the conclusion that what was needed was not a second edition, but rather a book that interacts with NCT on some foundational issues on a deeper level than that offered by *IDOTD*. This book is offered as an attempt to reflect upon some of the discussions that have taken place since *IDOTD* was published, focusing on three issues—hermeneutics, the covenant of works, and the Sabbath. The arguments used by NCT adherents, particularly against the doctrines of the covenant of works and of the Sabbath, are held by many in our day, and thus are worthy of interaction.

The analysis of NCT contained herein in no way pretends to be exhaustive. It reflects my own limited understanding of NCT. As I stated in 2001, it is still somewhat difficult to critique NCT because it is not a monolithic movement. There is also no agreed-upon NCT confession of faith. New Covenant theologians differ on some of the finer nuances involved with their system, as will become obvious in later discussions. These facts serve to alert the reader that NCT is a movement still in progress, which I think is a good thing.

As will become evident, the book utilizes hermeneutical principles contained in the Second London Confession of Faith of 1677/89 (2LCF) and seeks to defend two doctrinal formulations of that confessional document. Both the hermeneutical principles and the two doctrinal formulations are also found in the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) and the Savoy Declaration (SD). The justification for utilizing the 2LCF will be given in Chapter 2.

This book has been written primarily for pastors and theological students, though it is hoped that any studious Christian will profit from its contents. Those not interested in technical, secondary points may skip the footnotes (something I never do). The reader should know, however, that the footnotes also contain crucial justification for arguments made in the main text, as well as further interaction with those arguments.

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I want to thank various pre-publication readers who offered helpful comments and push-back. The Lord knows who you are. Christ Reformed Baptist Church, Vista, California, sent students from the Institute of Reformed Baptist Studies to fill my pulpit for a whole month in 2016, and I thank them for doing so.

Special thanks to my long-time friend Pastor James P. Butler of Free Grace Baptist Church, Chilliwack, British Columbia. Jim read each chapter of the book in a timely fashion and offered many suggestions that ended up in the book. I hope he does not accuse me of plagiarism.

Thanks also to my own church, Grace Reformed Baptist Church, Palmdale, California. Though we are not many nor mighty, we are Christ's and he cares for us faithfully.

My wife, Nan, is to be thanked for understanding that writing books means late nights and early mornings.

I want to express my deep appreciation to Founders Press for expressing interest in this book. Special thanks go to Dr. Thomas K. Ascol.

May the Lord continue to bless the labors of Founders Press and bring about a theological and practical reformation not only in the Southern Baptist Convention, but throughout the world and in all of Christ's true churches.

*Soli Deo gloria!*

Richard C. Barcellos  
Grace Reformed Baptist Church  
Palmdale, California  
September 2016





# Introduction

This book, in one sense, concentrates on hermeneutics and theological method. I contend that NCT gets the covenant of works and the Sabbath wrong because it gets the garden of Eden wrong, and it gets the garden of Eden wrong because it gets crucial aspects of hermeneutics wrong. The garden of Eden (and its surrounding context in the Genesis narrative) contains “the principal themes of biblical theology displayed in epigrammatic brevity” and “these simple but far-reaching affirmations...become the presuppositions of the rest of the sacred story.”<sup>1</sup> Eden sets the stage for the drama of redemption revealed to us in subsequent Holy Scripture. Though Eden was glorious, Adam failed his task as the representative of man and fell short of the glory of God. He fell short of something he did not possess via creation.

The redemptive stream of Holy Scripture takes creation to its intended end, the eternal state of glory. The agent appointed by God to do this is our Lord Jesus Christ. The last Adam, our Lord, takes His seed where the first Adam failed to take his. Adam had a goal to obtain, a goal he failed to achieve. Adam fell from the righteous state in which he was created and did not enter glory due to his sin. Though the potential for attaining glory was endowed upon him by his Creator, he never reached it. This means that eschatological potential existed from the beginning. Eden, though a glorious place, was not the end, but the beginning to an end. It had within it the seeds of a better world; a better world where sin could not enter and which could never lapse into a cursed condition. In the words of William J. Dumbrell, “Eden is the representation of what the world is to become...”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 39.

