

Comparison: Covenant, Dispensational and New Covenant Theologies Lesson 1

Series Overview

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Introduction: In *The Early Church*, Henry Chadwick wrote: "The central questions of the apostolic age turned on the continuity or discontinuity of the church with Israel."¹

Is it: The church and Israel—or—The church is Israel? How One Answers This Question Tells

Why:

- Some Christians **baptize babies** and others only baptize believers?*
- Some believers observe Sunday as a **Sabbath** day while others do not?*
- Some churches teach **tithing** but others do not?*
- Some denominations have **priests** and others not?*
- Some have **altars** and call their meeting places **sanctuaries**?*
- There is no **separation** of church and state in many European countries?*
- The European church thought it had the authority to **physically punish heretics**?*
- The **Prosperity Gospel** preachers think their "name it and claim it" teachings are biblical?*
- Some believers are so pro-Israel; Israeli-centric; keenly interested prophecy as it relates to Israel?*

What is NCT? It is an answer to the above question. It is so named because of its emphasis on the New Covenant rather than the Old Covenant. It is a way of interpreting and applying the Bible, with focus on Law of Christ rather than the Law of Moses. The New Testament is given interpretive priority (allows the NT to interpret the OT).

Inquiring minds want to know ...

- What is the relationship between the New Testament and the Old Testament?*
- What is the difference between the Law of Moses and the Law of Christ?*
- How much of the Law of Moses are Christians obligated to keep? All of it? Part of it? None?*
- What is the difference between the church and Israel?*
- What role does geo-political Israel play in the fulfillment of prophecy?*

Review: Henry Chadwick wrote: "The central questions of the apostolic age turned on the continuity or discontinuity of the church with Israel." Three different ways of answering this question are found in **CT, DT, and NCT**. **Overall Series:** In this series, we will seek to explain New Covenant Theology's approach to handling Scripture and dealing with these age-old issues. How a person answers this question has profound ramifications.

¹ Chadwick was a Church of England theologian, scholar and historian.

Perspective: 1) Every Christian holds more or less to one of these three views. Recognizing each will help you understand where someone coming from when you speak with him or hear a sermon or read a book. **2)** Trace elements of each of these three views can be found in the writings of early church leaders. However, none of the three views were systematized until after the Protestant Reformation of the 1500s. None of the three views is heresy, but at least 2 of the 3 do represent error (false teachings).

Covenant Theology (CT) ~ Embodied in the famous *Westminster Confession* of 1646; held to most famously by the Presbyterians. Vigorously taught by such luminaries as John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and more recently men like RC Sproul.

Dispensational Theology (DT) ~ Embodied in *Scofield Reference Bible* and the *Ryrie Study Bible*. It was developed in the mid-1800s by John Nelson Darby of Plymouth Brethren fame. It is taught today by Dallas Theological Seminary and the Moody Bible Institute. The *Ryrie Study Bible* and the *Scofield Reference Bible* both reflect a dispensation perspective. It is reflected in the movie *Left Behind*, and the book *Late Great Planet Earth*.

New Covenant Theology (NCT) ~ Since nothing in the *1st London Baptist Confession* of 1644 contracts it, many NCT theologians use it as their statement of faith. NCT is believed in its essence by John Piper, John Reisinger, DA Carson, and Douglas Moo. Adherents are generally Calvinistic Baptists. Several professors at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville adhere to it (such as Tom Wells, Fred Zaspel). This series is about NCT.

Today's Lesson: In today's session we will explain and compare each of these three views.

The Three Views Contrasted

Again, in *The Early Church*, Henry Chadwick wrote: "The central questions of the apostolic age turned on the continuity or discontinuity of the church with Israel."² Is it: The church and Israel—or—The church is Israel?

CT cannot get Israel and the church **apart**; they are inseparable. Believers within OT Israel were the church and the church is now spiritual Israel. God only has one people: the church.

DT cannot get Israel and the church **together** in any sense whatsoever. Believers within OT Israel were not the church and the church is not spiritual Israel. God has two separate peoples: Israel and the church.

NCT is in between CT & DT, taking the best elements from each.

NCT: NCT agrees with DT that believers within OT Israel were not the church. NCT agrees with CT that the church is spiritual Israel and that God only has one people: The church.

² Chadwick was a Church of England theologian, scholar and historian.

PPTS: Railroad Analogy: (note: **t** = Jesus' 1st coming; 2nd = 2nd coming).

