A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership
Volume 10 • Number 4 • Fall 2001

A Review Article

Gary D. Long

In Defense of the Decalogue: A Critique of New Covenant Theology

Richard C. Barcellos
Enumclaw, Washington: Wine Press Publishing (2001)
117 pages, paper, $10.95.

This book, as the subtitle states, is a critique of New Covenant Theology. In contrast to the alleged teaching of New Covenant Theology, it presents the Reformed Baptist confessional perspective of the Decalogue contained in the *1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith.* It is doctrinally endorsed by the Founders Ministries, the contemporary Calvinistic wing in the Southern Baptist Conference, and especially by the Reformed Baptist pastors and theologians cited on three unnumbered pages at the beginning of the book.

The purpose of the book is to offer a biblical critique of the "major tenets" of New Covenant Theology that "ends up being a defense of the perpetuity of the Decalogue" (7-8). The book purports to be a critique of a number of New Covenant theologians but is limited, focusing almost entirely upon a critique of three writings by two men who have written independently on the subject. Citations/references to these writings occur some thirty times in two books, published in 1989, by John G. Reisinger,[1] who is a non-dispensationalist, and some ten times to one 1997

article by Fred G. Zaspel,[2] who is allegedly a dispensationalist.

Barcellos' book consists of an introduction, a preface, eight chapters, a conclusion and a bibliography. It is apparently a book-version stemming from his Master of Theology (Th.M.) degree awarded to him by Whitefield Theological Seminary in Florida for his critique of New Covenant Theology (NCT).

In reviewing Barcellos' "In Defense of the Decalogue," I thought about doing a chapter-by-chapter analysis of his eight chapters in which he critiques the "major tenets" of NCT believing that they are not exegetically sound and therefore unbiblical. But upon reflection, I realized that the fundamental issue did not revolve around the perpetuity of the Ten Commandments, but only around the fourth commandment on the Sabbath. Barcellos' basic presupposition is that God's eternal "Moral law, is summarily contained in the whole Decalogue and is at the same time common to all men through general revelation" (83). Therefore, since the Decalogue (which includes the Sabbath commandment) is eternal moral law, it functions "outside the Old Covenant as a unit." This means that the Sabbath commandment (understood as one day of rest in seven) is ethically binding "for all men" (57) including Christians under the New Covenant. Failure to accept this understanding of moral law, characteristic of Reformed theology and its one covenant of grace—two administrations (whether held by paedobaptists or baptists), deprecates Christian ethics exegetically, theologically, historically and systematically. According to Barcellos, the fruit of these disciplines as taught within NCT is "diseased." "This," Barcellos writes, "is the greatest concern we ought to have for New Covenant Theology; it ends up producing a diseased system of doctrine, which produces diseased Christian thinking and living" (110). These are strong words by Barcellos who

acknowledges that his "understanding of New Covenant Theology" is "limited, and certainly fallible" (7). The implication[3] of his charge is one that has been long debated within Christianity in general, namely that NCT leads to antinomianism, and which today is the issue in particular by adherents of Reformed Baptist theology against what is now becoming identified as NCT.

In brief, I decided to only address Barcellos' book from what I believe is its fundamental weakness. (His two-chapter critique of the teaching of NCT on its hermeneutical presuppositions and canonics is greatly limited, devoting only two pages to each chapter [see pages 85-86 and 87-88.]) In addition to its exegetical brevity in treating opposing views—not primarily just the writings of two men—the fundamental weakness of "In Defense of the Decalogue" is that it hangs "all the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 22:40) upon the Ten Commandments rather than upon the first and second great commandments: love for God and one's neighbor (vv. 37-39). This reversal of Jesus' reply to the lawyer is significant.

Such a reversal is significant because the Sabbath commandment is not eternal moral law. It was the "sign" of the Old Covenant (Exodus 31:17). To hold that the sign of the Old Covenant is eternally binding is, in effect, to substitute symbolism over substance. The substance of the Sabbath-rest commandment is redemptively fulfilled in the believers rest in Christ (Hebrews 4:1-11) not in keeping one day in seven holy unto the Lord—a keeping which no two Reformed Baptist churches rarely observe alike. This is not to deny that the fourth commandment has moral and practical application under the New Covenant. Certainly, NCT would agree with John Calvin and Richard Gaffin that a special observance on the Lord's day, one day in seven for rest and worship, is preeminently practical to help prevent Christianity "from either perishing or declining among us"

(98). But to say that the fourth commandment is *eternal* moral law written upon the heart by virtue of man being created in the image of God and therefore binding upon all men for all time is another matter. This is the core issue. But, for those, such as Barcellos, who believe that it is the Ten Commandments which are written upon the hearts of God's New Covenant people (Hebrews 8:10), there will likely be no such acknowledgment that it is otherwise this side of glory. Why? Because the one covenant of grace different administrations (inherent in Barcellos' Reformed Baptist theology) will not allow him to accept the *newness*[4] of the New Covenant, that is, because the New Covenant has made the Old Covenant obsolete as covenantal law (Hebrews 8:13). Neither will it allow him to accept that the New Covenant believer can be under the law of (in-lawed to) Christ (1 Corinthians 9:21) unless this phrase be understood to refer to God's eternal moral law, namely, the Ten Commandments. NCT is adamant in teaching that the New Covenant believer is *not* without law because he is in-lawed to Christ; he is not under law but under grace (Romans 6:14). But the New Covenant understanding of these verses is not acceptable to Barcellos and other Reformed Baptists. Therefore, the implication is that NCT will lead to a license to sin because it is against God's law. NCT's reply is that of the apostle Paul: "What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!" (Romans 6:15).

