NEW FOCUS

New Covenant Theology
Reviewed by Dr George M. Ella

George M. Ella | Added: Dec 26, 2006 | Category: Reviews

New Covenant Theology
by Tom Wells and Fred Zaspel
New Covenant Media
ISBN 192896511 3

This book, promoted by Douglas Moo, D. A. Carson and Tom J. Nettles, is introduced as a description, definition and defence of New Covenant Theology, a new teaching regarding the law, the gospel and the two Testaments. It was published in the USA four years ago but because these highly liberal tenets are now being propagated in the UK and Continental Europe this review has become necessary. Sadly, a number of once stalwart Reformed men have recently been 'converted' to this new religion.

The book is introduced by Tom Nettles as relating \"New Covenant Theology to recent evangelical scholarship in a way that shows that their canonical hermeneutic is not quite so idiosyncratic as might appear with a restricted reading of that literature.\"1 Though D. A. Carson promises in his foreword that we shall be given both sides in the NCT debate, the authors nowhere gives orthodox views a fair hearing, particularly if they object to the NCT denial of the covenant of grace. Wells and Zaspel tell us that there is no full redemption in the Old Testament, no saving grace, no Bride of Christ and thus no Church and that we cannot take New Testament descriptions of the Old Testament saints literally. They offer us dyed-in-the-wool Dispensationalism of the most extreme kind under the guise of a New Speak which is almost amusing in its ingenuity and demand that their opponents drop their own traditional theological terms before entering into dialogue with them. A feature of this movement is that as new revelations come to them, they feel free to change their opinions, which they often do. However, new findings are always presented as a 'gospel' which readers reject at their peril.

The book gets off to a bad start by the highly misleading question, \"Which is the highest revelation of the character of God, the Ten Commandments or the person, work and teaching of Jesus Christ.?\" This is the same, for the anonymous Preface writer as asking which is the greater revelation of God, the Old Testament or the New? The weakness of such a question is that the Ten Commandments do not sum up the purpose of the Old Testament. There is grace in the OT as well as law. Nor is the work and witness of Christ only to be found in the New Testament. In other words,

the question presents a false antithesis. However one answers, it would be wrong. Moreover, the question presumes that there is something incomplete in the Ten Commandments as the Ten Commandments, which is not the case. So, too, the question appears to be saying that Christ and the Ten Commandments are at variance, which is also not the case. Law has its purpose when used lawfully and grace has its purpose when applied graciously.

Wells and Zaspel are as suspicious of the Old Testament and much of the New Testament based on it as the second century heretic Marcion. They are for an absolute divorce between the Testaments both concerning law which they say has been 'done away with', and grace which they explain in terms of new 'eschatological' laws only. Wells' scathing view of the Old Testament is seen in his exegesis of 2 Timothy 3:15-17, quoting from different Bible versions for different parts of the text as they suit his purpose. The AV reads:

And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.

Here we obviously have a Christian who has been brought up to love the Old Testament Scriptures by two Old Testament saints, his grandmother Lois and mother Eunice. Through his family's loving witness, these Scriptures have made Timothy wise unto salvation. \"Oh, no!\" says Wells. We cannot take this passage \"literally without any important qualification.\" We must put it through the NCT mincer first. Indeed, Wells tells us that nobody believes the passage as it stands in the original. Well, I do! Wells' point is that Lois, Eunice and Timothy could not be counted as real believers because this would mean that they had received all that was necessary to faith from the Old Testament law which is not sufficient for that purpose. Until one has learnt the New Testament changes in and developments of the old law, one cannot be fully saved!

In Appendix 1 'The Relation of the Law to the Work of Evangelism', Wells modifies this view in keeping with his confession that his views are necessarily 'elastic' and asks:

How, then, could they (the OT saints) have come to faith? The answer must lie in the attractiveness of the character of Yahweh that led them to trust him and his promises. I am not saying that men and women are saved on that basis today, apart from knowledge of Christ, because faith in Yahweh must have always been dependent on the level of revelation concerning God. Today, God is revealed in Christ. We see God in him and we come to faith in God by contemplating him.

Throughout this debate, Wells is hampered by a disability to believe in

faith as a direct gift of God in all ages. He appears to believe that it is not this gift but the amount of extra knowledge the sinner is able to amass concerning Christ and his ability to accept it which produces faith. He teaches that the only Old Testament way to faith was by the law which proved abortive. So, too, God's covenants with the patriarchs and prophets were either material or prophetic of a post-incarnation age but had no spiritual meaning for the times when they were given. He cannot see in terms of Galatians 3, that the Old Testament saints were not converted through keeping the law but 'by the hearing of faith'. Thus, like Zaspel and John Reisinger, Wells is prepared to accept the Old Testament patriarchs and prophets as believers but on a lower plain. Of course, Christ's testimony concerning Abraham fully backs the truth of 1 Timothy 3:16 and we have no need to practise Marcionite 'criticism with a penknife', in order to cut down the Word of God to suit NCT reserves about the plain truth of Scripture. The New Testament testifies to the fact that Abraham, Lois, Eugene and Timothy exercised unfeigned faith in Christ. This may not fit Wells' highly edited and cut down Bible but it fits the Biblical testimony that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and for ever (Hebrews 13:8) and they which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham (Galatians 3:9).