CT -----**t**----- 2nd

Only and ever one set of tracks; the church and Israel are one, on the same set of tracks (continuity). Old Testament Israel pulls into the station of the 1st coming, and the church leaves the station on same set of tracks. OT Israel was the church and the church is the true Israel.

DT ----- **t** ===== 2nd -----

OT Israel comes into the station of the first coming on one set of tracks, but leaving the station are two parallel sets of tracks (God has 2 peoples: Israel and the church). After Jesus returns, it is back to one set of tracks, Israel, during millennium. The church is a parenthesis between the first and second comings of Jesus. Israel is not the church and the church is not Israel. DT is the only one of the views that is tied to a specific eschatology.

NCT ----- **t** ~~~~~ 2nd

One set of tracks (Israel) into the station of Jesus' first coming, but leaving the station is a completely different set of tracks: the church. There is never a return to an ethnic Israeli set of tracks. Old Testament Israel was not the church, but the church is the true Israel.

Covenant Theology

Fact: Covenant theology is not named for on *any* of the biblical covenants. **What is it named for?** Rather, it is based on a theological covenant, the "covenant of redemption" made in eternity past within the Trinity to save mankind. This *theological covenant* is said to be **implicit** in Scripture. It is to be distinguished from the biblical covenants (which are **explicit**).

What is the difference between implicit and explicit?

Implicit means not directly expressed, not readily apparent (theological covenants).

Explicit means fully and clearly expressed; leaving nothing implied (the biblical covenants).

The bedrock theological covenant is the *covenant of redemption*. Flowing out of this theologically constructed covenant of redemption are supposedly two other theological covenants, both beginning with Adam. **What are they?**

1) *The covenant of works* ("do not eat")

ESV **Genesis 2:16-17** And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

2) *The covenant of grace* (the promise of the “seed” of the woman who will crush the serpent).

ESV **Genesis 3:14-15** The LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."

Biblical Covenants: When CT gets around to dealing with the explicit biblical covenants. CT says there are not really two different covenants, but merely two administrations of the one theological covenant of grace:

- 1) the old covenant administration
- 2) the new covenant administration

In other words, there is the old administration of the covenant of grace and the new administration of the covenant of grace.

Insight: CT constructs **theological** covenants based on **implications** from Scripture. Offensively stated, it makes covenants out of thin air, by fiat, out of nothing. Then, when Scripture does explicitly call something a covenant, it down plays these as actual covenants and instead calls them mere administrations of their made-up theological covenant. The effect of this approach is to level the playing field, to blur the distinctions between the old and new covenant and between Israel and the church.

The Westminster Confession of 1646: “There are not, therefore, two covenants of grace differing in substance, but one and the same under various dispensations.”³

Thus, it is thought that there is continuity between the Law of Moses and the Law of Christ. *The key to CT thinking is continuity, continuity, continuity.*

Example: Every January 1, people say, “Happy New Year!” Time is continuous and marches on. Dividing it up into years is a man-made distinction. This is how CT views the biblical covenants: merely different administrations of the same underlying covenant of grace. The new covenant is not really new at all in the normal sense of the word.

Cones Example: Imagine a tower of stacked orange construction cones. The bottom cone would represent the theological covenant of grace, and the other cones stacked above it would represent the various biblical covenants. Each grows out of the other.

CT Applications: CT theology is characterized by **Hebrew thinking**:

- Because the biblical covenants are seen as each building on the other (all are outgrowths of the one covenant of grace), **believers are expected to keep parts of the Law of Moses**. Going back in time, many CT teachers assume that the 10 commandments given to Moses in the old covenant were also given to Adam in the Garden (!), and going forward in time are still binding on new covenant believers today. The Law of Moses is said **1)** to show unbelievers’ their sin and **2)** it is to show believers how to be sanctified.

³ Chapter 7, sec. 6.

- Because Moses required a Saturday **Sabbath**, so now we are to keep a Sunday Sabbath.
- Because Moses required **tithing** to the temple, so now we are to tithe to the church.
- Because Moses required infants to be **circumcised** into the family of Israel, so now we are to **baptize** infants into the church
- Because Moses required **God and government** to be one, mixed together, a theocracy, so now there should be no separation of church and state. Thus, in European churches there historically has been no separation of the two. This continues on today in many European countries. The United States was the first government in history to make this separation (in part due to Baptist influence).

Perspective: In CT, the Hebrew Scriptures are given priority, and color the interpretation of the New Testament. Also, in CT, OT Israel was the church and the NT church is now the true Israel.

