

# Commonly Asked Questions About New Covenant Theology, Part 3

*By Steve Lehrer*

## **Question: What is the relationship of the Abrahamic Covenant to the Old and New Covenants?**

Much of Scripture is devoted to explaining or recording how God fulfills the promises He made to Abraham. People get confused as to exactly how the Abrahamic Covenant is fulfilled and how it relates to other covenants. The Abrahamic Covenant contains both the Old and New Covenants. That is, the Old and New Covenants are the physical and spiritual fulfillments of the Abrahamic Covenant. The covenant God made with Abraham reveals God's plan to save a people and bring them into His land. Under the Old Covenant, God physically saves the people of Israel (the physical descendants of Abraham) from the Egyptians and places them in the Promised Land, Palestine. Under the New Covenant, God spiritually saves believers (the spiritual descendants of Abraham) from sin and condemnation and brings them into the spiritual land (salvation rest now and in heaven). Thus, the Abrahamic Covenant "contains" both the Old and the New Covenants.

### **I. The Abrahamic Covenant Physically Fulfilled**

The era in which the Mosaic Covenant was in force is the record of God's physical fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise. Under the Old Covenant we see God bringing the physical descendants of Abraham into the land He promised them and giving them physical rest. As we examine the Abrahamic Covenant, we find that physical or blood relationship to Abraham is a dominant theme. All of the physical descendants of Abraham and Sarah were included in the covenant made with Abraham. Belief was not necessary. It was through physical birth that one became part of the Abrahamic Covenant in its physical form. Let's look at the promises God made to Abraham:

After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir." Then the word of the LORD came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir." He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars-if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness. He also said to him, "I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it" (Genesis 15:1-7).

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers." Abram fell

facedown, and God said to him, “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God” (Genesis 17:1-8).

Abraham is promised many physical descendants. God promises that Abraham’s offspring will not only be extremely numerous but that they will possess the land of Canaan. The capstone promise is that God “will be their God.” These are big and important promises that are repeated throughout the book of Genesis.<sup>1</sup> How and when were they fulfilled?

#### **A. “Many descendants” Physically Fulfilled**

The people that made up the nation of Israel were the physical descendants of Abraham. The fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise of “many descendants” could not be more clearly fulfilled than in the soon-to-be nation of Israel in bondage to the Egyptians:

Now Joseph and all his brothers and all that generation died, but the Israelites were fruitful and multiplied greatly and became exceedingly numerous, so that the land was filled with them. Then a new king, who did not know about Joseph, came to power in Egypt. “Look,” he said to his people, “the Israelites have become much too numerous for us. Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country.” So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites (Exodus 1:6-13).

#### **B. “I will be their God” physically fulfilled**

The nation of Israel in the Old Covenant era enjoyed special national status and a type of adoption by God. Deuteronomy 7 is a great example of this fact:

For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession. The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt (Deuteronomy 7:6-8).

God had a relationship with the Israelites that He had with none of the other nations in the world at that time. It was not a saving relationship in which the Israelites were spiritually redeemed (Hebrews 3:19), but the entire nation was physically redeemed and chosen to be the recipients of God's love in a way that no one else was at that time. God protected them and fought on their side. He talked to them and gave them the Scriptures. He used their nation to bring the Messiah into the world.

### **C. "Possession of the Land" Physically Fulfilled**

Old Covenant Israel enjoyed physical rest in the land of Canaan. In fact, the book of Joshua is emphatic, when the Israelites had finally taken most of the land; all of the promises given to Abraham had been fulfilled:

So the LORD gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their forefathers, and they took possession of it and settled there. The LORD gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their forefathers. Not one of their enemies withstood them; the LORD handed all their enemies over to them. Not one of all the LORD's good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled (Joshua 21:43-45).

Nothing else needed to happen for God to make good on His word to Abraham. His promises of rest and possession of the land had been fulfilled, just like his promises of many descendants and a special relationship with God. It was all fulfilled by the time of the conquest of the Land of Canaan under Joshua.