<sup>2</sup> William J. Dumbrell, “Genesis 2:1-17: A Foreshadowing of the New Creation,” in *Biblical Theology: Retrospect & Prospect*, ed. Scott J. Hafemann (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 61.

What the world is to become is what we call the eternal state of glory, the new heavens and the new earth. This being the case, a proper understanding of the garden is crucial for understanding many scriptural doctrines, such as God as both Creator and divine exemplar, man's identity and vocation, the law of nature, the covenant of works, the Sabbath, and even Christology and eschatology. Those who get the garden wrong end up robbing themselves of the foundational doctrines necessary to make proper sense of redemptive history. In order to properly understand the promise of Genesis 3:15, the unfolding and function of the biblical covenants, the function of old covenant Israel, and the new covenant inaugurated by our Lord, one must understand creation and its various doctrinal and ethical entailments. Indeed, as Dumbrell asserts, "the foundational factor in biblical theology is a creation theology."<sup>3</sup> The redemptive story line of the Bible assumes and develops from the original revelation of the state of Adam and Eve before the fall. Going astray at the level of the foundation creates problems when trying to assemble the structure of the Bible's teaching on many crucial subjects.

### Why the Covenant of Works and the Sabbath?

I chose to interact with NCT on the covenant of works and the Sabbath because, as will be argued, both of these doctrines are revealed to us in the beginning of the Bible and both are denied or modified by NCT advocates. In addition, the formulation of these doctrines demands the application of hermeneutical principles with which most NCT adherents agree, though, as will also be argued, they apply them inconsistently. The ongoing nature of the Sabbath under the inaugurated new covenant, in many respects, is the most obvious doctrine wherein NCT and Covenant Theology disagree. The covenant of works is probably second to the Sabbath in this regard. The formulation of these doctrines will serve as test cases to illustrate the differences in hermeneutics utilized by NCT and Covenant Theology.

### The Structure of the Book

The first two chapters deal with defining NCT (Chapter 1), the importance of hermeneutics in theological formulation, and charting a course of study for the main sections of the book (Chapter 2). Part I is entitled "Adam's Work in Light of Christ." This section discusses NCT's view of

<sup>3</sup> Dumbrell, "Genesis 2:1-17: A Foreshadowing of the New Creation," 65.

God, Adam, and covenant (Chapter 3), the confessional formulation of the doctrine of the covenant of works (Chapter 4), and the scriptural arguments in favor of the doctrine (Chapter 5). Part II, “God’s Rest in Light of Christ,” is more involved. After a chapter discussing NCT’s position on the Sabbath (Chapter 6), and a chapter on the confessional formulation of the doctrine (Chapter 7), seven chapters are devoted to the scriptural arguments for a Christian Sabbath (Chapters 8–14). The reason so much attention is given to the issue of the Sabbath is due to its foundational place at creation and its subsequent function in both the Old and New Testaments. The biblical doctrine of the Sabbath begins at creation and follows the story line of the Bible to the consummation. Understanding it properly requires the examination of many biblical texts. Because of this book’s particular focus on the problems within NCT, the present writer has attempted to provide significant interaction with those who agree and disagree with the confessional position advocated herein.

### Why Read this Book?

The book contains exegesis, biblical theology, systematic theology, and historical theology. It is crucial that the subject matter of this book be addressed through these methodological disciplines. This book will deal with texts, seek to help the reader understand those texts in their immediate contexts and the wider context of the entire Bible, and interact with systematic and historical theological concerns along the way. Interacting with voices from the past keeps the discussion within the bounds of Christian orthodoxy, where the Spirit of Christ has been helping the people of Christ understand the Word of Christ for thousands of years.

Some of the chapters are long and contain sustained arguments that must be followed carefully. Each chapter assumes and builds upon previous discussion. Readers are encouraged to read carefully and recall previous discussion often.

Though NCT is primarily a Calvinistic Baptist phenomenon, some of its tenets are held by others who do not identify with that theological tradition. There are Presbyterians who deny (or modify) the covenant of works and the Sabbath, though these doctrines are contained in the Westminster Standards. There is also a school of thought known as Progressive Covenantalism which denies (or modifies) these same doctrines. Progressive Covenantalism is relatively new. Books advocating its distinctives are just coming off the press. More time is needed for them to articulate their views and for others to listen carefully to them before interacting on a substantive level, though some interaction with it will be provided here. These things being the case, this book is not aimed at Baptists alone. My hope is

that it will benefit any inquiring mind on the issues discussed. If you are interested in hermeneutics, theological method, biblical theology, creation and its ethical entailments, man in the image of God, the covenant of works, the Sabbath, the old and new creations, and the relationship between protology, eschatology, redemptive history, and Christology, you are invited to read carefully and prayerfully the pages before you.