Dispensation Theology

A soap “dispenser” dispenses soap. What does it mean to dispense (verb) something? It means to deal out, to distribute, to administer. For instance, a pharmacy *dispenses* medicine. A synonym would be to allot or to dole out. In theology, a dispensation refers to a method (or scheme) according to which God carries out his purposes towards men, and these dispensations vary over time and with different people. There are seven distinct dispensations of God’s grace in different eras. Their favorite verse could be:

KJV **2 Timothy 2:15** Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.

Whereas CT tends to blur distinctions between biblical covenants, DT not only sharply separates the covenants, it adds divisions beyond the biblical covenants. CT is so named because of its emphasis on man-made, implicit, theological covenants, and not the biblical covenants. DT is so named because of its emphasis on their observed seven dispensations, and not the biblical covenants.

So, DT is a way of understanding the Bible, *especially concerning the church and Israel*.

DT Example: Image a series of separated orange highway construction cones. DT divides the Bible into various dispensations (or compartments), roughly based on the various biblical covenants (plus some extra divisions thrown in for good measure!). That which characterizes DT is discontinuity between the OT and the NT, and discontinuity between the Israel and the church.

DT holds that the church and Israel are two separate entities, and never the twain shall meet. OT Israel was not the church and the NT church is not Israel. Further, they say that God now has two covenant peoples: Israel is His earthly people and the church is His heavenly people.

Israel = earthly blessings church = heavenly blessings

DT is very pro-Israel. DT holds to a special future dispensation for Israel after the church is raptured out of the world. Most dispensationalists believe that God is going to fulfill His promises to national Israel through the restoration of geopolitical Israel, and that Christ will rule the world from Jerusalem upon His return (during a time called the millennium). Israel will have the center stage.

"A dispensationalist keeps Israel and the church distinct ... This is probably the most basic theological test of whether or not a person is a dispensationalist ... the one who fails to distinguish Israel and the church consistently will inevitably not hold to dispensational distinctions ..."⁴

"A Dispensationalist ... when he is stripped down to his most innermost garment, is found clad with one item of clothing ... the premise that God continues his relationship with Israel in terms of the old covenant into the Christian age and beyond"⁵

Perspective: Both CT & NCT agree with DT that God still has a plan for ethnic Jews, but that the plan is for their conversion and incorporation into the one true people of God: the church.

The teachings of DT contain **unique end time beliefs**, driven by their view of Israel. All dispensationalists hold to **premillennialism** and most hold to the **pretribulation rapture**.

What is premillennialism? Pre means before; millennium refers to a literal thousand-year reign of Jesus on the earth, from Jerusalem. Premillennialism is the belief that Jesus will come back before the millennium and that during this time all the OT promises to Israel will be literally fulfilled.

What is the pretribulation rapture? It is the belief that the church will be raptured out of the world prior to the start of a seven-year period of tribulation, culminating in the second coming of Jesus. During this time God will work toward the salvation of Israel. This expressed in such books as *Left Behind* and *The Late Great Planet Earth*.

*A trade mark of DT is **literalism**; they read the Bible literally. This is typically called:*

1) Historical-Grammatical Interpretation.

The alternative to this interpretive method is to interpret the Bible:

2.) Literarily (naturally). It is to interpret the Bible according to type of literature it is. The Protestant Reformers and thus CT took this approach, as does NCT.

Literal Example: In Matthew 24 Jesus predicted the literal destruction of Jerusalem. He also said the sun and moon will darken, and the stars will fall from the sky. A literal interpretation holds that all those things will literally happen. If it has not literally happened, then that prophecy is yet to be fulfilled. Thus, Matthew 24 is taken to have a yet future fulfillment.

⁴ Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 39.

⁵ Kevin Hartley, "Dispensationalism Defined", monergism.com.

Literary Example: Interpreting the Bible as literature, Jesus' prophecies in Matthew 24 are compared to older prophetic literature that concerned the destruction of other ancient cities (such as Babylon, Nineveh, Tyre, Samaria). Whereas the judgment coming upon Jerusalem was literal, the sun, moon and ocean statements are understood as hyperbole, exaggerations, to make an effect, a point, that things were going to be really bad. It is prophetic shop talk, not to be taken literally, but literality. There is literal meaning behind the hyperbole. Matthew 24 is taken to have been fulfilled in A.D. 70. It is fulfilled prophecy.

The literary (natural) method says each text should be interpreted according to its own genre, and according to the intent of the author (history, poetry, prophecy, or epistle).