## **II. The Abrahamic Covenant Spiritually Fulfilled**

The New Covenant is the spiritual fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant. Under the New Covenant we see God giving birth to the spiritual descendants of Abraham. These descendants get an everlasting possession of a spiritual land or spiritual rest. They are also brought into a relationship with God or adopted by Him. God promises to love them forever and to never punish them.

### **A. "Many descendants" Spiritually Fulfilled**

The promise of the Abrahamic Covenant pointed ahead to Jesus Christ, the one true Seed of Abraham. No one would have understood this without God revealing this truth through the New Covenant Scriptures. God promised Abraham many physical descendants. Let's look specifically at the promise again: "He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars-if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, 'So shall your offspring (seed) be' (Genesis 15:5). Moses' use of the word seed in grammatical terms is called a collective singular. We use collective singulars all the time in the English language. For example, "I went out to the nursery to pick up a bag of seed." When I say that, everyone knows that I did not go out and get a bag with one giant seed in it, but rather a bag filled with thousands and thousands of individual grass seeds. But Paul capitalizes on Moses' use of a collective singular in his New Covenant and divinely inspired interpretation of Genesis 15:5 in the book of Galatians. In Galatians chapter 3 Paul sets out to explain the relationship of the Old Covenant to the spiritual fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant: "The promises were spoken to Abraham and to

his seed. The Scripture does not say ‘and to seeds,’ meaning many people, but “and to your seed,” meaning one person, who is Christ” (Galatians 3:16).

What is a responsible interpreter to do with such an apparent discrepancy? The Genesis context absolutely and unequivocally demands a collective singular which gives the meaning “many people.” Paul is giving the final purpose of the text. This is legitimately a second divinely inspired meaning of the text.<sup>2</sup> It is the meaning of the text in its fulfillment and what it always pointed towards. The promise of offspring to Abraham is finally fulfilled in Christ. But that is not all. Paul goes on to identify all those who trust in Christ alone to be the spiritual seed of Abraham: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:28, 29). Paul lets us know that being a seed or descendant of Abraham in the New Covenant sense has nothing to do with blood relation to Abraham as it did in the Old Covenant era. All of those who belong to Jesus Christ, both Jew and Gentile, are the true recipients of the promise spoken to Abraham. Jesus Christ and the church are the spiritual or New Covenant fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise of many descendants.

### **B. “I will be their God” spiritually fulfilled**

The relationship of God to the physical nation of Israel in the Old Covenant era was qualitatively different from His relationship to all those who are in the New Covenant. The Israelites were “loved” “chosen” and “redeemed” by God, but most of them went to hell because of unbelief (Hebrews 3:19). God did not set his saving love on all of those people. God did not choose Israel the nation in the same sense he chose believers before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight (Ephesians 1:4). Most of the Israelites<sup>3</sup> in the Old Covenant era were what theologians categorize as “historically elect,” chosen to play a particular part in God’s plan of redemption. They were physically redeemed but not spiritually redeemed. Certainly these people did not deserve the amazing favor God bestowed on them. He gave them the Old Covenant, which has types and shadows of the gospel. No one else in the world had these types and shadows.

In Hebrews 8:7-12 the author describes the New Covenant and how it contrasts the Old or Mosaic Covenant:

The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord (v. 8, 9).

We must focus on how the New Covenant “will not be like” the Mosaic Covenant. In what way will it be different? The text goes on to spell it out: “This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people” (v. 10). Although Old Covenant Israel was God’s people and He was their God in a sense, there is another sense in which this was never accomplished in the Old Covenant era. That is what this passage is highlighting. It took the work of Christ on the cross,

which established the New Covenant to bring about the spiritual fulfillment of this Abrahamic promise. That is, Christ purchased complete forgiveness of sins and a God-loving heart for every last person in the new covenant. The result of this is that unlike the nation of Israel in the Old Covenant era, those in the New Covenant can actually approach God. God is no longer our eternal enemy and that is what it means for God to be our God.

In Hebrews 10, the context is the contrast between the work of Christ and the work of the priesthood of the Old Covenant. The Levitical priests were unable to make the believer acceptable to God, while Jesus' priestly work on the cross accomplished this:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water (Hebrews 10:19-22).

