

AN ASSESSMENT OF
'NEW COVENANT PIETY' THEOLOGY

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by
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Introduction

In 1949, George Orwell's dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was published. It told of a fictional totalitarian state called Oceania, which created a language called Ingsoc (for English Socialism) to progressively weaken the independence of people's thinking, enabling the ruling Party to get citizens of Oceania to accept anything it decreed, even if it were entirely illogical. For example, the official slogans of the Party, inscribed on the white pyramid of the 'Ministry of Truth,' were "War is peace," "Freedom is slavery," and "Ignorance is strength."

One could be forgiven for feeling that contemporary theology has been transported to Oceania, for a similar semantic inversion has been foisted on the Church today. With increasing unanimity, we hear that 'grace involves good works,' 'saving faith necessarily results in good works,' 'you are saved by faith, but you get into heaven by works,' and other such maxims. Any dissent is drowned out by the overwhelming volume of material affirming these views from well-known scholars, best-selling authors, and popular preachers. The 'folks in the pews' seem to know that something is amiss, but are powerless to stem the tide of this dogma.

The source of this idea is anchored in an understanding of the past. Another Party slogan in Orwell's Oceania goes like this: "Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past." Evangelical theology today is under the sway of Reformed Calvinism, with its well-defined interpretation of Christian history including Augustinian and Calvinist roots.¹ This theological oligarchy even has its slogan (of sorts): *It is therefore faith alone which*

¹ It is not in the scope of this paper to discuss views of history, and their effect on and relevance to contemporary theology. For the Calvinist dependence on historical Reformation roots, see Wayne Grudem, "*Free Grace Theology: 5 Ways It Diminishes the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), Chapter 1, "Not the 'Faith Alone' of the Reformation," 27-39. For a cogent exposé of the faulty foundation upon which Calvinist soteriology rests, see Ken Wilson, "A Theological and Historical Investigation," in Fred Chay, ed., *A Defense of Free Grace Theology* (Grace Theology Press, 2017), 33-65.

*justifies, and the faith which justifies is not alone.*² Based on this motto, Reformed theologians assert that “some good works will always accompany saving faith in a person’s life and will be seen after a person comes to faith.”³ Without this confirmatory or validating evidence, faith will not ultimately result in one receiving eternal life.⁴ The determining factor in whether or not a person is eschatologically *saved eternally* (goes to heaven) is therefore good works. Reformed theology controls the present, and thus the past, and thus the future.

If there is a ‘wrench in the works’ of this system, it is grace. To anyone not schooled in Calvinist doctrine, Scripture clearly affirms salvation by grace, through faith, not of works (John 3:16; 5:24; Acts 16:31; Rom. 4:4-5; Gal. 2:16, 21; Eph. 2:8-9; Titus 3:5; etc.). Grace is a joyful, attractive concept; it is magnified in God’s unconditional love for helpless sinners, the sacrificial death of His Son on the cross to pay the penalty of our sin, and the free offer of forgiveness of sin and the gift of eternal life to any and all who believe in Jesus Christ. It is therefore not surprising that every theological system, including those which make good works necessary for final salvation, wants to lay claim to grace.

To do this requires some dazzling theological dexterity.⁵ Granted, some evangelical theologians today have simply ‘come out of the closet’ and baldly pronounce that justification is by works.⁶ Many fit works in as an inevitable result of faith, or as an integral part of ‘true’ faith.

² Often attributed to Martin Luther, but see John Calvin, *Acts of the Council of Trent with the Antidote*, 6th Session, Canon 11. Online: https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/calvin_trentantidote.html. For a defense of this slogan, see Grudem, “*Free Grace*” *Theology*, 35-38; for a response, see Fred R. Lybrand, *Back to Faith* (Xulon, 2009).

³ Grudem, *Free Grace*” *Theology*, 28.

⁴ See David R. Anderson, “The Faith That Saves,” in Fred Chay, ed., *A Defense of Free Grace Theology* (Grace Theology Press, 2017), 74.

⁵ As an example, see Bradley G. Green, *Covenant and Commandment: Works, Obedience and Faithfulness in the Christian Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), pp. 55-76.

⁶ Matthew W. Bates, *Salvation By Allegiance Alone: Rethinking Faith, Works, and the Gospel of Jesus the King* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2017); Alan P. Stanley, *Did Jesus Teach Salvation by Works? The Role of Works in Salvation in the Synoptic Gospels* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2006); Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., “*By Faith, Not By Sight: Paul and the Order of Salvation*” (Bletchley, UK: Paternoster, 2006); Paul A. Rainbow, *The Way of Salvation: The Role of Christian Obedience in Justification* (Bletchley, UK: Paternoster, 2005). For a

The word “grace” features prominently in their writings or ministries; the requirement of works is usually obscured in the ‘fine print.’ But always, lurking in the background, like the proverbial ‘elephant in the room,’ is grace. Paul’s words in Romans 11:6 loom large: *But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace.*⁷ The requirement of works is clearly inimical to grace. As a result, the creative effort of numerous theologians is focused on showing that their soteriological system is all ‘of grace.’

New Covenant Piety

The focus of this paper is “New Covenant Piety” (hereafter NCP), one attempt to amalgamate salvation by grace and a requirement of works.⁸

The concept of new covenant piety is taken from God’s promise of a new covenant with his people prophesied by Jeremiah. In that covenant, God promises to restore the relationship with Israel and Judah by “remembering their sins no more” and to remedy their serial infidelity by enabling their faithfulness to the covenant by “writing the law on their hearts.” Thus, both getting in and staying in under the new covenant are contingent upon God’s initiative to forgive sins and his empowerment of human faithfulness. New covenant piety then conveys the notion that post-conversion faithfulness or obedience is grounded in God’s prior and ongoing empowerment of that faithfulness or obedience. Jeremiah’s prophecy of this promised new covenant became integral to early Christian identity.⁹

trenchant indictment of the departure of Gaffin and Rainbow from historic Reformation doctrine, see Mark W. Karlberg, “Book Reviews,” *JETS* 50, No.2 (June, 2007), 423-28.

⁷ NASV (unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are from the New American Standard Version). The NKJV (Majority Text) here adds: *But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work.*

⁸ NCP should not be confused with ‘New Covenant Theology’ (NCT); authors cited in this paper seem to have gone out of their way to *never* identify with NCT. However, there are some similarities between the two. In particular, in agreement with NCT, NCP seems to forge a path between traditional Covenant theology and Dispensationalism, views the NT as having interpretive priority over the OT, focuses almost entirely on the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and New Covenants, and sees the New Covenant being fulfilled in the church. See Dennis M. Swanson, “Introduction to New Covenant Theology,” *TMSJ* 18/1 (Fall 2007), pp. 149-163; William D. Barrick, “New Covenant Theology and the Old Testament Covenants,” *TMSJ* 18/1 (Fall 2007), pp. 165-180; Larry D. Pettegrew, “The New Covenant and New Covenant Theology,” *TMSJ* 18/1 (Fall 2007), pp. 181-199; Michael J. Vlach, “New Covenant Theology Compared with Covenantalism,” *TMSJ* 18/1 (Fall 2007), pp. 201-219.

⁹ Jason A. Whitlark, “Introduction,” in Charles H. Talbert and Jason A. Whitlark, *Getting “Saved”: The Whole Story of Salvation in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011), 3-4.

While not using the moniker “New Covenant Piety,” Bradley Green follows a parallel trajectory in his soteriology:

My argument is that in the new covenant, works are a God-elicited and *necessary* part of the converted person, a constant theme in the New Testament. . . In short, ‘works’ are ‘necessary’ for salvation because part of the ‘newness’ of the new covenant is actual, grace-induced and grace-elicited obedience by true members of the new covenant. When the New Testament documents are read against Old Testament texts such as Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Ezekiel 36:22-29 (cf. Ezek. 11:19; 18:31), this obedience is seen as a promised component of the new covenant. . . Indeed, there are solid biblical grounds for affirming a biblical theology of grace-filled and grace-elicited works, obedience, and faithfulness as essential components of membership in the new covenant – that is, of being a Christian.¹⁰

NCP takes its starting point from New Perspectives on Paul (hereafter NPP). E. P. Sanders’ seminal *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*¹¹ dissected the soteriological process into two steps; instead of one simply believing in the Lord Jesus and ‘getting saved’ (and thereafter possessing ‘eternal life’), Sanders divided the saving process into ‘getting in’ and “staying in.”¹² NPP’s ‘covenantal nomism’ thus makes ‘initial salvation’ by grace, but works are required to ‘stay in’ (“obedience maintains one’s position in the covenant”¹³). Sanders (and other NPP adherents) seek to avoid undermining grace by suggesting that while good works ‘maintain’ one’s salvation, they do “not earn God’s grace as such.”¹⁴

NCP adherents dissect the salvation process further, from two steps to three essential considerations: “How does one (1) get into the covenant relationship and (2) stay in the covenant relationship in order to (3) get into the age-to-come?”¹⁵ NCP then focuses on the middle step,

¹⁰ Bradley G. Green, *Covenant and Commandment*, pp.17-18.

¹¹ E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

¹² Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, pp.17, 424.

