NEW FOCUS

New Covenant Theology: A Critical Evaluation

Part 1 A New Approach to the Law

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Several friends have written to me during the last few years to tell me that their views of the Old Testament, of Law and Gospel, of the Covenant of Grace, of the Church and of the Person of Christ have been radically altered by the teaching of Fred Zaspel and John Reisinger. A few have turned judgemental and in their new enthusiasm for this new teaching, they have scolded me for keeping to old Reformed patterns of doctrine, exegesis and hermeneutics and have discontinued fellowship. Such disciples are far stricter than their mentors as both Reisinger and Zaspel invite constructive criticism and have altered, if not corrected, their views openly since the late nineteen-nineties. Indeed, they call their own views ‘elastic’. New Covenant Theology (NCT) off-shoots have also emerged with whom Zaspel, Reisinger and others to be mentioned in this series remain in dialogue seeking mutual solutions. This means, however, that any dialogue with the NCT has become like a dialogue with a piece of wet modelling clay as one never knows what shape they might drop into next.

A new character of thinking

In his booklet New Covenant Theology and the Mosaic Law, Fred Zaspel describes the idea behind the term New Covenant as the ‘new character’ of covenant thinking inaugurated by Christ. He claims that NCT stands midway between the two extremes of Covenant Theology and Dispensational Theology. Covenant Theology, according to Zaspel, emphasises the covenants of redemption, works and grace and thus tends ‘to carry the old order into the new’ with the law of the old covenant still binding on the new. In Dispensational Theology, Zaspel argues, the changes and differences between the old and new economies or dispensations are stressed and the law is seen as irrelevant to the covenant believer. New Covenant Theology, Zaspel urges, is centred on Matthew 5:17-20 where Christ says, ‘I am not come to destroy but to fulfil’.1 Zaspel thus sees Jesus as a new Moses and a new Lawgiver who is greater than Moses. The new law of Jesus contains what Zaspel calls ‘eschatological transcendence’ over the old and is to be found in His commandments and sayings, (Matthew 5:18-20).2 Zaspel then goes on to argue that Christ does not merely correct the abuse of the law in Matthew 5 but ‘rescinds’ some laws, ‘restricts’ others and ‘extends the requirements’ of a third group. As

Christ is greater than Moses and greater than the law, it is His prerogative to do with the law as 'He feels fit'.

Giving words new meanings

Zaspel explains that we have misunderstood the word 'destroy' in Matthew 5:17. The word does not refer to a 'tearing down' or 'disassembling' of the law but that Christ 'has not come to make it fail its intended design.' This 'intended design,' Zaspel sees in what he calls the 'eschatological realization of the law,' that 'brings about its intended and ultimate purpose.'3 This, Zaspel explains, has nothing to do with the old Reformed idea that Christ came to obey the law on behalf of sinners. The old law lost its applicability when Christ came because it was both fulfilled and transcended eschatologically.4 We now live in the time of fulfilment and transcendence which Zaspel calls the time of the law of Christ. As we now have the 'end', we can dispense with the means to it. Moses, Zaspel tells us, has taken the back seat. We no longer ask what Moses says but what Christ says. Moses is the Type, Christ the Antitype.5 Zaspel says he is no Antinomian but explains that the shadow function of the law is past but the effect of it remains in Christ. Now, by obeying the fulfilled and transcended law 'as interpreted by Jesus', we receive a righteousness that surpasses that of the Scribes and Pharisees. Zaspel maintains that most Reformed writers have entirely missed the point concerning the purpose of the law and closes his booklet with the words:

Nowhere here is there any implication that Jesus came to merely 'clarify' or more fully explain Moses' law. He did nothing of the kind. He came to 'fulfil' the law, to give it its final 'filling up'. His teaching is a necessary advance 'filling full' that which awaited Him for precisely this purpose. In Jesus is found, indeed, a full and complete 'definitive code of morality'. Without Him the old law has no relevance whatever, and the 'filling' which he gave it reflects and demands a degree of righteousness which Moses' law only anticipated.6

Are your alarm bells ringing?