Jesus Christ purchased the spiritual fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise to have a loving relationship with God on the cross. It is our blood-bought salvation.

### **C. "Possession of the Land" Spiritually Fulfilled**

The New Testament treats the land promise made to Abraham as a promise of true spiritual rest for God's true people. Joshua only gave them physical rest in the physical land. We saw that the Israelites did in fact receive this rest, but the author of the book of Hebrews tells us that Joshua never gave them rest. Let's look at this apparent conflict:

So the LORD gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their forefathers, and they took possession of it and settled there. The LORD gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their forefathers. Not one of their enemies withstood them; the LORD handed all their enemies over to them. Not one of all the LORD's good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled (Joshua 21:43-45).

For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience (Hebrews 4:8-11).

These Scriptures are in direct conflict unless we take into account the way rest and land are being interpreted in Hebrews chapters 3 and 4. The wilderness generation in the book of Exodus were not allowed to "enter God's rest" meaning enter the Promised Land. This is understood in Hebrews 3 to mean that they did not obtain salvation. Joshua, however, did take the Israelites into the Promised Land and they were given rest from their physical enemies! But the author of Hebrews is pointing past the physical fulfillment concerning physical land and rest from war and looking at salvation rest. The

promise of Canaan as an everlasting possession is finally and ultimately fulfilled with the everlasting possession of our eternal salvation.

In summary, understanding the relationship of the Abrahamic Covenant to the Old and New Covenants allows one to have a grasp on how Scripture fits together. The Abrahamic Covenant contains both the Old and New Covenants. The Old Covenant is the physical fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise and the New Covenant is the spiritual fulfillment.

**Question: There are promises about the future in the prophets that have not been fulfilled, and they seem sort of strange. There are promises in the Old Testament that the nation of Israel will get the physical land of Palestine and be given political and military power. There are promises that there will be scads of Levitical priests offering sacrifices forever. How does NCT handle these types of promises?**

Sometimes the things that are said by the prophets about a future age seem incredible and hard to explain. These prophets speak of a time after God's judgment of Israel for her transgressions in which there will be a restoration of the nation. But the descriptions of this time period of great blessings are full of detail that is both unimaginably wonderful and puzzling for the believer living in the New Covenant era. Because NCT has a proper grasp of how the whole of Scripture fits together, we have a coherent way of interpreting these promises. We understand that the Abrahamic Covenant was first fulfilled physically in the Old Covenant and in the nation of Israel and then fulfilled spiritually in the New Covenant and the church. In light of this, in the Old Covenant era we see spiritual truths being related in picture form. When God revealed man's need for his sin to be atoned for, he used the types and shadows of an elaborate sacrificial system including thousands of priests and barnyard animals. When God revealed the promise of His people to dwell with Him, he did so in the types and shadows of the land in the Middle East and in a building made of bricks and mortar. This is the way in which God revealed His plan in the Old Covenant era. So when God used the prophets to explain the spiritual fulfillment of God's plan in the New Covenant era, God decided to use the language of types and shadows. He was describing the New Covenant in the language of the Old Covenant. He pointed toward the spiritual goal of God's plan in the brightest and clearest way that the physical types and shadows would allow.

There is a prophecy in Amos 9:11-12 that is quoted in Acts 15:14-20 which will help us to understand how God interprets Old Testament prophecies concerning a future restoring of fortunes for national Israel. Our first step in interpreting this prophecy in Amos is to determine its context within the Old Testament. Amos is prophesying against the Northern Kingdom (Israel) and dressing them down for their idolatry and social injustices. The prophecy focuses on the coming judgment God is about to bring on Israel with His chosen instrument, the Assyrians, in 722 B.C. At the end of a series of visions concerning God's judgment on Israel, we read that God has plans to restore the nation of Israel:

“In that day I will raise up the fallen booth of David, And wall up its breaches; I will also raise up its ruins, And rebuild it as in the days of old; That they may possess the remnant of Edom And all the nations who are called by My name,”

Declares the LORD who does this. “Behold, days are coming,” declares the LORD, “When the plowman will overtake the reaper And the treader of grapes him who sows seed; When the mountains will drip sweet wine, And all the hills will be dissolved” (Amos 9:11-13).