Barcellos' polemic for understanding the moral law of God summarized in the Ten Commandments is consistent with his presuppositions but is to be challenged exegetically. His treatment of Jeremiah 31:33; Matthew 5:17 and Romans 3:31 is interpreted in light of the theologically deduced pre-understandings of Reformed theology. Exegesis by opposing competent biblical scholars is not undertaken. One example will suffice for summing up this review.

> The Christian is no longer bound to the Mosaic Law; Christ has brought its fulfillment. But the Christian is bound to "God's law" (1 Corinthians 9:20-21). God's law" is not, however, the Mosaic Law, but Christ's law (1 Corinthians 9:20-21; Galatians 6:2), because it is to Christ, the fulfiller, the *telos* of the law Romans 10:4), that the Christian is bound. . . . Thus, while the Mosaic Law does not stand as an undifferentiated authority for the Christian, some of its individual commandments remain [being covenantally] integrated into the law of Christ. . . .
>
> [What is "moral" law and what is not is determined by recognizing] that the New Testament does not approach the matter this way. The *whole* law, every "jot and tittle," is fulfilled in Christ and can only be understood and applied in light of that fulfillment. In actual ethical practice, very little is lost. For the New Testament clearly takes up all the Decalogue, except the Sabbath, as part of "Christ's law" and thereby as authoritative for believers. . . .
>
> [However,] an approach that eliminates the Mosaic Law as binding authority for Christians is sometimes accused of being "antinomian" and opening the door to ethical relativity. But two replies to this accusation must be made. First, the position . . . that Christians are not under the *Mosaic* Law, [does not mean] that they are free from *all* law. The distinction between the Mosaic Law, which is clearly what the New Testament writers mean ninety-five percent of the time when they use the word "law," and the theological concept of "law" needs to be carefully observed. . . . [T]he distinction has its roots in the New Testament, where Paul can distinguish between the Law of Moses and the Law of God (1 Corinthians 9:20-21). Failure to observe this distinction has resulted in considerable confusion and misunderstanding. Second, in fear about ethical nihilism, one senses a failure to appreciate the power of God's Spirit operative in the believer. When the "antinomian" implications of Paul's

> teaching were raised as an objection against that teaching, Paul responded not by introducing a "new law" but by pointing to the Spirit (Galations 5:16ff) and to union with Christ (Romans 6).... [Therefore,] any approach that substitutes external commands for the Spirit as the basic norm for Christian living runs into serous difficulties with Paul.[5]

In sum, Barcellos' conclusion is that "New Covenant Theology goes astray at the point of exegesis and thus produces a faulty theological system" (111). His critique of NCT will likely convince few, other than those who are already of his theological persuasion. It is my judgment that his prefatory belief that "New Covenant Theology is troublesome because it produces a reductionistic, myopic and truncated view of Christian ethics" (7) is unwarranted and severely limited in substance. I seriously question whether it will serve any positive role in enhancing the reader's understanding of the law of God and furtherance of the gospel of Christ. *In Defense of the Decalogue*, contrary to his contention, does tend toward a "flattening" of redemptive history in the eyes of New Covenant Theology as understood by this reviewer. It could be of help if Calvinistic baptist scholars, especially in Southern Baptist seminaries where the Reformed Baptist teaching on the Decalogue is gaining support, would undertake objectively to address the age-long issue over the role of the Decalogue under the New Covenant without being wedded to Reformed theology's theological system of one-covenant-of-grace—two administrations.

Gary D. Long
Guffey, Colorado

Notes

1. See his books *But I Say Unto You* and *Tablets of Stone* (Southbridge, Massachusetts: Crown Publications, 1989).
2. See his article, *"Divine Law: A New Covenant Perspective"* in *Reformation and Revival Journal*, 6:3 (Summer 1997), 145-69.
3. See, e.g., Samuel W. Waldron's endorsement at the front of Barcellos' book where he states: "The moral law of God, as epitomized in the Ten Commandments according to Reformed and Puritan Christianity, binds all men everywhere until Christ returns. The rampant antinomian attack on this great doctrine threatens the very foundations of biblical Christianity. The Christian community owes, therefore, a debt to Pastor Barcellos' book... [for it] mounts a devastating counterattack on one of the most subtle and dangerous attacks on the Reformed doctrine of the law of God" (un-numbered page; brackets mine).
4. Barcellos' theological stance will not permit him to accept the teaching of NCT and its teaching of the *newness* of the New Covenant, i.e., that "the Church is a new work of God and not . . . a continuation of Old Covenant Israel" (12). This refusal may be due in part to his objection to premillennialism, in general, and dispensationalism, in particular, as indicated by his footnote reference on p. 12 to Carl Hoch's book, *All Things New*, and its acknowledged scholarship endorsement by the editor of the *Reformation & Revival Journal*. Yet, the editor and I—while commending Hoch's book as a scholarly work to be addressed by Reformed theologians—are neither dispensational nor premillennial. Barcellos makes no attempt to answer Hoch's work which thoroughly sets forth the significance for biblical theology the *newness* of the New Covenant. Whether one is premillennial or non-premillennial is not determinative regarding the major points of NCT just as it is not determinative whether one is covenant premillennial, postmillennial or amillennial in their many inter- and intra-eschatological variations to hold to Reformed theology regarding its major points.
5. Douglas J. Moo, "The Law of Moses or the Law of Christ," in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments.* Edited by John S. Feinberg (Essays in Honor of S. Lewis Johnson, Jr.). (Westchester, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1988), 217-18 (brackets mine).