¹³ Sanders, 422; Charles H. Talbert, “Paul, Judaism, and the Revisionists,” in Charles H. Talbert and Jason A. Whitlark, *Getting “Saved”: The Whole Story of Salvation in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011), p.14.

¹⁴ Whitlark, “Introduction,” p. 2.

¹⁵ Whitlark, “Introduction,” p. 2.

between ‘getting in’ (to the elect community), and ‘getting in’ (to the age-to-come).¹⁶ For NCP, the fundamental question is *not* whether or not works are necessary to maintain one’s position (to ‘stay in the covenant relationship’), but on what basis this happens.

The question is one of anthropology: According to NCP, NPP is “anthropologically optimistic.”¹⁷ The motivation for doing good works in NPP is gratitude; a believing convert who ‘gets in’ to the covenant community by faith is thereafter motivated by gratitude to reciprocate with good works, which ‘maintain’ his place (and result in entrance into the eternal state). The New Testament, NCP asserts, does not reflect this optimism; instead of Christians living obedient lives in response to their reception of God’s grace, the New Testament has a pessimistic orientation. Rather than exhibiting obedience borne out of gratitude, Christians in the first century church display constant spiritual struggle, defeat, and even apostasy. Humans cannot, in and of themselves, be faithful in their relationship with God.¹⁸

Beyond this, NPP is open to the charge of synergism.¹⁹ NPP theologian N. T. Wright links ‘faith’ and ‘faithfulness’: “Indeed, very often the word ‘faith’ itself could properly be translated as ‘faithfulness,’ which makes the point just as well.”²⁰ In other words, it falls to the believer to generate the obedience which maintains salvation, and ultimately results in a person entering the age-to-come. According to Talbert, this is unacceptably synergistic and legalistic.

One may be a part of God’s people by grace, but in order to stay in the people and in order to enter into the age-to-come, one must obey the law. Obedience is the condition for eschatological salvation... By God’s grace one gets in the people but by human

¹⁶ Whitlark, “Introduction,” p. 3.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Talbert, “Paul, Judaism, and the Revisionists,” p. 32.

¹⁹ Michael Horton pulls no punches, bluntly equating covenantal nomism with synergism (Michael Horton, “Traditional Reformed View,” in James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy, eds., *Justification: Five Views* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), pp.106-7). In his response to Horton in this volume, NPP theologian James D.G. Dunn reacts strongly to this connection, suggesting that the criticism is not without merit (see pp.121-22). See also Whitlark, “Introduction,” p.3.

²⁰ N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 96.

effort/obedience one gets into the Eschatological Age beyond the last judgment. It is this synergistic, legalistic covenantal nomism against which Paul fights.²¹

The solution, according to NCP, is to recognize that while the believer cannot *on his own* perform the good works and obedience needed to ‘stay in,’ *divine enablement* makes it possible. It is all of grace: One ‘gets in’ by grace, and one ‘stays in’ by grace.²² The Christian does not do the good works; rather, *it is God who acts in them*; “Christ does the good works of Christians;” “good works of Christians have their origin in the action of God/Christ/Spirit.”²³

...legalistic covenantal nomism (in which one gets into the covenant relation by grace and then stays in it and gets into the age-to-come by works of the law)...is seen in contrast to a new covenant piety in which God or Christ or the Holy Spirit enables one to be obedient in an ongoing way after one’s having gotten into the relation. That is, in new covenant piety one gets into the relation by grace and stays in the covenant relation by grace and gets into the age-to-come by grace. In this view, the life of a disciple is by grace from start to finish. This grace is not a substitute for obedience to God’s will but is the enablement of it.²⁴

This ‘enabling grace’ is predicated on God’s promise of a new covenant with His people prophesied by Jeremiah, and integral to Christian identity.²⁵ Green summarizes:

...in two key Old Testament prophetic books – Jeremiah and Ezekiel (and ancillary passages) – there is a pattern in which a future day is coming, a day that will see Spirit-induced, God-caused obedience from the heart. This is pictured in different ways in different passages, but the pattern is clear, and one of the central marks of this approaching era is heart-obedience, an obedience ultimately elicited by God.

This prophesied “future day” is realized, or fulfilled, in the New Testament:

First, there is an affirmation that the new covenant has entered into history through the ministry of Jesus. Secondly, there is also affirmation that the writers saw the key themes from Jeremiah and Ezekiel as realities in the first century.²⁶

²¹ Talbert, “Paul, Judaism, and the Revisionists,” p.14.

²² Michael W. Martin, “Salvation, Grace, and Isaiah’s New Exodus in Mark,” in Charles H. Talbert and Jason A. Whitlark, *Getting “Saved”: The Whole Story of Salvation in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011), pp. 119-20.

²³ Timo Laato, *Paul and Judaism: An Anthropological Approach* (South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism 115; Atlanta: Scholars, 1995), 161-62; Talbert, “Paul, Judaism, and the Revisionists,” p.29.

²⁴ Charles H. Talbert, “Indicative and Imperative in Matthean Soteriology,” in Charles H. Talbert and Jason A. Whitlark, *Getting “Saved”: The Whole Story of Salvation in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011), p. 97.

²⁵ Whitlark, “Introduction,” pp.3-4.

In the place of the Mosaic Covenant, which was unable to deal with sin, the new covenant of Jeremiah 31 provides the basis on which “God himself enables his people’s faithfulness to the relationship.”²⁷

If there is any human faithfulness in the relation to God...it is due to divine empowerment. It is all of grace! The scriptural root for this basic assumption is the new covenant of Jer 31.²⁸

In summary, the ‘new covenant piety’ understanding of salvation agrees with NPP that good works (piety) are necessary for one who has ‘gotten in’ to the people of God (been ‘saved’) to maintain that position, and eventually enjoy eternal life.²⁹ However, it bristles at the apparent synergism and legalism which this implies. To avoid this charge, it suggests that believers cannot perform the good works necessary to maintain their salvation, but the new covenant promises of Jeremiah 31 are realized in the lives of Christians, and enable them to live faithful lives.³⁰

The questions which this paper seeks to answer are four: 1) Is NCP’s application of the new covenant promises in the Old Testament to Christians living in the Church Age exegetically and theologically sound? 2) Is ‘divine enablement’ as presented in the New Testament given for

²⁶ Bradley G. Green, *Covenant and Commandment*, p.54 (see also pp. 167-68).

²⁷ Talbert, “Paul, Judaism, and the Revisionists,” p. 31.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.34.

²⁹ Dr. Ken Wilson adroitly summarizes this view, adapting the classic Calvinist maxim: “Faith alone justifies, but the faith that glorifies is not alone.” See David R. Anderson, “The Faith that Saves,” in Fred Chay, ed., *A Defense of Free Grace Theology* (Grace Theology Press, 2017), p. 19.

³⁰ While this paper focuses specifically on ‘new covenant piety’ soteriology, its essential idea that the requirement of good works does not undermine the doctrine of justification by faith because these works are ‘divinely enabled’ is reflected in Roman Catholic, Reformed Calvinist, and Arminian soteriological statements. A Catholic publication states, “We cannot ‘earn’ our salvation through good works, but our faith in Christ puts us in a special grace-filled relationship with God so that our obedience and love, combined with our faith, will be rewarded with eternal life” (*Pillar of Fire, Pillar of Truth* (San Diego: Catholic Answers, 1993), p.23). Calvinist John MacArthur writes, “Furthermore, we are protected through faith. Our continued faith in Christ is the instrument of God’s sustaining work. God didn’t save us apart from faith, and He doesn’t keep us apart from faith. Our faith is God’s gift, and through His protecting power He preserves it and nurtures it. The maintenance of our faith is as much His work as every other aspect of salvation” (John MacArthur, *Faith Works* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1993), p. 185). Jacobus Arminius wrote that “those persons who have been grafted into Christ by true faith...possess sufficient powers to fight against Satan, sin, the world and their own flesh, and to gain the victory over these enemies, – yet not without the assistance of the grace of the same Holy Spirit” (James and William Nichols, *The Works of James Arminius* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, reprint 1999), vol. 1, p. 664).

the purpose of enabling the Christian to ‘stay in’ the people of God (and thus enter the age-to-come)? 3) Does appealing to ‘divine enablement’ as the grounds of good works really solve the problem of synergism and legalism in salvation which NCP theologians say it does? 4) What are the practical spiritual implications of NCP soteriology? Does it promote ethical obedience and joy in the Christian life? What are the logical effects for eternal security and assurance of salvation?

New Covenant Prophecy and the Church

Any discussion of the fulfillment of new covenant prophecies must reckon with two facts. First, the Old Testament prophecies of the new covenant are always and only made between God and national Israel, and the effects of this covenant are radical and pervasive.