# 1

## What Is New Covenant Theology?

In order to conduct the following study properly, it is only fair to define INCT. I attempt to do that in this chapter, allowing its own writers to speak for themselves. Since I will argue that hermeneutics is of great importance concerning the issues to be discussed, in the next chapter I will introduce readers to some of the principles of interpretation utilized in this book and chart our course of study, indicating what will be discussed and why.

### What is New Covenant Theology?

In *IDOTD*, the following was asserted:

The critique in no way pretends to be exhaustive. It reflects my own limited, and certainly fallible, understanding of New Covenant Theology. Frankly, it is somewhat difficult to critique New Covenant Theology for at least three reasons. *First*, New Covenant Theology is not a monolithic movement. New Covenant theologians differ on some of the nuances involved with defining New Covenant Theology. *Second*, New Covenant Theology is a relatively new school of thought. Though there is much in print on New Covenant Theology, there is no definitive work, as of yet... Because of these things, a critique can become quickly outdated.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Richard C. Barcellos, *In Defense of the Decalogue: A Critique of New Covenant Theology* (Enumclaw, WA: WinePress Publishing, 2001), 7.

The Preface to *New Covenant Theology* by Tom Wells and Fred Zaspel, published in 2002, agrees with this assessment. After quoting my words above, the authors say:

This analysis is right on target. It is too soon to know how these difficulties will be reconciled, but if NCT proves to be a viable understanding of the Scriptures, the work could well extend into the period beyond our lifetimes.<sup>2</sup>

Recently, NCT advocate Gary D. Long says of NCT:

[NCT] as a theological system in America...is a recent development<sup>3</sup> having different explanations, especially due to diverse—sometimes, sad to say, even heterodox—writings on the Internet which lack the discipline of biblical hermeneutics. The time has come for those who hold to the need for NCT to unify, explain and demonstrate what it is as a developing theological system exegetically based on sound principles of biblical interpretation.<sup>4</sup>

I appreciate Long's assessment. NCT is a recent, developing system.<sup>5</sup> Neither is it a monolithic movement. Because there is no agreed-upon creedal document subscribed by NCT advocates, it is hard for outsiders to offer critique. John Reisinger has even gone so far as to say, "Currently, New Covenant Theology has no clearly defined hermeneutic."<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere, he says, "I have yet to discover what a 'true new covenant theologian' is."<sup>7</sup> Though there is probably some rhetorical overkill in Reisinger's statements, his words reveal that even NCT advocates realize their formulations are somewhat recent and developing.<sup>8</sup> This makes what I asserted in 2001, and what the Wells/Zaspel book affirmed in 2002, still applicable.

<sup>2</sup> Tom Wells and Fred Zaspel, *New Covenant Theology: Description, Definition, Defense* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2002), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Kirk M. Wellum agrees with Long at this point. In A. Blake White, *What is New Covenant Theology? An Introduction* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2012), endorsement page iii, Wellum identifies NCT as a "relatively new theological formulation..."

<sup>4</sup> Gary D. Long, *NCT: Time for a More Accurate Way* (n. p., 2013), 1. The book is available at Amazon.com and CreateSpace.com.

<sup>5</sup> A. Blake White says, "New Covenant Theology is a developing system of theology...." See White, *What is New Covenant Theology?*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> John G. Reisinger, *New Covenant Theology and Prophecy* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2012), 7.

<sup>7</sup> John G. Reisinger, "Foreword," in A. Blake White, *The Law of Christ: A Theological Proposal* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2010), 3, n. 1.

