
The Principles of the New Covenant

Hebrews 8:1-6⁶

Russ Kennedy

The Quartz morning news summaries I receive in my inbox every day...

Summaries can be very helpful. But for them to be helpful we have to allow them to be limited in their purpose:

They are meant to be brief statements, not explanations.

They focus on the basic principles, not full expositions.

They articulate the distinctives of their own view.

They highlight the differences with other views.

This is a summary of New Covenant theology.

We will not attempt to prove or give in-depth Biblical support for these summary statements.

We will focus on the basic principles. There is so much more to say. But we will give you the core ideas I believe will help you to understand what it is about.

We will focus on what makes us distinct. There are many principles that we share with other views. Not everything we believe is unique to us.

We will highlight some principles that make us different from the two prevalent views.

What are those prevalent views?

Reformed Covenantal Theology embodied in the Westminster Catechism and the 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith

Two primary Covenants, a covenant of works and a covenant of grace. All of the covenants in the Bible are administrations of these two covenants.

Redemptive history is all about God redeeming a single people of God through the work of Jesus.

There is one purpose of God that is centered on Christ and the church.

The church replaces or succeeds Israel as the true people of God.

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The kingdom of God began with the coming of Jesus, is expanding through the preaching of the gospel and will reach its consummation in the new heavens and new earth.

Historic and Progressive Dispensationalism embodied in the Scofield and MacArthur Study Bibles and commonly held in many evangelical churches and seminaries.

There are 7 covenants God has made with man and those covenants involve God's plan for Israel and the church.

Redemptive history is about God's two distinct plans: His plans for the nation of Israel and His plans for the church.

Israel and the church each have their own purposes of God that sometimes intermingle but remaining distinct. The church does not replace Israel. God will literally fulfill the promises He made in the Covenants.

The Kingdom of God will reach its consummation in the 1000 year reign of David/Jesus on a literal throne on earth commonly called the Millennium.

New Covenant theologians summarize our differences with these two systems in this way: ¹

Covenant Theology errs in trying to read the Old Covenant as though it were the New Covenant. It attempts to keep believers accountable to the Old Covenant.

Dispensationalism errs in reading the Old Testament without taking into account the New Covenant. It rejects the Biblical idea that the New Testament explains the full meaning of the Old Testament.

Fundamentally, New Covenant theology is not a systematic theology. It is committed first and foremost to a Biblical or Canonical Theology. Yes, there is a place for Systematic Theology. But it is far more important to understand the Bible *in the form in which God gave it to us*.

Finally, we are thinking, growing, sharpening and reforming as we go. I will give you statements where NCT thinkers tend to agree in principle even if they state it somewhat differently. Then I will say, "However, we believe..." where our own thinking is different. The primary example of this is our thinking about the place of Israel and the church in God's plan. And I will say, "Furthermore, we are thinking..." where we have tried to work things out that there is little or no writing on.

Hebrews 8:1-6

¹ Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, ² a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man. ³ For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; thus it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer. ⁴ Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. ⁵ They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, "See that you make

everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain.”⁶ But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises.⁷ For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second.

In our Understanding of the Scriptures

2 Timothy 3:14-17

¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it ¹⁵ and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

Romans 15:4

⁴ For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

1 Corinthians 10:11-12

¹¹ Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. ¹² Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.

The Bible is redemptive history. It is the unfolding of the plan and purpose of God to glorify Himself by redeeming and ruling His people.

The Bible explains itself. All that God intends for us to understand comes through the reading and relating of the Scriptures to themselves.

The Bible is *not* a systematic theology though it contains categories of truth. The Bible is a canonical theology – it is the revelation of God and His plans and purposes *in the flow of history*.

The Bible is progressive revelation *in the chronological order that it was written*. There is not only less revealed in the Old Testament but some intentionally hidden which is unveiled and illuminated by the coming of Jesus, the coming of the Spirit and the giving of Apostolic teaching.

The Bible is primarily constructed on anticipation/fulfillment structure. The Old Testament is primarily anticipation through story plots, persons, pictures, portrayals, precepts, and promises. The Christ, in His person, work and people, fulfills all the Old Testament anticipates. The New Testament explains how we are to understand both the anticipation in the Old and the fulfillment in the New.

The New Testament explains the full meaning of the Old Testament. The in-breaking of the new creation through the incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ is the New Testament's interpretative key to the whole of redemptive history.

The Bible teaches us to think in terms of an already/not yet way. All the God is doing has both a finished and progressing sense. So even the fulfillment in Christ and with God's people in the New Covenant is done and is being done.

In the Centrality of Christ

Luke 24:25-27

²⁵ And he said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" ²⁷ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

Luke 24:44-49

⁴⁴ Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, ⁴⁶ and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, ⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high."

The Lord Jesus Christ is the central person and purpose of all things. The Bible is truly about the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Lord Jesus Christ is the reality of which the Old Covenant are but shadows.

The Lord Jesus Christ is the sum and substance, the fulfiller and fulfillment of all the promises.

There is much more to say about this that goes beyond the central ideas of New Covenant Theology. However, where there is no centrality of Christ, there can be no New Covenant Theology.

With Respect to the Covenants

2 Corinthians 1:19-22

¹⁹ For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not Yes and No, but in him it is always Yes. ²⁰ For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory. ²¹ And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, ²² and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.

The Covenants are fulfilled in Christ.

The Old Covenant as completed at the cross.

The New Covenant as located in Christ

The Noahic Covenant

The Noahic Covenant is God-established relationship of humanity to the created order that emerges from worldwide destruction of the Flood. It involves God's promise to preserve the creation from destruction by water, the protection of human life and the permission to eat animals for food.