The announcement of the New Covenant begins with a declaration that it will be a Jewish covenant, for it will be made with both houses of Israel. . . The result of the New Covenant will be a total national regeneration of Israel.³¹

...the parties of the new covenant are God and Israel. Jeremiah 31:31 speaks of one covenant and one people, even though the nation was divided and half was exiled at the time of this prophecy. The covenant anticipates a reunited and restored Israel as a national entity. The covenant is not promised to any other group or nation. The OT is unanimous in stating that the new covenant is made with Israel.³²

Although only Jer. 31:31 refers to the new covenant by name, the references and allusions to it in late pre-exilic and exilic prophetic writings are widespread and frequent (Isa. 49:8; 54:10; 55:3; 59:21; 61:8; Jer. 32:39-40; 50:5; Ezekiel 11:19; 16:60-63; 18:31; 34:25; 36:26; Hosea 2:18-20). Drawing only from two major passages relating to the new covenant, Jer. 31 and Ezek. 36, the new covenant provisions for Israel include 1) the internalization of God’s Word (“I

³¹ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Footsteps of the Messiah: A Study of the Sequence of Prophetic Events*, rev. ed. (San Antonio, TX: Ariel Ministries, 2003), pp. 404-5.

³² Rodney Decker, “New Covenant, Theology of the” in Mal Couch, Gen. Ed., *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1996), p. 278.

will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts”); a personal relationship with the nation (“I will be their God, and they will be my people”); intimate knowledge of God (“they will all know Me”); complete forgiveness of sin (“I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more”); the eternal existence of the nation of Israel, the land and the city of Jerusalem restored; responsive and pure hearts, with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (“And I will put my Spirit in you”); material prosperity, abundant crops, and increasing population.³³ Clearly, these provisions of the new covenant are not presently true of Israel. Furthermore, any attempt to ‘divine’ a fulfillment in the Church is a total intrusion on the text, and requires such a spiritualizing of the covenant’s promises as to make them virtually meaningless.

The second fact concerning the new covenant we must reckon with is the New Testament references to it, which clearly pertain to the Church. Jesus announced it the night before His crucifixion: In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you” (Luke 22:20). The Apostle Paul repeated Jesus’ words for the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 11:25). Just as the old Mosaic Covenant had been ratified with blood (Exodus 24:8), so too the new covenant – with the shed blood of Christ (Heb. 9:11-20). As the blood of animal sacrifices ratified the old covenant, so too the blood of Christ ratifies the new covenant. Paul writes that he serves under this new covenant (2 Cor. 3:5-6):

Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit, for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Literal, historical exegesis requires that we grapple with the question of how the new covenant promises to Israel fit into the experience of Christians in the Church Age. A cursory review of various views on this topic shows that this is, theologically, a ‘vexed question.’

³³ Decker, p. 279. Many more New Covenant eschatological blessings for Israel are found throughout the OT.

Two very different groups have sought to circumvent the problem entirely, without success. Some dispensationalists suggest that the New Covenant in the Old Testament, made with Israel, and the new covenant in the New Testament, made with the church, are two distinct covenants.³⁴ While this view preserves the veracity of God's covenant promises to Israel, it is based on theological presuppositions instead of biblical exegesis. New Testament references to the new covenant are clearly based on Old Testament prophecy (Heb. 8:8).

A second group, supersessionists ('replacement' or 'fulfillment' theology) reinterpret the language of the Old Testament so that the church becomes the 'new Israel' and inherits its promises. But this does violence to the specific promises made to Israel, shoe-horning them into the church age. Furthermore, Romans 11 makes a clear distinction between ethnic Israel and the church in God's future program.³⁵

The solution to this conundrum lies in recognizing some continuity or relationship, while at the same time preserving biblical distinctions. Some dispensationalists suggest that the church has no relationship to the new covenant. This view is usually associated with J.N. Darby.³⁶ In this view, the church enjoys some similar spiritual blessings as those promised in the new covenant, but the only relationship between the church and the new covenant is that members of the church enjoy gracious, spiritual benefits by virtue of being united with Christ, the mediator of

³⁴ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), vol. 7, pp. 98-99. See Rodney Decker, "New Covenant, Dispensational Views of the," in Mal Couch, Gen. Ed., *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1996), p. 281.

³⁵ Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *Handbook on the Prophets* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Academic, 2002), p. 196. Whether or not any or all NCP theologians hold to 'replacement theology' is not clear, and not explicitly addressed in NCP teaching. However, by ignoring any national ethnic fulfillment, and when discussing Jeremiah 31, moving immediately from prophecy to "Israel and Judah" to fulfillment in Christian experience, there is an *appearance* of replacement theology, and it sometimes 'bubbles to the surface.' One NCP theologian writes that "the church has superseded Israel as God's people" (Jason A. Whitlark, "Ἐμφυτός Λόγος: A New Covenant Motif in the Letter of James," in Charles H. Talbert and Jason A. Whitlark, *Getting "Saved": The Whole Story of Salvation in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011), p. 207.

³⁶ *The Collected Writings of J.N. Darby*, 34 vols. (Sunbury, Pennsylvania: Believers Bookshelf, Reprint 1971), vol.25, p.370. John Master is a modern advocate of a position similar to Darby's. See Rodney Decker, "New Covenant, Dispensational Views of the," pp. 281-82.

the new covenant. The only true fulfillment of the new covenant will be with Israel in the future millennial kingdom.³⁷ A similar view is that while the New Covenant will be fulfilled with Israel in the future, it is ‘enjoyed soteriologically’ by the church now.³⁸

Progressive dispensationalists use ‘inaugurated,’ ‘already-not-yet,’ or ‘partial fulfillment’ terminology in an effort to explain the church’s participation in the new covenant.³⁹ In this view, the church has a ‘preliminary part’ in the New Covenant, as the ‘spiritual seed’ of Abraham, but the church and Israel maintain their distinct identities.⁴⁰

Leaving aside the ‘two covenant’ view, and ‘replacement theology,’ there is a common understanding that the church has some connection – enjoying ‘spiritual blessings’ or ‘spiritual benefits,’ having a ‘preliminary part’ in the New Covenant promises. Chisholm summarizes the solution well:

As foreseen by the prophets, the new covenant will be fulfilled in conjunction with the future salvation of ethnic Israel. Indeed, Romans 11:26-27 anticipates this event. However, the prophets’ focus was limited in its scope. In the progress of history and revelation, we discover that this new covenant has a broader application. Prior to the restoration of ethnic Israel, God has implemented this new covenant with the followers of Christ, who are being transformed through the gift of the divine Spirit.⁴¹

What exactly is this prophetic pre-fulfillment which the church enjoys? Hodges lists four ‘enablements’ of the New Covenant for Christians, benefits which belong “to all the regenerate of every age since the cross:” 1) an inner inclination to obey God, 2) a firm relationship with

³⁷ Elliott Johnson, *A Dispensational Biblical Theology* (Allen, TX: Bold Grace Academic, 2016) takes this view, or something very similar to it. The “ratification” of the New Covenant occurred at Christ’s death (p. 327); believers are “benefactors” through their reception of the gospel (p. 25). “At the return of Christ, the New Covenant will be inaugurated with Israel” (p. 495).

³⁸ Homer A. Kent, Jr, “The New Covenant and the Church,” *Grace Theological Journal* 6.2 (Fall, 1985): 289-298. Rodney Decker, “New Covenant, Dispensational Views of the,” pp. 282.

³⁹ Rodney Decker, “New Covenant, Dispensational Views of the,” pp. 283.

⁴⁰ J. Paul Tanner, “The Epistle to the Hebrews,” in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, 2 vols. (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2010), 2:1063: “Though inaugurated at the Cross, it would be best to think of the New Covenant as being *progressively fulfilled*, since there is still an aspect of it that awaits fulfillment with Israel as a nation.”

⁴¹ Chisholm, p. 196.

God, 3) the knowledge of God, and 4) the forgiveness of sins,⁴² Anderson highlights the ministry of the Holy Spirit:

By virtue of the New Covenant, we have the Holy Spirit living within us to quicken our consciences in a way unknown to the OT believer who relied more on the Law to spell out right and wrong.⁴³

New Covenant Piety is clearly within biblical grounds in suggesting that fulfillment of New Covenant prophecies in the church provides ‘scriptural warrant’ for the view that there is ‘divine enablement’ that brings about God’s transformative activity in the life of a believer.⁴⁴ But a problem surfaces in NCP’s view of the *purpose* of this ‘divine enablement.’

The Purpose of New Covenant Blessings for the Church

According to NCP, the purpose of the new covenant ‘divine enablement’ is to empower Christians to ‘stay in’ the covenant people, to ‘arrive at the finish line’ with our faith intact, in *relationship* with God so as to enter the age-to-come (heaven). Whitlark states that

both getting in *and staying in* under the new covenant are contingent upon God’s initiative to forgive sins and his empowerment of human faithfulness. New covenant piety then conveys the notion that *post-conversion faithfulness or obedience is grounded in God’s prior and ongoing empowerment of that faithfulness or obedience*. Jeremiah’s prophecy of this promised new covenant became integral to early Christian identity.⁴⁵

In other words, the New Covenant blessings which have ‘preliminary fulfillment’ in the experience of church-age believers are viewed by NCP as *determinative* of a person’s *position* as a member of the ‘covenant community’ (maintaining a *relationship* with God, and thus ‘getting

⁴² Zane C. Hodges, “Hebrews,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 2 vols. Edited by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1983), p. 800. It is interesting that Hodges uses the favorite word of NCP writers, ‘enablement,’ to describe the New Covenant benefits which Christians enjoy.

⁴³ David R. Anderson, *Free Grace Soteriology*, rev. ed. (Grace Theology Press, 2012), p. 238.