“In that day” refers to a time after the promised judgment on Israel that God poured out on them in 722 B.C. According to Amos, this “day” or period of time after the judgment of Israel, will be a time of restoration of the nation. “David’s fallen tent” refers to the divided kingdom. When David ruled over Israel it was a united kingdom and it is considered the golden age of Israel in Scripture. But at the time Amos was prophesying, the kingdom was divided and Israel was at a moral and political low point. God, through Amos, was saying that in a day in the future God would unify the nation of Israel and make it like it was in the days of David and Solomon. This is to happen for a reason: national Israel is to be unified in the future so that “they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations (gentiles) that bear my name.”

Now if we look up Edom in a standard Bible dictionary we find that “The term Edom...denotes either the name of Esau, given in memory of the red pottage for which he exchanged his birthright... or the Edomites collectively... or the land occupied by Esau’s descendants, formerly the land of Seir... It stretched from the Wadi Zered to the Gulf of Aqabah for c. 160 km, and extended to both sides of Arabah or wilderness of Edom.”<sup>4</sup>

So, when God promised Israel that they would possess the remnant of Edom, it was a reference to political and military supremacy over their national enemies. God, through Amos, prophesied that there will be a time in the future after the exile of Israel when the nation of Israel will have military supremacy over its enemies, political re-unification, and of course the expansion of its physical borders to its original size under David’s leadership.

When you turn to your New Testament you will find Amos 9:11-13 quoted by Luke in the book of Acts chapter 15. God, of course, inspired Luke to interpret the passage from Amos in the book of Acts. Therefore, as we look at Acts 15, our job is to determine how Amos 9 is interpreted in the light of the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ.

In Acts 15 the Jerusalem council is meeting to discuss the question of whether or not gentiles can be included in the people of God. In other words, can non-Jews be saved? They were also addressing the related question concerning the Law of Moses and what, if any of that Law believers need to obey? James addresses the first of these questions by showing that the prophets legitimize Peter’s understanding of God’s grace reaching non-Jews by quoting the book of Amos:

“Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name. “And with this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written, ‘AFTER THESE THINGS I will return, AND I WILL REBUILD THE TABERNACLE OF DAVID WHICH HAS FALLEN, AND I WILL REBUILD ITS RUINS, AND I WILL RESTORE IT, IN ORDER THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD, AND ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME, ‘SAYS THE LORD, WHO MAKES THESE THINGS KNOWN FROM OF OLD. “Therefore it is my

judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood (Acts 15:14-20).

James interprets Amos to say that God does save Gentiles and they too should be included in the people of God. We also know from James' interpretation that the phrase "after these things" in Amos 9 refers to this period in which God is saving Gentiles, that is from Pentecost to the second coming. James understood that the period of time Amos prophesied about was actually taking place in the 1st century A.D.! He believed that the re-unification and restoration of Israel was happening. But it clearly wasn't a national re-unification because it included non-Israelites and Israel the nation was securely under the thumb of Rome at the time.

There is something else that is important in God's use of Amos 9 in Acts 15. Notice that the reference to Edom seems to have been removed and the action resulting from the restoration of Israel has changed from possession of enemies to God's election from among all peoples of the world. The restoration of national Israel in Amos 9 is interpreted by God in Acts 15 to refer to the gathering of God's elect, both Jews and Gentiles, to be saved and brought together into the church. This is not left to some time in the future, but it was happening in the first century and it is happening now.

In Amos 9, God spoke to the Jews through the prophet Amos about the New Covenant era. He spoke about the amazing things he would do in the future for His people. But He did so in the language of the picture. God spoke about this in terms of King David, material wealth, and political and military power. This is the language of the physical kingdom. But we find that in the fulfillment of this prophecy the language of the physical kingdom and the physical people of God is interpreted in terms of the spiritual kingdom and the spiritual people of God. Amos was inspired to describe the New Covenant era in the language of the Old Covenant and Luke was inspired to interpret it for us.