New Covenant Theology

What's so new about the New Testament? One answer to this question can be found in something called New Covenant Theology. In this new series, going forward we will concentrate on NCT.

What is NCT? It is so named because of its emphasis on the New Covenant rather than the Old Covenant. It is a way of interpreting and applying the Bible, with focus on Law of Christ rather than the Law of Moses. The New Testament is given interpretive priority.

ESV **Revelation 21:5** ... he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

Christ's inauguration of the New Covenant brings in things that are qualitatively "newer," expressed in the theological significance of such basic biblical concepts as: new wine (**Mt 9:17**), new wineskin (**Mt 9:17**), new covenant (**Lk 22:20**), new commandment (**Jn 13:34**), new life (**Ro 7:6**), new creation (**2Co 5:17**), new way (**Heb 10:20**), new man (**Ep 2:15**), new name (**Re 2:17**), new song (**Re 5:9**), new Jerusalem (**Re 3:12**) and all things new (**Re 21:5**).

What is NCT? It is:

- A Way of interpreting the Bible
- Emphasis on NT over OT
- NCT says our starting point for ethics should be Jesus, not Moses.
- NCT says that believers are under the law of Christ, not the Law of Moses.
- NCT says that the way Jesus and the apostles interpreted the OT should be normative for the way we interpret the OT (allow the NT to interpret the OT).
- NCT says the Bible should be read not simply literally, but more importantly, literarily
- NCT says the OT is type and shadow, the NT is fulfillment and reality.
- NCT says that the Israel of the OT was not the church, but only a type of the church
- NCT says the church started at Pentecost and did not exist in the OT.
- NCT says that the Israel of the OT was not the church, but only a type of the church
- NCT says that God only has one people (the church), not two (the church & Israel)
- NCT says that the church today is the true Israel.

What's so new about the New Testament?

ESV **John 1:17** For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

“New” means New: Whereas in CT, the two biblical covenants (Old and New) are merely two administrations of the same theological covenant of grace (resulting in continuity), *under NCT the word “new” in new covenant signifies a break, or discontinuity.* NCT holds that different names indicate different covenants, different parties, different terms, different purposes. In this sense it is similar to dispensational theology.

NCT says that when God changed the *covenant* (from old to new), he also changed the *people* (from Israel to the church, from ethnic Hebrews to spiritual Hebrews).

NCT has no use for:

- Tithing
- Priests
- Sanctuaries
- Infant baptism
- Keeping the Lord's Day as a Sabbath day
- The separation of church and state
- The believer's obligation to the Law of Moses

NCT also impacts:

- The proper use of the Ten Commandments today
- The church's attitude toward modern geopolitical Israel

Perspective: Should we interpret the NT according to the OT, or the OT according to the New? Which should have priority? NCT sees the New Testament as the apex of God's revelation, as terminal station, and allows the NT to interpret the OT (not visa versa).

Which is the higher revelation of the character of God, the Ten Commandments or the person, work and teaching of Jesus Christ? CT effectively acts as if the Ten Commandments are higher. Both DT & NCT shout that Jesus is! NCT starts with Jesus, not Moses, with the Law of Christ, not the Law of Moses.

CT says that the church has existed since Adam and that believing OT Israel was the church. The Church is the true spiritual Israel. The two are inseparable. There is covenantal continuity and redemptive continuity.

DT says OT Israel was not the Church and that the church is not the true Israel. The two are separate. Covenantal discontinuity and redemptive discontinuity

NCT says that the church began with Jesus' death on the cross and that Israel and the church existed sequentially. First came Israel then came the church. Covenantal Discontinuity but Redemptive Continuity

Middle Ground: Whereas NCT is like DT in saying that the old covenant is totally different from the new, NCT is more like CT in saying that the promises to Israel are ultimately fulfilled in the church and that God does not have two people (Israel and the church), but only one people (the church). And, unlike DT, NCT does not take the bible simply literally, it also takes it literarily.

Summary: The issues:

Is there continuity or discontinuity between the Old Covenant and the New Testament?

Are Israel and the church the same?

What impact did the start of the new covenant have on the old covenant?

Is the new covenant believer under the law of Moses?

Conclusion: Every Christian holds more or less to one of these three views. Recognizing each will help you understand where people are coming from when you speak with them, hear a sermon, or read a book.

- Contact NTRF.org for a link to the PPTs.
- You can hear this lesson being taught at SermonAudio.com/NTRF.

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