⁴⁴ Whitlark, “Introduction,” p. 7; Talbert, “Paul, Judaism, and the Revisionists,” p. 32.

⁴⁵ Jason A. Whitlark, “Introduction,” pp. 3-4 (italics added).

in' to heaven). But this does not mesh with the differing natures of biblical covenants, or the purpose of the old Mosaic covenant for Israel and the new covenant blessings for the church.

The problem is the distinction between *position* and *condition*, between *relationship* and *fellowship*. There are two types of covenants in the Old Testament: Covenants of grant, like the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New covenants, are conditioned at the outset on obedience, but once inaugurated, they are unconditional.⁴⁶ The Abrahamic covenant, once inaugurated (Gen. 15), was irrevocable. Abraham's descendants are not required to do something in order to maintain their *position* in the covenant people. The *position* or *relationship* between Yahweh and Israel is secure. The Davidic and New covenants, likewise, once inaugurated, were unconditional. Nothing can nullify them.

A second kind of covenant in the Old Testament is the suzerainty-vassal covenant, such as the Mosaic Covenant. This kind of covenant has no conditions at its initiation, but once it is inaugurated, it is conditioned on obedience.⁴⁷ The *purpose* of this kind of covenant was for the realization of the blessings, for *fellowship* between the suzerain (God) and the vassal (Israel). It reflected their *condition*, not their *position* or *relationship* with God, which had been secured on the basis of the Abrahamic Covenant.

To summarize, Israel's *position* as the people of God was not the issue in the Mosaic Covenant – the giving of the law; *condition* was. Her *relationship* was secure, but her *fellowship*, and each generation's participation in the blessings of the covenant relationship, was not. This *fellowship* depended on Israel's obedience to the law, the Old Covenant.

⁴⁶ Anderson, *Free Grace Soteriology*, 140-46.

⁴⁷ Anderson, *Free Grace Soteriology*, pp. 140-46.

But this Old Covenant failed. Although good and just in its requirements, it lacked the power to overcome sin.⁴⁸ The New Covenant, inaugurated and implemented at Jesus' sacrificial atonement⁴⁹, provided an irrevocable promise *for Israel* that she would one day enjoy the full blessings which she never could through the law (because of her inability to adhere to it). This is because God would supernaturally put His law in their minds, purify their hearts, forgive their sins, and indwell them by His Spirit. Anderson explains:

Yahweh was looking for an ideal generation which would be faithful to the stipulations of the Mosaic Covenant (the suzerainty-vassal covenant). Through such a generation, He could fulfill the promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He could fulfill the Abrahamic Covenant (the covenant of grant).⁵⁰

He adds that

...though the fulfillment of the blessings of the grant covenants was conditioned on the obedience of a faithful generation, the promise to the line itself was unconditional after the grant had been given. The only question was which generation would be that faithful generation.⁵¹

The point is this: Neither the Old Covenant (law) or the New Covenant were given for the purpose of enabling *Israel* to either 'get in' or 'stay in' the covenant community (*relationship* or *position*); rather, they both pertain to *condition* or *fellowship*, to enjoying the rewards offered to the covenant people for faithfulness and obedience.

This is where NCP makes a 'category error.' The purpose of the New Covenant blessings for the church are not to enable people to 'get in' or to 'stay in' the covenant community (to 'stay saved'), and in the end, to enter the age-to-come (heaven). They are to enable the faithfulness and obedience which results in present *fellowship* with God.

⁴⁸ A fact NCP admits; see Talbert, "Paul, Judaism, and the Revisionists," p. 31.

⁴⁹ Chisholm, p. 196.

⁵⁰ Anderson, *Free Grace Soteriology*, p. 145.

⁵¹ Anderson, *Free Grace Soteriology*, p. 144.

By virtue of the New Covenant, we have the Holy Spirit living within us to quicken our consciences in a way unknown to the OT believer who relied more on the Law to spell out right and wrong.⁵²

By ignoring or misapplying the *purpose* of the Old Covenant Law, to provide a basis for Israel to live in covenant *fellowship* with Yahweh, then missing the purpose of New Covenant promises, which will bring in this *fellowship*, NCP incorrectly applies New Covenant spiritual blessings which are realized in the Church as being for the purpose of securing our *position* as Christians, instead of promoting obedience in the Christian life, and *fellowship* with God.

The Purpose of ‘Divine Enablement’ in the New Testament

While the ‘New Covenant’ promises in the Old Testament provide a prophetic starting-point and thematic foundation for NCP views, the moral and ethical instruction of the New Testament is its real focus. NCP finds throughout the New Testament ‘imperatives for Christian living’ following conversion which are ‘necessary for final salvation.’⁵³ But is this understanding found in the text, or is it a theological presupposition imposed on the text? History is strewn with the ruins of theological persuasions which imposed a theological system on Scripture; “in the sea of theology many a theologian has found their ship broken up upon an *a priori* commitment to a theological system.”⁵⁴ We therefore must ask if New Testament instances of ‘divine enablement’ are provided by God for the purpose of gaining eternal life – to ‘stay in’ the ‘people of God,’ and thus enter the age-to-come.

⁵² Anderson, *Free Grace Soteriology*, p. 238.

⁵³ Whitlark, “Introduction,” p. 3 writes, “The fundamental questions asked here are: (1) How is post-conversion faithfulness or ‘staying in’ the covenant relationship so as to experience eschatological salvation understood by the various NT texts? And (2) do these Christian texts...[support] a new covenant piety (divine enablement) for staying in the covenant relationship?” His answer to the second question is ‘yes’ (cf. pp. 4-8).

⁵⁴ Fred Chay, John P. Correia, *The Faith that Saves: The Nature of Faith in the New Testament* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2012), p.11.

Go and make disciples...or go to hell? NCP theology views the imperatives of the New Testament as requirements for ultimate salvation, but denies that this is legalism, since ‘divine enablement’ (not our own efforts) make this happen. Their treatment of the Great Commission provides an apt starting point. Talbert writes,

We may begin with Matt 28:19-20. On the basis of all power being given (by God) to him...the Matthean Jesus issues a command to his followers. As you go, make disciples, baptizing them and teaching them (28:19-20a). A promise follows: “I am with you always, to the close of the age” (v. 20b). Jesus’ promise is that he will empower them so they can fulfill the mission he has just commanded them to undertake.⁵⁵

No one will argue against the idea that Jesus’ promise of His presence is for the purpose of enabling the disciples to fulfill their mission to ‘make disciples of all the nations.’ Indeed, the application of Jesus’ promise to be ‘with’ believers ‘to the end of the age’ is one that provides encouragement and strength.

But what does this have to do with ‘getting in’ to heaven? Nothing. Talbert’s declaration that “grace is not a substitute for obedience to God’s will but is the enablement of it”⁵⁶ reflects his own theology, but is found nowhere in Matthew. He writes:

Matthew speaks of the divine indicative, divine enablement for the whole of a disciple’s existence from its beginning unto the messianic banquet! Granted, all of this is unobtrusive, almost invisible to the eye that is focused on the surface of the plot of the Gospel.⁵⁷

It is not only ‘almost invisible’ to one reading the Gospel of Matthew, it is nonexistent. Only the NCP theologian will ‘discover’ this theme which is not there.

Jesus’ prayer enabled Peter to ‘stay saved’? NCP advocates all view works as necessary for one to enter the age-to-come (to ‘go to heaven’ or experience ‘eternal life’), but they vacillate

⁵⁵ Charles H. Talbert, “Indicative and Imperative in Matthean Soteriology,” in Charles H. Talbert and Jason A. Whitlark, *Getting “Saved”: The Whole Story of Salvation in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011), p. 115.

⁵⁶ Talbert, “Indicative and Imperative in Matthean Soteriology,” p. 97.

⁵⁷ Talbert, “Indicative and Imperative in Matthean Soteriology,” p. 118.

between Calvinist and Arminian positions on eternal security. Calvinists suggest that those who do not persevere were never saved in the first place (they only ‘seemed’ to be saved), while Arminians believe a person may be truly saved, then lose salvation. But while it is not clear what *exactly* ‘failure to persevere’ entails, all agree that *apostasy* results in eternal damnation. A key point within NCP teaching then is to show that God’s ‘divine enablement’ empowers a Christian to avoid apostasy, and thus ‘stay saved.’

Focusing on Luke’s writings, Arterbury highlights the danger of apostasy:

Luke highlights apostasy as a very real threat for Jesus’ followers, who are between the point at which discipleship begins and the soteriological consummation. Succumbing to the temptation of apostasy then seemingly jeopardizes a disciple’s status as a member of God’s covenant people in the age-to-come. In short, in Luke’s writings, that a person begins the process of discipleship does not necessarily mean that the person will remain on that pathway to its completion.⁵⁸

Arterbury then finds a solution to the danger of apostasy in a contrast between Judas and Peter, who both exhibited spiritual vulnerability in the events leading up to the cross. Why did Judas fail, while Peter survived? He suggests the answer is in Jesus’ prayer for Peter. He writes:

Both Judas and Peter are heavily influenced by Satan in Luke’s passion narrative as they betray and deny Jesus. Yet, whereas Judas apparently apostatizes, Peter perseveres as one of Jesus’ disciples. The only explanation that Luke provides...for the perseverance of Peter’s faith or faithfulness (πίστις) is found in Luke 22:32. There, Jesus’ prayer and God’s implied, though unseen, work behind the scenes are credited with enabling Peter to survive Satan’s sifting. Consequently, important soteriological and Christological implications are found in Luke 22:31-34.⁵⁹

This is amazingly weak, both exegetically and theologically. Arterbury arbitrarily gives theological meaning to an event in the Lukan narrative, without *any* evidence in the text that this

⁵⁸ Andrew E. Arterbury, “‘I Have Prayed for You’: Divine Enablement in the Gospel of Luke,” in Charles H. Talbert and Jason A. Whitlark, *Getting “Saved”: The Whole Story of Salvation in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011), p. 156. Arterbury cites Arminian I. Howard Marshall here, perhaps resulting in his Arminian-sounding suggestion that a once-saved person may end up ‘unsaved’.