One of the passages that promises Israel that she will receive the physical land of Palestine in the future and many Levitical priests offering sacrifices is Jeremiah 33. This is another instance of a prophet describing the New Covenant fulfillment in the language of the Old Covenant picture. Consider the context: Jeremiah was a prophet to Judah leading up to their exile in 586 B.C. In the chapter preceding our text, Jeremiah has given the people a clear message that they are guilty and will be exiled by the Babylonians. Chapters 30-33 is a bright spot in the book where God gives Jeremiah some good news. This good news is that after the exile God is going to restore Israel to a grandeur that not even Solomon was able to deliver. In Chapter 31 there is the promise of a New Covenant that will be unlike the Mosaic Covenant, which the people of Israel were about to reap the curses of breaking. In chapter 32 God tells Jeremiah to buy some real estate just outside of Jerusalem. He does this to show the Israelites that God is not done with them. He will yet restore Israel in the land and love them as His own people. In chapter 33, after describing the judgment that will take place, God promises that he will restore His people:

“ ‘Nevertheless, I will bring health and healing to it; I will heal my people and will let them enjoy abundant peace and security. I will bring Judah and Israel back from captivity and will rebuild them as they were before. I will cleanse them from all the sin they have committed against me and will forgive all their sins of rebellion against me. Then this city (Jerusalem) will bring me renown, joy, praise and honor before all nations on earth that hear of all the good things I do for it; and they will be in awe and will tremble at the abundant prosperity and peace I provide for it’ “This is what the LORD says: ‘You say about this place, “It is a desolate waste, without men or animals.” Yet in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem that are deserted, inhabited by neither men nor animals, there will be heard once more the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of bride and bridegroom, and the voices of those who bring thank offerings to the house of the LORD, saying, “Give thanks to the LORD Almighty, for the LORD is good; his love endures forever.” For I will restore the fortunes of the land as they were before,’ says the LORD. “This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘In this place, desolate and without men or animals-in all its towns there will again be pastures for shepherds to rest their flocks. In the towns of the hill country, of the western foothills and of the Negev, in the territory of Benjamin, in the villages around Jerusalem and in the towns of Judah, flocks will again pass under the hand of the one who counts them,’ says the LORD (33:6-13).

In these verses God promises that he will not only spiritually restore Judah, but that he will give them prosperity in a rebuilt Jerusalem. Material wealth and physical peace from enemies is promised. The time frame is when God brings Judah back from captivity, which was 70 years after their exile. This is an unambiguous promise to restore physical Israelites into the physical land and give them health and wealth. These promises are specific to Jerusalem and the surrounding countryside. Notice that the promises are linked to Messianic promises:

“ ‘The days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will fulfill the gracious promise I made to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah. “ ‘In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David’s line; he will do what is just and right in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness’ (33:14-16).

This promise of a “Branch” and his connection to David is very similar to Isaiah 4:2; 6:13; 9:7; 11:1 and said to be fulfilled in Matthew 2:23. It is clearly a messianic promise in which, according to the language of the text, the Messiah will be doing what is just and right in the land of Palestine. He will save Judah (physically) and Jerusalem will be safe from her enemies.

For this is what the LORD says: ‘David will never fail to have a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel, nor will the priests, who are Levites, ever fail to have a man to stand before me continually to offer burnt offerings, to burn grain offerings and to present sacrifices ‘ “(33:17,18).

In these verses we not only see a promise of eternal kingship in the line of David, but an eternal Levitical priesthood who will continually offer burnt offerings, grain offerings, and animal sacrifices.

The word of the LORD came to Jeremiah: “This is what the LORD says: ‘If you can break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, so that day and night no longer come at their appointed time, then my covenant with David my servant—and my covenant with the Levites who are priests ministering before me—can be broken and David will no longer have a descendant to reign on his throne. I will make the descendants of David my servant and the Levites who minister before me as countless as the stars of the sky and as measureless as the sand on the seashore’ “ (33:19-22).

This promise couldn’t be clearer. There will be a reign over Israel and Judah of one or many of David’s descendants forever and there will be “countless” Levitical priests ministering presumably in the temple doing sacrifices forever.

