

THE NEW COVENANT AND THE CHURCH

HOMER A. KENT, JR.

The relevance of the new covenant to the church today requires a careful look into both the OT and the NT. When Jesus mentioned the new covenant as he was instituting the bread and the cup, he clearly indicated its significance for the church. When the OT is examined to discover what this new covenant involved, and when the NT is investigated for further clarification, it becomes clear that only one new covenant is in view, even though different groups may derive somewhat varying benefits from it. The essence of the new covenant is spiritual regeneration, enjoyed now by Christian believers and prophesied for national Israel at the second coming of Christ.

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THE concept of "covenant" is a pivotal one in biblical studies. Both the OT and NT utilize words denoting this idea, and their contexts reveal how crucial certain covenants were in explaining the actions which followed. Gleason Archer's definition of the term may serve as a working guide:

A compact or agreement between two parties binding them mutually to undertakings on each other's behalf. Theologically (used of relations between God and man) it denotes a gracious undertaking entered into by God for the benefit and blessing of man, and specifically of those men who by faith receive the promises and commit themselves to the obligations which this undertaking involves.¹

Students of Scripture are particularly concerned with the covenants which God has announced for man. Inasmuch as these are expressions of his will, his promises, and his demands, they are supremely important to the Christian who has committed his trust and allegiance to God and the doing of his will.

¹G. L. Archer, "Covenant," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 276.

In the OT six covenants are clearly mentioned: Noahic (Gen 6:18; 8:20-9:17); Abrahamic (Genesis 15, 17); Mosaic or Sinaitic (Exod 19:5, 20); Palestinian (Deuteronomy 29-30); Davidic (2 Sam 7:4-16; 23:5); and New Covenant (Jer 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36-37). In addition some would posit by deduction an Edenic Covenant, and would separate the Mosaic into Sinaitic and Levitical.² Much of Reformed Theology also sees two or three theological covenants: The Covenant of Works, the Covenant of Redemption (debated by some covenant theologians), and the Covenant of Grace.³ This article will consider the biblical New Covenant prophesied by Jeremiah, referred to by Jesus, and mentioned with some extended discussion elsewhere in the NT.

THE OT BACKGROUND

When Jesus ate the last supper with his disciples in the upper room, he introduced the memorial drinking of the cup with the words, "This cup is the new testament (ἡ καινὴ διαθήκη) in my blood" (Luke 22:20). No further explanation is given as to the identity of this covenant, yet the presence of the article implies that a specific and presumably understood covenant is in view. Thus one logically concludes that the disciples would have thought in terms of their own biblical heritage. The new covenant recorded as prophecy by Jeremiah seems almost certainly to have been the covenant of which the disciples would have thought.

Jeremiah's announcement of the new covenant was made during a very dark period for Israel. The northern kingdom had already been overthrown and its citizens led captive by the Assyrians (2 Kgs 17:5-6). Foreign colonists were brought into the land to repopulate it (2 Kgs 17:5-6, 23-24). The southern kingdom was likewise in dire straits. The prophet had begun his ministry in the days of Josiah and lived to see the Babylonian captivity begin. It was during those momentous days that God gave him the prophecy of the new covenant that offered better things for the suffering nation.

The new covenant recorded in Jeremiah would be made with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah (31:31). This implies that the two kingdoms would both exist and presumably be united, inasmuch as only one new covenant is mentioned. The Jewish contemporaries of Jeremiah would have understood that God was promising

²J. B. Payne, "Covenant in the Old Testament," *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975) I. 1007-10.

³R. A. Killen and John Rea, "Covenant," *Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia* (Chicago: Moody, 1975) I. 387, 390; and M. E. Osterhaven, "Covenant Theology," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 279-80.

to them a new kind of relationship. In the context preceding this prophecy, they had been informed that the people would be regathered to their land (30:1-3). This would occur after the time of Israel's greatest suffering known as "Jacob's trouble" (30:7), when all their enemies have been destroyed (30:16), and their homeland rebuilt (30:17, 18).

God promised that the new covenant would be a different sort than the Mosaic one he had given. It would bring a spiritual transformation by an inward change, not just by imposition of external code (31:33). Forgiveness of sins would be complete, and the knowledge of God would be universal among participants (31:34). God also called it an everlasting covenant (32:40).