⁵⁹ Andrew E. Arterbury, p. 155.

has anything to do with Peter's eternal salvation. Lacking any contextual support, Arterbury appeals to other Lukan texts.

In the Parable of the Sower (Luke 8:4-8), he finds in the rocky and thorny soils references to those who begin as disciples, but fail to persevere, and therefore do not enter the age-to-come.⁶⁰ But the person illustrated by the rocky soil "receives the word with joy" and "believes" (Luke 8:13); the person illustrated by the thorny soil bears fruit, but it doesn't grow to maturity (Luke 8:14). Here we have reception of the gospel, faith, and fruit! The issue in these two soils is not falling away from eternal salvation, but failing to grow spiritually. Dillow explains:

The seed which fell on rocky soil produced growth, but the person in view fell away. But from what did he fall? There is not a word about heaven and hell in the parable. There is much about fruit bearing (Luke 8:8) and progression to maturity (Luke 8:14). The most plausible interpretation of the phrase is simply to fall away from that progression which leads to maturity, to fruit bearing, and become a dead and carnal Christian.⁶¹

Arterbury next appeals to Luke 12:1-12, especially the phrase "whoever denies me before others will be denied before the angels of God" (12:8-9), which he declares means that "if Jesus' disciples fail to acknowledge him publicly, their status as disciples and soteriological insiders will be revoked."⁶² Once again, he injects his theology into the text. Jesus never says that a person who denies him publicly on earth *is not saved*. Dillow again explains:

Only those Christians who acknowledge Christ now will be acknowledged by Him then. Only those Christians who are overcomers now will have their names acknowledged before the Father and His angels... But having one's name "acknowledged" is not the same as being declared saved. Rather, it refers to the public testimony by the Son of God

⁶⁰ Andrew E. Arterbury, p. 157.

⁶¹ Joseph C. Dillow, *Final Destiny: The Future Reign of the Servant Kings* (Grace Theology Press, 2013), p. 535. See Charles C. Bing, *Grace, Salvation, and Discipleship* (Grace Theology Press, 2015), pp. 87-89.

⁶² Andrew E. Arterbury, p. 157. Cryptic terminology like "soteriological insiders" is common in NCP writings, since bluntly declaring that failure to acknowledge Jesus publicly condemns one to hell is too pejorative. Bock (Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1996), p. 338) seeks to equate 'acknowledging Christ' with "choosing to believe in Jesus," but this does not match the meaning of either ὁμολογέω (acknowledge, confess; v.8) or ἀρνέομαι (deny; v.9).

to the faithful life of the obedient Christian. Conversely, not having one's name acknowledged is to forfeit the Master's "Well done."⁶³

Finally, Arterbury suggests that the judgment of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-11 are another Lukan example of "people who begin the discipleship process but who fail to persevere until the soteriological consummation."⁶⁴ But for a third time, Arterbury simply injects his theology into a text which has nothing to do with it. There is no indication that Ananias and Sapphira have apostatized. They have not denied Christ, or the faith; they have lied about the amount of a donation to the church. Their judgment is temporal death, not eternal hell.⁶⁵

Jesus *did* pray for Peter, that his faith would not fail; notably, this prayer did not prevent Peter thrice denying Christ, but it was no doubt instrumental in Peter's subsequent repentance and return to following Christ. However, there is no hint of this having anything to do with Peter's salvation ('staying in'); Peter is facing spiritual battle in his Christian walk, as he did later with the Apostle Paul (Gal. 2). The issue is sanctification, not salvation.

I suspect that all of us understand Peter. We have all had times when we had a chance to identify with Jesus but remained silent or denied him because we did not know what reaction might set in. We have failed in standing up for Jesus. But like Peter, we also can learn from our failures and grow.⁶⁶

Clothed in order to get into heaven? Paul exhorts his readers to Christian obedience using the figure of clothing:

"...let us lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light... But put on Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts" (Rom. 13:12, 14).

⁶³ Joseph C. Dilliw, *Final Destiny: The Future Reign of the Servant Kings*, p. 687. See Bing, *Grace, Salvation, and Discipleship*, pp. 78-80.

⁶⁴ Andrew E. Arterbury, p. 158.

⁶⁵ At the very least, we concur with Bruce: "It is idle to ask if Ananias and Sapphira were genuine believers or not. ...we cannot be sure that they were not, unless we are prepared to say that no one who is guilty of an act of deliberate deceit can be a true Christian. The fear which fell upon the whole community suggests that many a member of it had reason to tremble and say to himself, 'There, but for the grace of God, go I.'" F.F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1981), p. 115.

⁶⁶ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: The NIV Application Commentary*, p. 564.

“...and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth” (Eph. 4:24).

“Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices, and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him... So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience, bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity” (Col. 3:9-14).

Concerning these New Testament references, NCP theologian Talbert writes:

To be clothed in Christ means to be transformed by Christ and to be enabled by Christ with Christ’s own power. Likewise Rom 13:14’s ‘put on the Lord Jesus Christ’ is an exhortation to appropriate the enabling power within one’s participation in Christ to ‘make no provision for the flesh.’⁶⁷

Taken alone, this is an excellent statement of Paul’s message: He is calling his believing audience to demonstrate their faith in Jesus Christ in their practical living. Paul uses the language of ‘putting on’ both to describe our *position* as believers, and to exhort us to live our lives in a way which is ‘fitting’ as believers. Galatians 3:27 states that “all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” Bruce comments:

To ‘put on Christ’ is for Paul another way of expressing incorporation into him. The closest parallel to Χριστὸν ἐβαπτίσθητε here is Rom. 13:14, ἐνδύσασθε τὸν κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν, but there believers are exhorted to do what they are here said to have done already. This indicative/imperative oscillation is not unparalleled in Paul. ‘Be what you are’, he says in effect, meaning ‘Be in ordinary practice what God’s grace has made you.’⁶⁸

Bruce highlights here that when Paul uses the imperative, he is exhorting those who are already ‘saved’ to ‘be what you are.’ It is precisely at this point that NCP misappropriates Paul’s use of the ‘being clothed’ metaphor, making the indicative and the imperative *both* to refer to the

⁶⁷ Talbert, “Paul, Judaism, and the Revisionists,” p.33.

⁶⁸ F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*. NIGTC. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), p. 186.

process by which a person ‘gets in’ to the life-to-come. After his lucid statement about being ‘clothed in Christ’ cited above, Talbert confuses the issue with this conclusion:

For Paul, grace and obedience are not successive stages in religious life but are bound together in each moment as root and fruit.⁶⁹

Talbert ignores the purpose of Paul’s exhortation to “put on Jesus Christ” or “put on the new self,” somehow conflating it with the position of believers as already being clothed with Christ, and extrapolating from this the idea that those who do not ‘put on Christ’ have never been clothed with Christ in the first place, or perhaps become ‘unclothed’ as a result of their lack of obedience.⁷⁰ This imposition of Paul’s exhortation on eternal justification is unfounded.

Does grace (χάρις) imply the inevitability of good works? Ephesians 2:8-10 is one of the clearest summary statements of salvation-sanctification truth in Scripture:

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.

According to NCP theology, these verses indicate that the ‘good works’ enjoined are actually part of God’s gracious saving act. While the works are performed by the believer, they are not ‘our works’ *per se*, but really *His*. Whitlark writes:

In Eph 2:8-10, the author crystallizes the extent of God’s saving χάρις. First, in verses 8-9, the author argues that because the saints have been saved by χάρις there is no room to boast. For the saints’ salvation from first to last is not from themselves but is a gift from God. Second, in verse 10, God re-creates the Christian for good works, works that God has already prepared for them to do. God gives the Christian a nature to do good works

⁶⁹ Talbert, “Paul, Judaism, and the Revisionists,” p.34.