<sup>8</sup> I don't think developing one's system is necessarily a bad thing. In *IDOTD*,

The safest way to define NCT is to allow their writers to speak for themselves. However, since it is still developing, what one writer sees as a crucial element of the system, another might not. For example, in *IDOTD*, I asserted that “One key text for New Covenant Theology is found in Matthew 5:17–20.”<sup>9</sup> John Reisinger takes issue with my claim:

While NCT does believe in a redemptive-historical shift in law, we do not present this text as a key text to support the idea. We usually only refer to this text in relation to that shift when someone else raises it as an objection. To present it as one of our key texts is akin to saying, “One of the key texts for those who believe in free will is Romans 9,” and then proceeding to show how Romans 9 teaches sovereignty and refutes free will. Arminians do not use Romans 9 as a key text. Barcellos’ point is similar to stating that 1 John 2:2 is a key text for those who believe in limited atonement, and then demanding an explanation from them of the phrase *the whole world*. It would seem that Barcellos has chosen texts that he himself wants to discuss, and then has stated that he is using those particular texts because they are important texts to NCT. While it is legitimate for him to feel that a given text is important in this discussion, it is not fair to put words in our mouth and then refute them. If the phrase “One key text for New Covenant Theology” means “this is a key text that NCT must explain,” then Barcellos has made a fair request. If he means that the text he identifies is one that New Covenant theologians use as a key text, then he has misrepresented NCT.

Matthew 5:17–20 is important to this discussion because Covenant theologians make it a key text in their refutation of NCT. Again, I acknowledge that NCT must explain that text, as well as any other salient text, but that does not mean that we make it a foundational text for our view.<sup>10</sup>

This was published in 2008. The Wells/Zaspel book was published in 2002. Its full title is *New Covenant Theology: Description, Definition, Defense*. Four of its fifteen chapters, written by Fred Zaspel, treat Matthew 5:17–20 (the discussion is more extensive than those verses alone). *IDOTD* is not referenced in those chapters. Zaspel himself says of Matthew 5:17–

for example, I purposefully stayed clear of various doctrinal formulations found in my confession of faith (2LCF) that I was still “developing” in my own thinking. Where I have landed on those issues is not relatively new ground, however. Also, to be fair, some of the tenets of NCT predate its designation.

<sup>9</sup> Barcellos, *IDOTD*, 12.

<sup>10</sup> John G. Reisinger, *In Defense of Jesus, the New Lawgiver* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2008), 59–60.

20, “Indeed, the whole NT theology of law grows out of this pivotal statement of Jesus.”<sup>11</sup> In the Foreword to that book, Douglas J. Moo says, “... Zaspel concentrates on a careful exegesis of key New Testament texts — especially the pivotal Matthew 5:17–20.”<sup>12</sup> Most of what Zaspel wrote on Matthew 5 was written prior to *IDOTD*.<sup>13</sup> Since that is the case, he was not responding to my book simply because I brought up that text. This would mean that what I said about this passage in *IDOTD* was accurate, at least as Zaspel sees NCT. Interestingly, Gary Long’s list of “NCT Characteristics” published in 2013, what he identifies as “some of the major NCT characteristics,”<sup>14</sup> includes the following: “The Law of God is both absolute and covenantal (Matt. 5:17–20)”<sup>15</sup> and “The law of Christ is not to be equated with the Decalogue.”<sup>16</sup> He then cites Matthew 5 three times in support. It is clear that Long sees Matthew 5 as important for NCT. In addition, John Reisinger wrote a whole book on the Sermon on the Mount, first published in 1989.<sup>17</sup> Maybe I assumed more than I ought to have in light of that book by Reisinger, but it seems clear to me that the Wells/Zaspel book and Long’s book both view Matthew 5 as important to the system of thought advocated by NCT.

This brief caveat was included to highlight that defining NCT is not easy, especially for an outsider. Indeed, as Gary Long asserts, NCT “is a recent development having different explanations.”<sup>18</sup> Though I will attempt to state a working definition of NCT, I fully realize some might take issue with aspects of it.

If I understand NCT correctly, the chapter titles of A. Blake White’s *What is New Covenant Theology?* may go some way toward a working definition. NCT is a developing system of doctrine which advocates the following:

Chapter 1: One Plan of God Centered in Jesus Christ

Chapter 2: The Old Testament Should Be Interpreted in Light of the New Testament

<sup>11</sup> Wells and Zaspel, *NCT*, 78.

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

<sup>13</sup> This has been confirmed to me through personal correspondence with Fred Zaspel.