This was not, however, a totally new concept when Jeremiah voiced it. In the eighth century B.C. Isaiah spoke of a different covenant which God was promising:

Incline your ear and come to Me. Listen, that you may live; And I will make an everlasting covenant with you, According to the faithful mercies shown to David [55:3; all biblical quotations from *NASB*].

And as for Me, this is my covenant with them, says my Lord: My Spirit which is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your offspring, nor from the mouth of your offspring's offspring, says the Lord from now and forever [59:21].

And I will faithfully give them their recompense, And I will make an everlasting covenant with them [61:8].

Ezekiel, a contemporary of Jeremiah in the sixth century B.C., was also aware of this promise of a new covenant from God:

Nevertheless, I will remember My Covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish an everlasting covenant with you. . . . Thus I will establish My covenant with you and you shall know that I am the Lord [16:60-62].

And I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will place them and multiply them, and will set My sanctuary in their midst forever. My dwelling place also will be with them; and I will be their God, and they will be my people [37:26-27].

The same thought is obviously in view in another passage in Ezekiel, although the word "covenant" is not used:

For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands, and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and

from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances. And you will live in the land that I gave to your forefathers; so you will be My people, and I will be your God [36:24–28].

Thus, there is an extensive OT background to the New Covenant. This enabled Jews in the NT era to receive the concept as familiar terminology.

THE NT TEACHING

Explicit mention of the New Covenant occurs six times in the NT, although the thought is found more frequently than these few references. Of special interest is the Greek term *διαθήκη* / 'covenant, testament', which is employed in each of these instances. It was not the usual term among the Greeks for a treaty or agreement. That concept was usually reserved for *συνθήκη*—a covenant or agreement negotiated by two parties on equal terms. Rarely was *διαθήκη* used in the sense of treaty. J. Behm can cite only one instance of this term with the sense of "treaty," and that was with the meaning of "a treaty between two parties, but binding only on the one according to the terms fixed by the other."⁴ Consequently, *διαθήκη* had the more common meaning of "will" or "testament," both in legal circles in every period, and in popular usage also. Apparently the NT writers without exception chose this term in referring to God's covenant with man because in its one-sidedness it was more like a will than a negotiated treaty.

Jesus' Reference to the New Covenant

The sole reference in the Gospels using the phrase "new covenant" is found in Luke. Parallels in Matthew and Mark mention "covenant" but not "new covenant" (Matt 26:28; Mark 14:24). Luke wrote, "And in the same way He took the cup after they had eaten, saying, This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood" (Luke 22:20).

Because of Jesus' previous disclosures to his disciples that he was the Messiah and that the kingdom of heaven was at hand (Matt 4:17; 16:16–17), the hearers at the last supper would have had no reason to suppose he was referring to any other new covenant than the one

⁴J. Behm, "Διαθήκη," *TDNT* 2 (1964) 125. His entire discussion of this term is excellent and highly recommended (see pp. 104–34).

foretold in the OT. The absence of any clarification or further disclosure by Jesus reinforces this conclusion.

The Lord Jesus used the occasion in the upper room on the eve of crucifixion to announce that his death would establish the New Covenant. His words also made it clear that his blood was shed "for you"; hence the disciples were participants and beneficiaries in some sense. Furthermore, the context records the command for perpetuation of the ceremony as a remembrance, thus pointing to the future significance for those disciples and others whom they would enlist (Luke 22:19).

Paul's References to the New Covenant

The first Pauline use of the phrase "new covenant" occurs in his first canonical letter written in Corinth, "In the same way He took the cup also, after supper, saying, This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me" (1 Cor 11:25). Here Paul was endeavoring to correct some abuses in the church at Corinth regarding inappropriate conduct at the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:20). The meal they were eating together had become a selfish, uncharitable scene of mere temporal gratification. Surely it was an unworthy preparation for the ceremonial bread and cup to follow. Consequently Paul referred the readers to the events of the last supper, and quoted the words of Jesus regarding the meaning of the symbols. It is clear that he regarded the Corinthians' observance as the perpetuation of what Jesus had instituted, even though it had undergone some gross distortion by their practices. It was the distortion he was correcting, not their understanding of Jesus' command that the blood of the new covenant was to be remembered by them.