⁷⁰ Talbert seems to lean toward the Arminian idea that one loses salvation by failure to live an obedient life. “One may be a part of God’s people by grace, but in order to stay in the people and in order to enter into the age-to-come, one must obey the law. Obedience is the condition for eschatological salvation” (Talbert, “Paul, Judaism, and the Revisionists,” p.14). Hafemann, in contrast, takes the Calvinist view: “though based on God’s eternal election and sure promises, the command to make one’s calling and election firm cannot be down-sized to an exercise in subjective assurance... .the promises of eschatological deliverance *in the future* are conditioned on increasing obedience in the *present*” (Scott J. Hafemann, “The (Un)Conditionality of Salvation: The Theological Logic of 2 Peter 1:8-10a,” in Charles H. Talbert and Jason A. Whitlark, *Getting “Saved”: The Whole Story of Salvation in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011), p. 261.

and then provides those works for the Christian to do. From first to last, “getting in” and “staying in” are the result of God’s own doing.⁷¹

He concludes:

In Ephesians, the bond between God and his elect is an expression of his χάρις. Moreover, his χάρις reaches not only to the admittance into a relationship but also the maintenance of that relationship. The saints’ perseverance in holiness, blamelessness, and love is a result of God’s inward working.⁷²

Green writes,

Hence, we are warranted in saying that what God is doing in history is forming a people who are being more and more conformed to the image of the Son (the obedient Son), and as such God is forming a people who – *since they are in union with Christ by faith alone* – are themselves marked by obedience. . . the targeted outcome of the gospel is a life marked by “the obedience of faith,” the new creation good works (Eph. 2:10) wrought in believers as attendant expressions of their saving faith.⁷³

By making both ‘faith’ and ‘good works’ God’s gracious doing, by which a person both ‘gets in’ (is ‘saved’) and ‘stays in’ (gets into the age-to-come), NCP confuses the *position* of a person (a justified saint) with that person’s *condition* (walking in or out of fellowship). In a theological ‘sight-of-hand,’ NCP makes ultimate salvation something which is attained by both faith *and* works, since the grace which saves includes good works which enable one to ‘stay in.’

NCP introduces two concepts into Ephesians 2:8-10 which are entirely foreign to the context. First, the idea of “staying in” (as if you can get in, then ‘drop out,’ then get back in, etc.) is found nowhere in Ephesians. Second, the idea of “maintenance” of one’s relationship with God (as if without this ‘maintenance,’ the relationship would cease to be in effect) is simply an imposition based on NCP presuppositions. There is no indication of this in the text.

⁷¹ Jason A. Whitlark, “Enabling Χάρις: Transformation of the Convention of Reciprocity by Philo and in Ephesians,” in Charles H. Talbert and Jason A. Whitlark, *Getting “Saved”: The Whole Story of Salvation in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011), p. 53.

⁷² Jason A. Whitlark, “Enabling Χάρις: Transformation of the Convention of Reciprocity by Philo and in Ephesians,” p.56.

⁷³ Bradley G. Green, *Covenant and Commandment*, p. 143, italics his. With similar ‘theological dexterity,’ Green also suggests that since the gospel requires one to believe, “it is impossible to say that command, or law, is excluded from the message of the gospel” (*Covenant and Commandment*, p. 61).

What NCP theology does is confuse the *goal* of our salvation *in this life* with the faith through which we receive that salvation.⁷⁴ *We have been saved*; this is our present *position* (the Greek perfect tense indicates past action with continuing present results).⁷⁵ But when Paul speaks of ‘walking,’ his focus is not on our *position*, but our *condition*: Are we living our lives in a way commensurate with our position as redeemed saints? Anderson writes,

And will you notice the word “walk”? Remember we said as soon as we see the word “walk,” the focus has switched to our Condition. He “saved” us (justification) from the penalty of sin (Position) in order to have an impact on our walk (Condition). Position affects Condition. Not the other way around.⁷⁶

How tragic that NCP confuses one of the clearest statements of the contrast between faith and works, and makes it include good works as a requirement for ‘getting in’ to heaven.

Receive the “word implanted” or go to hell? The epistle of James has historically been the site of soteriological shipwreck for many theologians. Luther felt it undermined salvation by faith alone, and dubbed it “an epistle of straw.”⁷⁷ NCP theology has no such problems: It asserts that the moral imperatives in James are requirements for getting into heaven. Whitlark writes:

The author of James is concerned that his audience master their passions and desires. . . Thus, to lead a life that leads to eschatological salvation. . . one must master one’s passions and desire for worldly pleasures.⁷⁸

Again, when we return to the Letter of James, this self-mastery over the passions and pleasures of this life is vital for its addressees’ realization of their eschatological hope.⁷⁹

...the author states that the recipients of his letter need wisdom in order to successfully navigate the various trials of their faith so that they will receive eschatological

⁷⁴ “The words διὰ πίστεως, “through faith,” denote the subjective means by which one is saved.” Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2002), p.340.

⁷⁵ Hoehner, *Ephesians*, p. 341.

⁷⁶ David R. Anderson, *Position and Condition: An Exposition of the Book of Ephesians* (Grace Theology Press, 2017), p. 56.

⁷⁷ Martin Luther, “Preface to the New Testament,” in *Word and Sacrament*, ed. Theodor Bachman (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), 35:362.

⁷⁸ Jason A. Whitlark, “Ἐμφυτος Λόγος: A New Covenant Motif in the Letter of James,” in Charles H. Talbert and Jason A. Whitlark, *Getting “Saved”: The Whole Story of Salvation in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011), p. 199.

⁷⁹ Jason A. Whitlark, “Ἐμφυτος Λόγος,” p. 200.

salvation... It must be asked for from God and given by God for the Christian to become “perfect, not lacking anything,” that is, for the Christian to realize his or her eschatological hopes.⁸⁰

James...uniquely articulates the necessity of a gospel-empowered life from beginning to end for the realization of eschatological salvation.⁸¹

How is it possible to require mastering passions and worldly temptations, and being ‘perfect, not lacking anything’ to get into heaven, without undermining salvation by grace through faith alone?⁸² NCP finds the solution in “the word implanted” (ἔμφυτος λόγος; James 1:21), which fulfills the new covenant promise of Jeremiah. Whitlark writes:

...the implanted word in James conveys the notion of divine enablement, a notion that was especially suited for articulating the hope of divine enablement for faithfulness promised in the new covenant of Jeremiah.⁸³

The ἔμφυτος λόγος makes the imperatives of James possible. . . ἔμφυτος λόγος in Jas 1:21 is a motif of enablement grounded in inward transformation experienced through the gospel proclamation.⁸⁴

That same deposit of truth that brought the community life also continues to reside in the members of the community to sustain them in their journey to eschatological joy.⁸⁵

Since the moral imperatives of James are ‘enabled’ by the new covenant “implanted word” which is ‘written on their hearts’ (Jer. 31:33), they aren’t good works the believer must do, but God-enabled good works which come with the new covenant piety.

There are two conceptual flaws in this reasoning. First, Jeremiah prophesied that the new covenant people of God would not need to teach God’s commandments, because the law would be written on their hearts, and that all would know the Lord (Jer. 31:33-34). If this is true of every Christian who enters heaven (presumably many in James’ audience), why does James need

⁸⁰ Jason A. Whitlark, “Ἐμφυτος Λόγος,” p. 200-201.

⁸¹ Jason A. Whitlark, “Ἐμφυτος Λόγος,” p. 215.

⁸² Whitlark even suggests that “getting enmeshed in business affairs” (James 4:13-17) is a way in which the lure of wealth leads Christians down a path “that ultimately ends in the failure to achieve eschatological salvation.” Jason A. Whitlark, “Ἐμφυτος Λόγος,” p. 204-05.

⁸³ Jason A. Whitlark, “Ἐμφυτος Λόγος,” p. 195.

⁸⁴ Jason A. Whitlark, “Ἐμφυτος Λόγος,” p. 197.

⁸⁵ Jason A. Whitlark, “Ἐμφυτος Λόγος,” p. 202.

to enumerate such teachings? Why does he tell his audience to ‘bridle their tongues’ and “visit orphans and widows in their distress” (James 1:26-27)? Why does he warn Christians not to speak against each other (James 4:11)? Why does he exhort Christians to “draw near to God, and He will draw near to you” (James 4:8)? The idea that “the word implanted” is the prophesied new covenant blessing of Jeremiah simply does not fit. NCP reduces the promised spiritual transformation of Jeremiah 31 from a miraculous divine reality to an uncertain human possibility which is dependent on our response to moral imperatives.

Second, James 1:21 is itself a moral imperative. James is not announcing a spiritual reality of a ‘new covenant’ blessing, but rather exhorting his readers to receive something. The Greek term δέξασθε is an aorist middle imperative, commanding the action as a whole: “receive (for yourselves) the implanted word.”⁸⁶ Reception of this word is preceded by “putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness,” and the one receiving the word must do so “in humility.” This is not a cryptic reference to a new covenant promise, but a call for believers to embrace God’s Word, through which they had been saved (James 1:18).

That Word, James notes in passing, is *implanted* (*emphytos*: “inborn”). In context, it is reasonable to take this as a reference to the readers’ new birth (v18), which was effected by *the word of truth*. Like a seed *implanted* within them, the Word had imparted new life to them. It was thus an “inborn” Word which was natural and innate to them as born-again people. Now these Christians should receive the instruction of God’s Word...⁸⁷

By forcing a theological grid into a context entirely foreign to it, NCP transforms what is a vibrant exhortation to believers to humbly listen to God’s truth and obey it (James 1:22) into a cryptic promise of an internal divine enablement which may result in them one day making it into heaven. It is hard to imagine an interpretation more foreign to James’ intended message.

⁸⁶ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), pp. 421, 485.