<sup>14</sup> Long, *NCT*, 4.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>17</sup> John G. Reisinger, *But I Say Unto You* (Southbridge, MA: Crown Publications, Inc., 1989).

<sup>18</sup> Long, *NCT*, 1.



- Chapter 3: The Old Covenant Was Temporary by Divine Design
- Chapter 4: The Law is a Unit
- Chapter 5: Christians are not Under the Law of Moses, but the ‘Law’ of Christ
- Chapter 6: All Members of the New Covenant Community are Fully Forgiven and Have the Holy Spirit
- Chapter 7: The Church is the Eschatological Israel.<sup>19</sup>

As stated and without explicit elucidation, I agree with all seven points. But, as will be demonstrated below, some of the nuances articulated by NCT adherents in the way these statements are explained is where I will take issue. For example, though I agree that the Old Testament should be understood in light of the New Testament, I maintain that the Old Testament ought to be understood in light of itself as well. Though my hunch is that NCT adherents will agree with me at this point, I have not seen this worked out on a consistent basis in the various books I have read by them.

Gary Long offers the following brief definition of NCT: “*God’s eternal purpose progressively revealed in the commandments and promises of the biblical covenants of the OT and fulfilled in the New Covenant of Jesus Christ.*”<sup>20</sup> He then offers what he calls its “major themes...summarily described” as follows:

- *God’s eternal purpose of redemption*: covenantally revealed and administered through biblical covenants beginning with a pre-fall covenant of obedience with Adam (Rom. 5:12–19; Eph. 2:12)<sup>21</sup> and a post-fall covenant of promise (Gen. 3:15);
- *Hermeneutics*: consistent interpretation of the OT in light of the NT (Luke 24:27; II Cor. 1:20);

<sup>19</sup> White, *What is New Covenant Theology?*, Table of Contents.

<sup>20</sup> Long, *NCT*, 2; emphasis original.

<sup>21</sup> This is an interesting place to reference Ephesians 2:12. If intentional by Long, it makes that text to include what he calls “a pre-fall covenant of obedience with Adam,” which would make that covenant one of the covenants of promise mentioned by Paul. Ephesians 2:12 speaks of “the covenants of promise.” Paul says that Gentiles “were at that time [i.e., when they were not Christians] separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.” Long includes the “pre-fall covenant of obedience with Adam” among “the covenants of promise.” This seems unwarranted from the Ephesians text and broader considerations. It could be that the reference to Ephesians 2:12 belongs with Long’s words “and a post-fall covenant of promise (Genesis 3:15).”

- *The people of God*: all the elect of God throughout time first constituted as the church at Pentecost (Acts 1:4–5), but not before (John 7:39; 17:21–22; Col. 1:26–27; Heb. 11:39–40), as one corporate spiritual body in union with Christ (I Cor. 12:13; Eph. 2:19–21; Col. 1:18, 24); and
- *The law of God*: the two great commandments of God—love of God and neighbor (Matt. 22:36–40)—are innate law known instinctively by man (Rom. 2:14–15) created in God’s image (Gen. 1:27). Upon these two great commandments all of God’s covenantally written laws depend as administered under biblical covenants, which culminate in the New Covenant (NC) law of Christ (I Cor. 9:20–21; Romans 13:8–10; Galatians 6:2; Heb. 8:6; James 2:8; I John 5:3). Innate law is righteous and unchanging. Covenantal law is written, righteous and changeable (Heb. 7:12) worked out in history in accordance with God’s eternal purpose (Eph. 1:11; 3:11; II Tim. 1:9).<sup>22</sup>

Some of these major themes of NCT as offered by Long are not agreed upon by other NCT advocates, as will be shown below. What is of interest at this point in our discussion is his suggestion that there are two covenants revealed in the early chapters of Genesis: a pre-fall covenant of obedience with Adam and a post-fall covenant of promise announced in the curse upon the serpent (Genesis 3:15). It is also of interest to note that this is not typical of many NCT writers. Finally, notice Long’s distinction between innate law and covenantal law, which will be discussed below.

These two samples of what constitutes the major tenets of NCT from two of its writers illustrate what some of its advocates admit: NCT is a developing system. One of my intents in this book is to nudge NCT adherents in this admitted development.

<sup>22</sup> Long, *NCT*, 2–3.