This passage bristles with problems without the hermeneutic of NCT and the picture/fulfillment concept. Even the messianic promises are problematic here. Certainly the promised King in David’s line who will reign forever is clearly fulfilled in Jesus Christ. This fulfillment is a bit surprising because before the cross one would have expected a dynastic fulfillment to this promise involving a succession of Kings ruling over the nation of Israel. But we know now that the prophecy is fulfilled in Jesus Christ who is in David’s genealogical line, but lives forever. Although Jesus is clearly reigning now according to Peter in Acts 2:24-36 and the book of Hebrews chapter 1:3, Jesus does not rule politically over the nation of Israel. Geo-political rule is clearly what Jeremiah speaks about. This is a problem for those who believe that it is necessary to have a specific one for one fulfillment for the prophecy.<sup>5</sup> Instead it is better to see the language concerning geo-political rule over the nation of Israel as God using the language of the picture (the physical kingdom and the physical nation) to describe the fulfillment that involves the spiritual kingdom and the spiritual people.

The promise of an eternal Levitical priesthood offering animal and grain sacrifices is difficult, if not impossible to interpret in harmony with the New Testament without using the hermeneutic described here. In the book of Hebrews Christ is specifically said to be the one high priest who offers the one sacrifice. He is specifically said to belong to the tribe of Judah, not Levi. This one eternal priest makes the many sinful priests who die obsolete. His one effective sacrifice exposes their many ineffective sacrifices to be weak, useless and unable to take away sins:

Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. Such a high priest meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people.

He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high priests men who are weak; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever (Hebrews 7:23-28).

It would seem that a reinstatement of the Levitical priesthood would be to jump backward into the types and shadows. Can you imagine after having the one perfect and eternal priest who has made the perfect sacrifice, going back to weak and useless priests offering the blood of bulls and goats? Hebrews 10 tells us that the whole system of worship including the law and the priesthood was “only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves.” The entire set up with the tabernacle, the priests, and the sacrifices were wonderful in that they pointed to the realities, but they weren’t the realities.

When Jeremiah speaks of a restoration of the fortunes of the nation of Israel and the city of Jerusalem, an eternal kingship on the throne of David ruling Israel and keeping them safe, and an eternal and exceedingly numerous Levitical priesthood continuously making sacrifices, he is using the language of the picture to describe God’s New Covenant fulfillment.

### **Question: Is New Covenant Theology antinomian?**

Let me begin by saying “NO!” This is a common question asked of those who hold to New Covenant Theology (NCT) and it deserves a full and careful answer. Richard Barcellos accused those who hold to NCT in Ligonier Ministries monthly publication called *Tabletalk* (the September 2002 issue) of advocating antinomianism.<sup>6</sup> New Covenant Theology is NOT antinomian. Antinomianism is a heresy that is incompatible with authentic Christianity.

The term *antinomianism* refers to the belief that Christians do not have a law that they must obey today. That is, it is the belief that Christians are “lawless” people. A necessarily connected belief to *antinomianism* is that Christians cannot sin. Sin is defined in Scripture as breaking God’s law (1 John 3:4) and if there is no law then it is impossible to sin. A life of moral decadence, of course, results from such an abhorrent belief. Thus, *antinomianism* is a longstanding heresy that is fought against by all faithful Christians. In theological circles the term *antinomianism* is much like the term *rape*. It is usually said in a whisper because it is so very, very wicked.

The words that we use matter. Consider the following exchange:

“The Bible encourages *child abuse*! Aren’t you appalled and shocked?”

“Wait a minute! How does it encourage *child abuse*? The Bible never tells us to brutalize our children.”

“No, it does something far more dangerous! It encourages *child abuse* because it teaches us that we need to tell our children that they are sinners. That abuses their self-esteem! Such treatment of a child’s delicate psyche is far more brutal than mere physical *abuse*.”

Now before you get too excited, I don’t believe that the Bible encourages child abuse. I am a firm believer in telling our children the gospel, which consists of both the bad news

and the good news. I want my child to have Christ-esteem, not self-esteem. The purpose of the dialogue above was to make the point that the words we use matter. The way in which the phrase *child abuse* was used above, not only slanders the one being falsely accused and connects a label to him that is hard to shake, but it trivializes the awful crime itself! In the same way, *Tabletalk* has used the term *antinomianism* to refer to New Covenant Theology. Such a respected ministry calling us *antinomian* gives us a false and ugly label that will be hard to shake. Also, using this term in the way that they have trivializes the seriousness of the false doctrine and will make the real thing more difficult to recognize.