Paul's second use of the phrase occurs in a totally different context, although written to the same church. He wrote, "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" (2 Cor 3:6). In this passage Paul was exulting in the ministry which God had given him under the New Covenant as compared to the Mosaic covenant, which he characterized as a ministry of condemnation and death. The OT period was a time of fading glory (3:7) with Jewish hearts being veiled from clear understanding (3:14). However, as Paul proclaimed the gospel of Christ, the energizing power of the Spirit made alive those who responded. The obscuring veil was removed (3:16), true spiritual liberty resulted (3:17), and life was possessed by every believer (3:6). Allowing Paul to define his own terms, the "new covenant" (which his preaching of the gospel was promoting) was the same new covenant which Jesus announced in the upper room and which his death secured for believers.

References to the New Covenant in Hebrews

The expression "new covenant" occurs three times in the epistle to the Hebrews. In one of these the word "new" is different from the other two. In addition several other references in Hebrews employ the word "covenant" alone but are presumably references also to the New Covenant (8:10, 13; 9:15*b*; 10:16).

The first reference is the author's quotation of Jer 31:31, "For finding fault with them, He says, Behold days are coming, says the Lord, when I will effect a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah" (8:8). In this section of Hebrews the author cited the entire paragraph from Jeremiah (31:31-34) and used it to support his contention that Christ had become the mediator of a better covenant than that of Moses; Christ established the New Covenant of Jeremiah's prophecy. The author cited enough of Jeremiah to convey the basic promises of the New Covenant. This enabled the readers to see clearly that their Christian experience paralleled much of what had been promised.

The first promise mentioned that under the New Covenant God's laws would be implanted in the very minds and hearts of the participants (Heb 8:10; Jer 31:33). No longer would those laws be only an external code inscribed on stone. Thus compliance would be by inner desire, not by outward compulsion. This transformation is the very essence of regeneration. This promise of inner change was clearly specified also in Ezek 36:26-27.

This does not mean that no Jew under the Mosaic Covenant had a transformed heart. What is being stated is that the New Covenant itself would provide this for every participant. Such was not the case with the Mosaic Covenant. Even though it was obviously possible to know God and have a transformed heart during OT times, the old covenant itself did not provide this. Many Jews lived under the provisions of the Mosaic Covenant and still died in unbelief. The New Covenant, however, guarantees regeneration to its beneficiaries.

The second promise of the New Covenant assured that its provisions would be efficacious to every participant (Heb 8:11; Jer 31:34*a*). The knowledge of God would not be dependent upon further revelation and instruction from prophets, priests, or more knowledgeable neighbors. Only true believers will participate in the New Covenant, and God will plant the knowledge of himself in their hearts by his Spirit. Every believer without exception will have this knowledge.

Jesus taught the same truth: "It is written in the prophets, and they shall all be taught of God. Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father, comes to me" (John 6:45). The apostle John conveyed the same truth: "But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you all know" (1 John 2:20); "And as for you, the anointing

which you received from Him abides in you, and you have no need for anyone to teach you" (1 John 2:27). Of course John did not mean that no teachers are ever needed by believers. Christ gave the gift of teaching to some believers (Eph 4:11; 1 Tim 3:2), and John himself was teaching as he wrote these words. The sense is that the function of human teachers is not to convey new revelation or knowledge, but to clarify and unfold the intuitive knowledge which, in germ at least, is possessed by all believers.

The third promise of the New Covenant provides complete forgiveness to all who are under its provisions (Heb 8:12; Jer 31:34*b*). Sins would be put away permanently in a sense different from the old covenant. Later in the epistle the point is made that repeated sacrifices reminded Israelites that no final sacrifice for sin had been offered (Heb 10:3, 4). The New Covenant would deal with sins in such a way that no continued remembrance by repeated sacrifices would occur. Christ's death provided complete expiation for sins once-for-all. It is obviously the intention of the author to show that the promises of the New Covenant are all experienced by Christians.

The second Hebrews usage mentions Christ as the mediator of the new covenant.

And for this reason He is the mediator of a new covenant, in order that since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first covenant, those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance [9:15].

Christ's death not only made possible the provisions stated in Jeremiah regarding the New Covenant, but also superseded the old covenant. It provided an expiation for the guilt of those who lived under the Mosaic Covenant. Their sin had been "covered" by animal sacrifices, but that could not provide true expiation (Heb 10:4). Christ's death thus validated the New Covenant and also implied that the old covenant was obsolete and could disappear (Heb 8:13).

The final usage of the phrase in Hebrews uses a different adjective for "new," and mentions the covenant in a context that brings together a number of different parties. Heb 12:24 reads, "And to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel."