Wells' arguments show his Marcionite and Roman bias, especially when Peter is appealed to. Read the following for a nice piece of popery:

However glorious the old people of God was under the Old Covenant, that people existed without having Peter as its foundation. For Jesus' church to rest in any sense on Peter the church could not be older than Peter himself. Both the future tense and the words of Jesus describing the foundation he was to lay demonstrate that the church of Jesus Christ was a product of the age of the New Covenant. The rest of the NT confirms this understanding.2

Inconsequently enough, Wells tells us that the Church in Peter's day was a future movement built on Peter's confession. However, he goes on to quote Ephesians 2:14-22, seemingly ignoring the first chapter which dealt with the aspects of Christ's church in eternity 'before the foundations of the world'. Wells then affirms that the foundations of the Church are \"the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the corner stone.\" Here, he omits the opening words 'are built upon'.3 If the church of Peter and Paul's days were built upon the foundation of Christ as the corner stone and the prophets and the apostles, they were added to a church which was already there, waiting to be continually increased until the end of time.

Nothing daunting, Wells turns to 1 Peter 2:4-5 which speaks of believers built into a house of living stones, perhaps suspecting that some would see the OT prophets as such believers. To this, Wells says:

The foundation consists of him and his apostles, all men of the first century. In addition, there are prophets. Is there here, in the foundation at least one group of OT believers? Clearly not. This building has no

basement; the apostles and prophets are joined to Christ Jesus, as I have pointed out (i.e. in his false analogy with Peter), as his contemporaries.

Wells' facetious reference to the basement, is quite out of place. The verses concerned refer obviously and solely to the corner stone, the foundations and those built on them who complete the building. For Wells to admit that the reference is to OT prophets as are the bulk of other references to 'prophets' in the NT, would mean that he would have to abandon his view of a mere eschatological church. He thus argues that as there can be no church in Old Testament times, these prophets must all be contemporaries of the incarnate Christ, that is, first century Christians. To back up his arguments, he claims that \"prophets play a major role4 under the New Covenant.\" By 'prophets' he does not mean the great New Covenant envoys of God in the Old Testament such as Ezekiel and Jeremiah but unknown contemporaries of Peter and Paul who, he assumes, exercised powers equal to those of the apostles. Indeed, he tells us that prophets were 'an everyday category' in the church and we do not recognise this because we fail to understand the social environment in which Paul lived. Wells apparently does. This writer needs more convincing proof of Wells' theory, even though he warns us that we ignore him at our peril!5

Zaspel remains true to his old presentation of Christ as the New Moses who rescinded, altered and extended the old law6 and in his 'Contextual Observations' on Matthew 5 adopts the transitional ethics of Andrew Fuller in teaching that the morals of the Ten Commandments have been 'transcended' and Jesus (Zaspel prefers this title to 'Christ') is taking them \"in whatever direction He sees fit.\" Thus Zaspel allies with his New Covenant colleague Randy Seiver in denying that Christ's 'fulfilment' is final and that we may expect 'a fuller realisation' of their New Covenant teaching in future. Zaspel uses the picture of a partly-full fishing net. The net is the law but there is much room left in it to be filled up with new laws by and by. The old law has served its purpose but the new law has a prophetic function and points to later fulfilments. It has, in NCT jargon 'eschatological transcendence', leading to 'eschatological fulfilment'. The term 'fulfilment' for Zaspel, however, indicates alterations and additions and further revelations so that at times Zaspel reminds us of the old Gnostics. Zaspel never tells us when we get to the end of his legal chain. He defends himself from the charge of Antinomianism but his defence is purely Neonomian. In fact, the NCT adherents must be given both titles.

In a manner again reminding us of Fuller's transformative attitude to the law, NCT bases its dogmas on natural law. In his chapter on the continuing relevance of the Divine law Zaspel argues that the natural law of God in man is different from the revealed law. What he virtually says is that we must forget the Mosaic law and go back to natural law which he calls 'the law of God' and then we are able to live a life under New Covenant teaching. This is the same as Fuller's teaching concerning discovering the law of 'the nature and fitness of things'. Zaspel, however, like Fuller, fails to show which of the two laws Christ came to fulfil. Here we must ask the

question, what condemns us; God's law in us as natural men or the Mosaic law revealed to us? It cannot be a divine law in our hearts as we are dead in trespasses and sin. Thus it must be a law external to us. This is the revealed, Mosaic law. So, too, the law within us cannot save us so we must be saved from outside of ourselves. This the Bible teaches is by saving grace and not a carnal understanding of a new law. Sin is not a rebellion against one's self as Zaspel depicts it; it is a rebellion against God who is not in us but kept out of us by our sin. Thus salvation must come from without and not from within.

Our Reformers distinguished between error and heresy. The former was a mere misunderstanding of the gospel here and there; the latter was a total rejection of the gospel and the bringing in of a new religion. New Covenant Theology is thus most definitely a heresy. The 'new' in it is a new law and a new gospel with a new ecclesiology, a new Christology and a new doctrine of the Word of God. It has a new view of the natures of both man and God and a new view of God's dealings with man. In the following months, I hope to show in detail what are the basic tenets of this false religion and how we can armour ourselves against it.

(Footnotes)

1 New Covenant Theology, foreword by Tom Nettles, p. viii.

2 Ibid, p. 52.

3 Ephesians 2:20.

4 My emphasis, Wells and Zaspel, p. 53.

5 Ibid, p. 57.

6 See his New Covenant Theology and the Mosaic Law.

PLEASE FEEL FREE TO USE AND DISTRIBUTE CONTENT FROM NEW FOCUS BUT PLEASE MAKE SURE TO INCLUDE A CREDIT TO "NEW FOCUS HTTPS://GO-NEWFOCUS.CO.UK"

Source: https://go-newfocus.co.uk/resources/app/category/reviews/article/new-covenant-theology-a-review.pdf
© New Focus 2026