⁸⁷ Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistle of James: Proven Character Through Testing* (Irving, Texas: Grace Evangelical Society, 1994), p.40.

What must we ‘supply’ in order to gain eternal life? In 2 Peter 1:5-11, the apostle lists virtues which the Christian (“in our faith”) should “supply”: moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love. At the end of this list, he declares that “if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v.8). The one who lacks these qualities, however, is “blind or short-sighted” (v.9). This leads to an admonition: “Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you...” (v.10).

NCP asserts that possessing *and* increasing in the virtues listed by Peter are requirements for final salvation:

The necessity of progressing in the virtues in order to participate in the fulfillment of God’s promises in the age-to-come is made explicit by the two adverbial, present tense participles of verse 8, both of which are to be construed as continuous and conditional in force: “if [these things] are yours and if they are increasing...

If the virtues, represented as a whole, are not increasing, they do not exist.⁸⁸

The existence of the virtues of verses 5-7 is the very *definition* of the godly life by which one will participate in the final establishment of the eternal kingdom of Jesus Christ.⁸⁹

Not to increase in “these things,” therefore, would mean...that one had not, in fact, encountered the divine glory, here identified explicitly with Christ, that brings about this conversion-knowledge in the first place.⁹⁰

But while Peter surely emphasizes the importance of his readers increasing in the listed virtues, it is *never* stated that this will determine their eternal destiny. NCP has injected this into the context, making it say something Peter never says. Peter’s focus is not on ‘getting in to the age-to-come’ (which is never doubted), but on his readers ‘growing up’ spiritually (see 3:17-18). Applying these virtues to life causes the Christian to be “neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:8). The Christian who fails to apply these virtues is

⁸⁸ Scott J. Hafemann, “The (Un)Conditionality of Salvation,” pp. 244-45.

⁸⁹ Scott J. Hafemann, “The (Un)Conditionality of Salvation,” pp. 246.

⁹⁰ Scott J. Hafemann, “The (Un)Conditionality of Salvation,” pp. 248.

“blind or short-sighted, having forgotten his purification from his former sins” (1:9). Only a completely *a priori* reading into the text of NCP theology will find it there. Kistemaker writes:

If we possess these eight virtues, says Peter, and if they continue to increase, we are reaping an abundant harvest. . . . The consequence of this development is that we are not ineffective and unproductive in our spiritual lives (refer to Gal. 6:10). We are busy applying these virtues and thus witness their visible results. When we are ineffective, we are idle; and when we fail to be productive, we are useless in society (compare Mark 4:19). Such is not the case when all our virtues increase and bear fruit, especially in reference to our knowledge of Christ. Peter unfolds a favorite theme in this epistle: “Grow in the knowledge of Jesus Christ our Lord” (1:2,3,8; 3:18). As parents want to see their infants gain weight, so Peter desires our spiritual growth in knowing Jesus more and more.⁹¹

Hodges further explains:

Peter was certainly a spiritual realist even if many modern theologians are not. He does not take for granted that spiritual growth will occur automatically or inevitably. Indeed, the character development he thinks of cannot occur apart from the believer giving all diligence toward that end (v.5). This does not mean that the believer does this all on his own. God supplies the basic resources and provides help along the way. But Christian growth will not occur apart from our diligent participation in the process.⁹²

It is notable that Hafemann, in presenting the NCP interpretation of 2 Peter 1, ends his focus at v.10a: “Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about his calling and choosing you...” Although he never exegetes this phrase, his assumption is that it, like the entire passage, refers to the believer’s entry into heaven:

...as 2 Peter emphasizes, those within the covenant must now maintain a life of sustained obedience in order to inherit its promises, at the heart of which is entrance into the eternal kingdom itself.⁹³

But does the phrase “make certain about his calling and choosing you” mean “make sure that you will eventually enter the age-to come” (go to heaven)? Nothing in the context says this, and much in the context mitigates against it. As noted above, Peter is interested in promoting

⁹¹ Simon J. Kistemaker, *Peter and Jude*, New Testament Commentary series (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1987), pp. 253-54.

⁹² Zane C. Hodges, *Second Peter: Shunning Error in Light of the Savior’s Return* (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2015), p. 26.

⁹³ Scott J. Hafemann, “The (Un)Conditionality of Salvation,” pp. 242.

spiritual growth and fruitfulness, not in determining their eternal hope. Immediately preceding this phrase, Peter indicates that these readers have been cleansed from their sins (1:9b). When the reality of our position as forgiven saints is combined with the call to pursue Christian virtues, the meaning becomes clear. Dillow summarizes:

To “make [our] calling and election sure” means to guarantee by adding to our faith the character qualities in 2 Peter 1:5-7 that our calling and election will achieve their intended aim. . . . We have been called to be holy and that we might be obedient (1 Peter 1:1-2), and that we might proclaim His name (1 Peter 2:9). . . . The aim of our calling and election is holiness in this life, perseverance in suffering, and inheriting a blessing in the life to come.⁹⁴

That this is Peter’s meaning is clinched by verses 10b-11. Those who “practice these things” (the virtues of 1:5-7) avoid stumbling (spiritually) in this life (v.10b), and obtain an “abundant” entrance into the eternal kingdom (“entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you,” v.11). The word “abundantly” is from the Greek adverb *πλουσίως*, which denotes an enhanced *quality* of entry. Hodges writes:

Salvation from hell is not in view. Heavenly reward is the real theme. The holy and fruitful lifestyle of vv3-8 can be a demonstration – a verification – that an individual Christian has not only been “called”, but actually “chosen”, for great reward in God’s future kingdom.⁹⁵

Conclusion. NCP’s essential tenet, that the blessings of the new covenant are presented in the New Testament as the basis for a requirement of God-elicited works in order for a believer to ‘stay in’ the people of God and ultimately enter the age-to-come (heaven), is not exegetically sound. A perusal of passages appealed to by NCP theologians suggests that they have arrived at their conclusions *before* coming to the text. Rather than *inductively* studying Scripture (going from observation to interpretation), the foregoing illustrations demonstrate that they *deductively* read NCP theology into it.

⁹⁴ Joseph C. Dillow, *Final Destiny: The Future Reign of the Servant Kings*, p. 461.

⁹⁵ Zane C. Hodges, *Second Peter: Shunning Error in Light of the Savior’s Return*, p.32.

Additional examples could be cited, but a pattern of hermeneutical error is evident throughout. Like wearing rose-colored glasses makes everything look rosy, NCP theologians read every New Testament text through “new covenant” glasses; it is not surprising that they see “new covenant piety as a ubiquitous element of the NT corpus.”⁹⁶ But like cultists with blinders to any truth outside the matrix within which they exist, NCP obscures, instead of elucidating, the true meaning of New Testament texts.

NCP, Legalism, and Synergism

Promoters of NCP soteriology are consumed with avoiding the accusations of legalism and synergism.⁹⁷ The constant appeal to “divine assistance” functions as a sort of ‘get-out-of-synergism-prison’ card for NCP: If there is some ‘divine enablement’ which assists a believer in producing the good works required for one to ‘get into the age-to-come,’ then – we are told – those good works are *not really ours*, but God’s, hence there is no legalism. The Christian does not produce good works; God produces the good works. Talbert states it bluntly: “Christ does the good works of Christians.”⁹⁸ As Anderson observes:

When challenged on what appears to be a very works-laden orientation to salvation, they just retreat to Philippians 2:13 (meaning God does these works so it is not *synergism*).⁹⁹

But NCP writers are not able to sustain this distinction; indeed, the effort to meld salvation by grace with the requirement of works to “get in to the age-to-come” implodes on itself. Three logical fallacies prove fatal to NCP.

⁹⁶ Jason A. Whitlark, “Introduction,” p.8.

⁹⁷ This is evident in the number of pejorative references to these ‘isms, usually aimed at NPP (which is referred to as “legalistic nomism”), in Charles H. Talbert and Jason A. Whitlark, *Getting “Saved”*; see pp. 2, 3, 4, 5, etc.

⁹⁸ Charles H. Talbert, “Paul, Judaism, and the Revisionists.” p. 29.

⁹⁹ David R. Anderson, “The Role of Repentance in Salvation,” in Fred Chay, ed., *A Defense of Free Grace Theology* (Grace Theology Press, 2017), p. 106.

First, no matter how many forms of ‘divine enablement’ NCP theologians identify in the New Testament, or how much ‘help’ is provided to the Christian to live an obedient life, the fact remains that it is *the believer* who must *do* the good works, or suffer eternal damnation.

No one will suggest that God does *not* provide assistance to the Christian. The attendant blessings of the Christian life, including the Holy Spirit’s ministry, prayer, fellowship, or the Word (to mention just a few), are real and necessary to spiritual growth and vitality. But all these blessings notwithstanding, the Christian is still *commanded* to obey. NCP theologians seem to think they are alone in recognizing the existence of ‘divine enablement’ in Scripture. They are not. And the commands to obey, even with God’s help, still require human response.