Writers and teachers are in the word business. Words are the tools of their trades. For Christian theologians, the skill of explaining the use of Greek and Hebrew words is a necessity since those are the original languages of the Scriptures. But the use of words and therefore language, Greek and Hebrew included, is governed by rules. Most Christian writers are careful about how they use language, especially Greek and Hebrew. But give a novice or a reckless Christian writer and teacher a Greek word to play with and it is like giving a child the keys to a candy store...you never know quite what you are going to end up with, but you know it is going to be a great big mess. In the article “The Death of the Decalogue” in *Tabletalk*, Mr. Barcellos begins to play with the word *antinomian* creating just such a mess:<sup>7</sup>

“NCT even sounds a clear alarm against antinomianism. However, we must be careful to ascertain what NCT means when it speaks of antinomianism. We must ask: Against what law? And what does the word *against* mean? Does it mean against altogether? Could it mean against in part? The prefix *anti* has various nuances. It can mean ‘against,’ ‘instead of,’ or ‘in place of.’ In other words, although NCT may not be against law in an absolute sense, if it denies the moral law of the Old Testament is the moral law of the New Testament, and if it replaces the moral law with another, then it is antinomian on two counts” (15).

Notice, the meaning of the word *antinomian* now no longer has a fixed definition. Neither the context nor its consistent historical usage determines what the word means. Mr. Barcellos tells us that the meaning of *antinomian* is now determined by the flexibility of the Greek prefix *anti*. He broadens the meaning of the word to include one who does not see that all of the OT “moral law” is applicable today. It also could mean one who sees one law being used in place of another. With this magical transformation of the meaning of the word, suddenly NCT fits the definition of *antinomian*!

Let’s play this word game for a moment. We learned from Mr. Barcellos that *anti* can mean “against all of something” or “against *part* of something.” Mr. Barcellos, along with all Christians, does not believe that the laws that regulated sacrifices or the laws that regulated how Israelites planted their fields or how they kept their beards are still binding today. Therefore, Mr. Barcellos and the rest of Christendom are against *part* of the Old Covenant law, so they must be *antinomian*! If we play with words like this anyone can be called an *antinomian*.

In his article Mr. Barcellos writes: “ ‘Moderate antinomianism’ has resurfaced under a new banner...New Covenant Theology (NCT) extols the Lordship of Christ in Christian ethics, which we applaud (Westminster Confession of Faith, 19:5), but it does so at the

expense of moral law” (15). Now, if this statement were to go unqualified, New Covenant Theology would seem to be an utter contradiction. How does one extol Lordship, and yet do away with moral law? Isn't the essence of Lordship obedience to Christ? Aren't Christ's commands, and the commands of the Apostles, laws? Aren't these laws moral in their character so that if one were to disobey any of those laws it would be sinful? Yes, but this is not what Mr. Barcellos means when he uses the term “moral law.” He uses the term “moral law” in a very specific way. When you hear the term moral law you immediately think of absolute standards of right and wrong. But Mr. Barcellos joins many in Reformed Theological circles to define “moral law” specifically as the Ten Commandments. Because NCT views the Decalogue as no longer binding on believers in the New Covenant era, they are by definition *antinomian*. Mike Adams examined this issue in a recent paper where he writes:

Our continued use of the phrase ‘moral law’ in explaining biblical law must be discarded altogether because it is often used to enforce unbiblical definitions on an otherwise clear subject. Because of its long history within both Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism, the phrase “moral law” carries with it much implied meaning that is less than biblical and for that reason, does not clearly convey the concept of biblical law. In this way, “moral law” becomes a flexible medium to express what our theological system demands of us concerning biblical law. Our interpretation of biblical law remains unchecked because we can make “moral law” mean whatever we want it to mean regardless of the biblical text.<sup>8</sup>

We must not load up the term “moral law” with our theological presuppositions. New Covenant theologians are trying to guard against such mistakes while taking biblical law seriously. If you are a believer, what law you are to obey is a very big deal. The primary way we express our love for God is through obedience to His commands. How can I love my Lord if I don't know what he wants me to do? How can I avoid sinning against Him?