Here, for an orthodox Christian, a number of alarm bells must be ringing. Zaspel leaves us in the dark as to which part of the law is rescinded, which is altered and which is extended. So, too, Zaspel's New Covenant Theology reveals a radical break with Reformed theology in that it views the covenants of grace, redemption and works as having no part in the continuing revelation of both testaments. The New Covenanters' claim to have discovered a 'new character' of theology is chiefly fostered by a rejection of orthodox Reformed terms such as 'the covenant of grace' and giving old terms new meanings. This is illustrated by Zaspel's interpretation of Christ's attitude to the law which appears to contradict Christ's own words, 'I am not come to destroy but to fulfil.' In modern, and surely in Biblical parlance, 'destroy' means 'to do away with utterly'. Yet Zaspel says he is not speaking of 'destroying utterly' any part of the

law but of ‘rescinding’ it, which one would think was the same thing. My OED defines ‘rescind’ as ‘abrogate, annul, revoke, cancel’. Thus, the father of New Covenant Theology, John Reisinger tells us that the law and the Old Covenant, which he equates with the Ten Commandments, are ‘done away’ altogether.7 Zaspel claims that Christ’s words take on new meanings in the light of His fulfilment of the law. The old form is annulled and has been replaced by what Zaspel calls a new effect. By effect, Zaspel does not mean the condemning effect of the Mosaic law on sinners but the post-law transcendence with which Christ replaces it. Though with his doctrine of ‘transcendental eschatology’ Zaspel would gladly promise believers a new spirituality, all he really gives us is legal add-ons which create a new law, for believers. New Covenant teaching is thus basically New Law teaching, that is, a new development of Neonomianism.

Sound Biblical scholarship views Christ’s fulfilment of the law as including His own substitutive obedience to it as the federal Head of His Bride, the elect Church. Christ obeyed both the letter and the spirit of the law because part of His redemptive work was to bring in righteousness where man had none. In order to fulfil the law, Christ had to keep it in the very form and effect in which it was intended as a law which mankind had failed to keep. New Covenant leaders such as Zaspel and Reisinger merely stress nebulously what new, extended teaching Christ brought with Him. Their Christ did not thus fulfil the law in His own body; indeed, He rejected some parts, altered others and added more. This reminds us of Andrew Fuller’s teaching on the law in his chapter on Substitution which claims that Christ did not put Himself under the law but stood "above the law, deviating from the letter, but more than preserving the spirit of it."8 This does not agree with Matthew 5:18 where Christ claims that not one jot or tittle of the law shall pass away. Furthermore, Christ speaks here of the vast importance of even the least of the law’s commandments. After all, Moses did not invent the law but was given it by the God of both Testaments. The law shows the eternal standard of Father, Son and Holy Ghost and is a description of the Divine character. As God is immutable, nothing can be added to or taken away from that character. So, too, the Apostles were diligent in quoting the Mosaic law as being still valid as we see in Romans 13:9. When Christ Himself takes up one of the Ten Commandments, it is not to rescind, restrict or extend it but to say what it means as in Matthew 5:27-28. Besides, in Matthew 5, Christ is not criticising the moral or spiritual state of Moses but that of the Scribes and Pharisees who externalised the law.

Zaspel, however, so concentrates on the legal, literal aspect of his extended New Covenant law, that he is in danger of externalising it like the Scribes and Pharisees did the original Mosaic law. He is giving us New Covenant Traditions of the Elders. It is furthermore quite clear that Zaspel rejects the Mosaic law because he understands it purely as did the Scribes and Pharisees whom Christ condemned. Thus Tom Wells in his defence of NCT tells us, that it is probable that Jesus and the Ten Commandments do not agree in what they teach.9 Zaspel claims that we must look to the effect

of the law rather than the form, but does not explain clearly what this effect is. We must therefore look to other writings of the New Covenant movement to see what they mean by ‘the effect’ or ‘new character’ of their ‘new law’.

(Footnotes)

1 Pages 2-3.

2 Pages 4-6.

3 Pages 13-14.

4 Pages 15-16.

5 Page 19.

6 Page 21.

7 Tablets of Stone, p. 86.

8 Works, vol. II, p. 689.

9 New Covenant Theology, p. 206.

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