In ‘unguarded’ moments, NCP theologians reveal the same ‘legalistic’ or ‘synergistic’ tendencies which they criticize in NPP. For example, Hafemann writes:

If “getting in” the covenant is a matter of God’s *unconditional* grace, “staying in” is clearly *conditional*, being based on keeping the covenant stipulations.¹⁰⁰

Green admits, “It seems clear that at least in *some* sense our destiny is linked to what we do in this life.”¹⁰¹

This results in logically confounding statements, such as:

...the promises of eschatological deliverance *in the future* are conditioned on increasing obedience in the *present*. . . The inheritance of God’s promises, which is granted unconditionally, is conditional on persevering in the obedient life of faith that God’s provision and promises themselves create.¹⁰²

God is a God who saves by grace, expects his people to obey him, and moves his people to obey him. This obedience can be “necessary” without compromising in the least an affirmation of the radical grace of God.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Scott J. Hafemann, “The (Un)Conditionality of Salvation,” pp. 259-60 (italics his).

¹⁰¹ Bradley G. Green, *Covenant and Commandment*, p. 33.

¹⁰² Scott J. Hafemann, “The (Un)Conditionality of Salvation,” pp. 261 (italics his).

¹⁰³ Bradley G. Green, *Covenant and Commandment*, p. 68.

Statements such as these amount to the theological equivalent of a ‘square circle.’ When that which is “unconditional” is “conditional,” and ‘necessary obedience’ is wedded to ‘grace,’ terms have lost their meaning, and we are playing word-games. NCP cannot hide behind “divine enablement” and pretend they are not synergistic.

Second, God never fails, but in NCP, there is the possibility of failure. To reiterate, NCP declares that in their system, a person ‘gets in’ to the covenant community by grace, ‘remains in’ the covenant community by grace, and ‘gets into the age-to-come’ by grace.¹⁰⁴ But ‘staying in’ and ‘getting in to the age-to-come’ are not a foregone conclusion for the one who gets in to the covenant community. Whitlark states that the Christian, in the struggle against sin, has the resources, power, and *possibility* to be victorious.¹⁰⁵ But the *possibility* of making it to heaven means there is also the *possibility* that the person will *not* make it. While the Christian *may* enter the age-to-come, he *may not*. No matter how this is framed, the picture is unchanged: A person’s final destiny is dependent on both God’s grace, and good works he or she performs subsequent to conversion, and this is synergism.

Third, any failure on the part of the Christian is not God’s fault! Unless NCP theologians are prepared to say that God’s grace fails, they must accept that the believer who ‘gets in’ to the covenant community, but not into the age-to-come, failed to appropriate the ‘divine enablement’ which was at his disposal. In other words, it is his failure to produce the necessary good works which result in his eternal condemnation. God’s grace provided sufficient ‘divine enablement’ (He did His part), but the Christian failed to appropriate it (he did not do his part). This is the definition of synergism.

¹⁰⁴ Charles H. Talbert, “Paul, Judaism, and the Revisionists,” p.12.

¹⁰⁵ Jason A. Whitlark, “Enabling Χάρις: Transformation of the Convention of Reciprocity by Philo and in Ephesians,” p.53 (italics mine).

NCP theologians begin with ‘getting in’ by faith, but by making good works a necessary result of ‘true saving faith,’ by which a person finally gets in to heaven, they pollute their whole doctrine of salvation with the poison of legalism. Dillow exposes this succinctly:

Here we can lay down a self-evident principle: a necessary result for which we are responsible which must be present for another result to occur is no different than an additional condition for the achievement of that second result. . . . There is no difference between a result for which we are responsible and a condition!¹⁰⁶

If the works are a necessary result of faith and if a person cannot be saved without them, then the works are in fact a condition for and a cause of salvation, and the person is responsible to save himself. If they are not present, he will perish. Necessary results for which we are responsible are the same as conditions.¹⁰⁷

Practical Implications of NCP Soteriology

Those who espouse NCP no doubt feel that by emphasizing the necessity of good works for entry into the age-to-come, and the divine enablement that makes such good works feasible, they are providing practical motivation and encouragement for believers to live godly, obedient lives. Green even accuses those who do not include ‘good works’ in their soteriology (include a requirement that true believers must ‘behave as covenant people’) as tacitly promoting license:

...certain understandings of salvation, and of justification in particular, can, if one is not careful, lead to an unbiblical passivity. Thus it would appear that some, with a commendable passion to guard the objective nature of justification (i.e. Christ has done, outside us, what is necessary for our justification), are unable to speak meaningfully about the subjective change wrought in the believer.¹⁰⁸

Green’s charge is valid to a point: Some wrongly construe that justification by faith alone makes subsequently indulging in sin inconsequential. Paul’s rhetorical question (and answer) in Romans 6:1-2 confronts this notion: “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that

¹⁰⁶ Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings* (Miami Springs, Florida: Schoettle Publishing Co., 1992), p. 233.

¹⁰⁷ Joseph C. Dillow, *Final Destiny: The Future Reign of the Servant Kings*, p. 596.

¹⁰⁸ Bradley G. Green, *Covenant and Commandment*, p.62.

grace may increase? May it never be!” Any who would suggest that ‘justification by grace alone through faith alone’ means that holiness of life is unimportant have missed the point of the bulk of scriptural teaching.

But Green (and all NCP theologians) fail to realize the full effect of their doctrine, and ignore the true biblical motivation for a Christian to live a godly, obedient life.

The motivation for God’s people to obey God’s law and pursue holiness, both in the Old and New Testaments, is not to ‘enter the age to come,’ but to enjoy blessings of the relationship they have entered into by faith, and receive eschatological rewards which God will give after this life.¹⁰⁹ Failure to include the motivation for blessing and rewards which pervades Scripture forces NCP theologians to make good works a determining factor in whether a person will go to heaven or hell.

Further, NCP theologians are blind to the destructive erosion to a life of faithfulness which results when a believer lives in constant doubt as to whether he or she will ‘persevere’ to the end in such a way as to finally ‘get in’ to the age-to-come. No reader will find any comfort in ‘divine enablement’ when there is no assurance that such divine enablement is actually coming. If there is no assurance of salvation at the moment of faith – if eternal destiny is determined only at the final judgment of our works, and we cannot know until then if we will ‘pass’ the test, the result is uncertainty and despair.

¹⁰⁹ On eternal rewards, see Joseph C. Dillow, *Final Destiny: The Future Reign of the Servant Kings*, and “The Doctrine of Rewards” in Fred Chay, ed., *A Defense of Free Grace Theology* (Grace Theology Press, 2017), 311-45; R. T. Kendall, *When God Says “Well Done”* (Christian Focus Publications, 1993); Bruce Wilkinson, *A Life God Rewards* (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, 2002); Erwin W. Lutzer, *Your Eternal Reward* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1998); Robert N. Wilkin, *The Road to Reward* (Irving, Texas: Grace Evangelical Society, 2003); Kenneth F. Dodson, *The Prize of the Up-Calling* (Miami Springs, Florida: Schoettle Publishing Co., 1989); Robert Govett, *Reward According to Works* (Miami Springs, Florida: Schoettle Publishing Co., 1989), and Joe L. Wall, *Going for the Gold* (Xulon, 1995); Randy Alcorn, *The Law of Rewards* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1989); Zane C. Hodges, *The Hungry Inherit* (Dallas, Texas: Redención Viva, 1997).

Finally, the undefined “change” which must be “wrought in the believer” to signify that he or she is “truly saved” is self-defeating. Exactly what is required? Who can say? After all, didn’t Jesus say, “Therefore, you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48)? If this is a requirement for one to eventually attain entry into the age-to-come, who can ever get into heaven?¹¹⁰

A glaring omission from NCP writings is any focus on assurance of salvation. No wonder. In a system which makes ‘divinely enabled’ and undefined ‘good works’ the determining factor in whether or not a person will ultimately enter heavenly bliss, there is no assurance or security. Green confidently asserts,

...the cross unleashes a power that leads to the transformation of God’s people (a transformation that includes the manifestation of works, obedience and faithfulness. . . . Our works, obedience and faithfulness flow from his work on our behalf. . . . what Christ has done *for* us leads to a change *in* us, which includes the manifestation of works, obedience and faithfulness.¹¹¹

But this has the sound of a television preacher confidently proclaiming the power of faith to heal sickness or provide wealth. The reality of the Christian life is often better reflected by admissions like these of the Apostle Paul:

For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. . . . I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good. For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? (Romans 1:18-24)

Even near the end of his life, the Apostle could refer to himself as “the foremost of all” sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). While no one debates that Paul manifested “works, obedience and faithfulness,”

¹¹⁰ John MacArthur calls the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus’ quote is found, “pure gospel.” John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), p.179.

¹¹¹ Bradley G. Green, *Covenant and Commandment*, p.91.

making one's eternal destiny *dependent* on a vague estimation of attaining a sufficient number of these works cannot help but erode any assurance.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, NCP theology fails from beginning to end. Its theological foundation, the New Covenant promises realized in the present age, are wrongly applied to the *position* of Christians (whether or not they are ultimately saved), instead of to their *condition* (whether or not they are in fellowship). This category error extends throughout NCP.

As a result, their interpretation of New Testament passages injects the question of one's eternal destiny into every imperative, and ends up being rife with legalism and synergism, even though they seek to avoid this by appealing to 'divine enablement.' The practical result of this bad theology and bad exposition is predictable: Insecurity, doubt, and uncertainty.

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