The Abrahamic Covenant

The Abrahamic Covenant is a revealing of God's plan of salvation through Abraham and his physical descendants. The true seed of Abraham is Jesus Christ and believers are the true children of Abraham.

The Old Covenant

The Old Covenant (Mosaic Covenant, also called the First Covenant) is legislation; that is it is a legal, conditional covenant, not another administration of the Covenant of Grace. Although God had a gracious purpose for giving the Mosaic Covenant the covenant itself is a legal covenant that was intended to show the Israelites their sin.

The New Covenant

The New Covenant is a description of the whole of the work of Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection. The day of Pentecost with the once for all descent of the Holy Spirit is the historical beginning of the New Covenant era.

In our Understanding of Law

New Covenant theology is unique in its understanding of the Biblical idea of Law. This distinctive is most prominent in our understanding of the Law in the Old Covenant and the Law in the New Covenant, the Law of Christ.

Galatians 2:18-21

¹⁸ For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor. ¹⁹ For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. ²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the

life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. ²¹ I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.

1 Corinthians 9:19-21

¹⁹ For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. ²⁰ To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. ²¹ To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law.

The Ten Commandments

The Ten Commandments are the essence or terms of the Old Covenant not the essence of all of God's law or righteousness. The Ten Commandments as a unit are not brought into the New Covenant era. The essence of all of God's law is found in the 2 great commandments. Jesus Christ Himself is the moral foundation of righteous living.

The Law of Christ

Most New Covenant theologians say that the Law of Christ is the legislation in the New Covenant era. The issue is not whether or not believers in the New Covenant era are under legislation. The issue is which legislation are the believers under in this present era.

We have given this much thought and Pastor Dale and I together believe that is probably an incorrect understanding of the Law of Christ. We question the idea that the Law of Christ is legislation.

The Ten Commandments are the central legislation of the Old Covenant. The New Covenant believer is not only not under the Ten Commandments, but is not under law as legislation. We have been delivered from law keeping as the means of transformation.

The Law of Christ is not legislation. The Law of Christ is an observation of the way the life of God in the soul of a believer expresses itself. It is like the Law of Gravity. The Law of Gravity is not "legislation". The Law of Christ is not legislation. It is faith working through love. Faith then believes both truth statements and commands. God given faith believes truth and commands in an obeying way. True righteousness is believing God's Word in an obeying way, not because it is legislation but because that is how the Spirit who is our life functions. Therefore the fruit of the Spirit are a cluster of virtues that have nothing to do with legislation.

In God's purposes for ethnic Jews, national Israel and the Church

Galatians 3:25-29

²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. ²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

Ethnic Jews

...are the physical descendants of Abraham through Isaac

...are a people group

...will be ingathering of elect Jews during the last days

National Israel:

...was a national entity begun in Egypt and constituted at Sinai

...was intended to be a type of God's people

...was made up of largely of unbelievers with a remnant of believers

...are only a picture of the real people of God that is revealed in the New Covenant era.

...was judged by God because of sin, unbelief and the execution of Christ

...has a future place in history as apostate, but none as blessed

The Church

Is an organic, spiritual entity begun at the resurrection (?)

OT Believers enter the organic unity of the body of Christ at His resurrection

NT Believers enter the organic unity of the body of Christ at their regeneration

Is made up only of believers

BOTH:

Find their fulfillment and reality in Christ.

Are not continuities or discontinuities of each other.

Christ is the true vine, not Israel nor the Church.

Israel is a branch of Christ the true vine.

Gentiles are a branch of Christ the true vine.

With Respect to Circumcision and Baptism

Colossians 2:9-12

⁹ For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, ¹⁰ and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. ¹¹ In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, ¹² having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

Both serve as entry gates into their respective covenants.

Circumcision:

Outwardly causes union with Israel irrespective of belief and so was administered to the male children.

It was the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant and was required at the Exodus from Egypt and under the Mosaic Covenant.

Points to regeneration and to spiritual circumcision of the heart.

Is NOT fulfilled by the rite of baptism

Baptism:

Outwardly signifies what has already transpired inwardly.

Is the method for publicly professing faith in Christ and union with God's gathered people.

A Brief Summary of New Covenant Theology

By Russ Kennedy

I am a New Covenant theologian committed to a grammatical, literary, redemptive historical method of interpretation. I believe that the Old Testament is to be read and understood in the light of the New. The death, resurrection and ascension of Christ and His exaltation as King over all are New Testament controls on our understanding of the Old Testament. I do not believe in a future blessing for the nation of Israel – I believe the Bible teaches that the promises to Noah, Abraham, Moses, David and Solomon are fulfilled in Christ. Every person, Jew and Gentile, who is placed into Christ, receives the fulfillment of those promises as ultimately intended. God has established His kingdom in heaven and in the future. The glories of the future kingdom age, primarily spoken of as eternal life and the new creation, have broken into this age through the incarnation, resurrection and regeneration. The kingdom is expanding through the preaching of the gospel, the granting of eternal life through the Spirit in the new birth with the gifts of faith and repentance. At the end of days, there will be a great falling away accompanied by a final intrusion of the powers of darkness and Satan into this age through a Satan incarnating messianic figure who will attempt to rule the world. The Lord Himself will return from the heavens, reward His saints, crush His enemies, judge the unbelieving living and the dead casting them into hell. Just as the world was destroyed by water in Noah's day, the present world will be destroyed by fire with the new heavens and earth emerging when the final regeneration and glorification take place by the Word and Spirit filling all the universe with life eternal, and thus, righteousness.

Notes

¹ Geoff Volker and Mike Adams; Originally posted on [In Depth Studies](http://www.IDS.org) at www.IDS.org.