NCT embraces the law of Christ, which is the law that is applicable to believers today. The law of Christ includes the commands given by Christ<sup>9</sup> and His Apostles. There are many, many laws in the New Covenant Scriptures and space constraints will not allow me to list them all, but just a few of the many laws that believers must obey in the New Covenant era are found in the book of Ephesians:

Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body. “In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry and do not give the devil a foothold. He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need. Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one

another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you (Ephesians 4:25-32).

These are very specific laws that all believers must obey and when they do not, they sin. So, let's put this critique of NCT to bed now. NCT is not antinomian. The question concerning law that NCT asks believers to consider is not "Do believers have to obey any of God's laws today?" But rather, "Which of the many laws in Scripture does God want His children to obey in the New Covenant era?"

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### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> (a) Abraham's descendants would become a great nation (Genesis 12:2, 13:16, 15:5, 16:10, 18:18).

(b) The descendants would possess the Promised Land (Genesis 12:7, 15:18-21, 17:8).

(c) The descendants would be God's own people (Genesis 17:2, 7-8, 18:19).

<sup>2</sup>Louis Berkhof is incorrect when he writes: "Properly understood, *the deeper sense of the Bible does not constitute a second sense*. It is in all cases based on the literal, and is the proper sense of Scripture. The real meaning of Scripture does not always lie on the surface. There is no truth in the assertion that the intent of the secondary authors, determined by the grammatico-historical method, always exhausts the sense of Scripture, and represents in all its fullness the meaning of the Holy Spirit. Many of the Old Testament types pointed ultimately to New Testament realities; many prophecies found their final fulfillment in Jesus Christ, no matter how often they had obtained partial fulfillment; and many of the Psalms give utterance to the joy and sorrow, not merely of the poets, but of the people of God as a whole, and, in some cases, of the suffering and triumphant Messiah. These considerations lead us to what may be called, the deeper sense of Scripture" (Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992 (1950)], pp. 59-60).

Paul's interpretation of Genesis 15:5 is God's intention for the spiritual fulfillment of His promise to Abraham. But it is hard to avoid understanding this as anything other than a non-literal and or "second sense" in which the text is to be read.

<sup>3</sup> I say "most" because there was always a remnant of true believers within the nation of Israel who were saved by the work of Christ that was to be done years later (Romans 3:25).

<sup>4</sup>*New Bible Dictionary*, ed. J.D. Douglas, F.F. Bruce, J.I. Packer, N. Hillyer, D. Guthrie, A.R. Millard, D.J. Wiseman (Downer's Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 1982), 298.

<sup>5</sup> But they can always say that it is a promise only partially fulfilled now and will be fully realized in the future.

<sup>6</sup> Mr. Barcellos also wrote a book against New Covenant Theology entitled *In Defense of the Decalogue: A Critique of New Covenant Theology*. We have several papers on our

website that respond to different aspects of Mr. Barcellos' argument. You can find these papers at [www.ids.org](http://www.ids.org).

<sup>7</sup> We at In-Depth Studies do not believe that Mr. Barcellos intended to misrepresent the word *antinomianism* or NCT. Our private exchanges with Mr. Barcellos have only affirmed our view that he is a Christian man of great personal integrity.

<sup>8</sup>The rest of this paper can be found at [http://www.ids.org/doctor/Moral\\_Law.html](http://www.ids.org/doctor/Moral_Law.html)

<sup>9</sup> Not every command given by Christ is applicable today. The Gospels are records of a period that is still technically the Old Covenant era. During the period of Christ's ministry, He was under the Old Covenant but talking a lot about the New Covenant era. Consider the account of Jesus rebuking the Pharisees in Matthew 23: Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former (23:23). Believers in the New Covenant era are responsible to be just, merciful and faithful, but we can in fact neglect tithing because that is not part of the law in the New Covenant era (see the article in this issue “God and Your Money”).