The adjective "new" used here is νέας, which denotes something recent as distinguished from καινος, the adjective used in all other instances with διαθήκη, which denotes what is new in quality or nature.⁵ The author presumably had in mind the recent revelation of Jesus Christ. Of course, he was referring to the same new covenant.

⁵J. Behm, "Καίνοσ," *TDNT* 3 (1965) 447.

The context of Hebrews 12 describes the Christian readers as the spiritual colleagues of those in the city of the living God in the presence of myriads of angels (v 22). They have joined with the church of the firstborn ones enrolled in heaven—a reference apparently to living NT believers (v 23a). They are also now in association with the spirits of righteous men made perfect (v 23b). These were OT saints with whom Christians share a common salvation. They are called “spirits” because they are not yet united with their bodies in resurrection, but their spirits have been made perfect because Christ’s sacrifice for sins has provided expiation (11:40). Thus the New Covenant has relevance for OT believers as well as the NT ones.

THE RELEVANCE FOR THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

In spite of certain obvious connections between the biblical teaching regarding the New Covenant and the blessings experienced by the NT church, the careful student of Scripture recognizes other problems that must be resolved before the issue can be fully answered. To whom does the New Covenant actually apply? How does the NT church fit into its framework?

Amillennialists usually view the nation of Israel, with whom the New Covenant was specifically connected in OT revelation, as being permanently displaced. All of the promises to Israel are now being fulfilled by the NT church. O. T. Allis is representative of this position as he states:

The passage [Heb 8:8–13] speaks of the new covenant. It declares that this new covenant has been already introduced and that by virtue of the fact that it is called “new” it has made the one which it is replacing “old,” and that the old is about to vanish away. It would be hard to find a clearer reference to the gospel age in the Old Testament than in these verses in Jeremiah.⁶

Premillennialists, on the other hand, have dealt with this issue in various ways. Some have insisted that the new covenant was made with Israel, and will be fulfilled with Israel alone at the second coming of Christ (Rom 11:26–27). J. N. Darby, for instance, represents this viewpoint:

The first covenant was made with Israel; the second must be so likewise, according to the prophecy of Jeremiah. . . . We enjoy indeed all the essential privileges of the new covenant, its foundation being laid on

⁶Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1945) 154.

God's part in the blood of Christ, but we do so in spirit, not according to the letter.⁷

A smaller group of premillennialists explains the data as pointing to two new covenants, one for Israel and one for the NT church. This explanation attempts to treat the OT data in its straightforward, historical sense, and yet recognizes that the NT references do relate the church to the New Covenant. L. S. Chafer explains:

There remains to be recognized a heavenly covenant for the heavenly people, which is also styled like the preceding one for Israel: a "new covenant." It is made in the blood of Christ (cf. Mark 14:24) and continues in effect throughout this age, whereas the new covenant made with Israel happens to be future in its application. To suppose that these two covenants—one for Israel and one for the Church—are the same is to assume that there is a latitude of common interest between God's purposes for Israel and His purpose for the Church.⁸

The commonest explanation among premillennialists is that there is one new covenant. It will be fulfilled eschatologically with Israel but is participated in soteriologically by the church today. By this explanation the biblical distinction between national Israel and the church is recognized, the unconditional character of Jeremiah's prophecy which made no provision for any forfeiture by Israel is maintained, and the clear relationship of certain NT references to the church and the New Covenant are upheld. The notes in the *Scotfield Reference Bible* state that, "The New Covenant secures the personal revelation of the Lord to every believer (v. 11) . . . and secures the perpetuity, future conversion, and blessing of Israel."⁹

The reasons supporting this understanding offer the best explanation of the biblical references. First, the normal way of interpreting the various references to "the New Covenant" is to see these as one New Covenant rather than two covenants with the same name and with virtually the same contents. Second, the crucial passages on the New Covenant in Hebrews are addressed to Christians. They may well have been Jewish Christians, but the essential fact is that they were Christians. Third, it is difficult if not impossible to maintain a consistent distinction between a New Covenant for Israel and a New Covenant exclusively for the church in the reference at Heb 12:23-24.

⁷J. N. Darby, *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible* (New York: Loizeaux, rev. ed., 1942) 5. 329.

⁸L. S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1948) 7. 98-99.

⁹C. I. Scotfield, ed., *Scotfield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University, 1917) 1297. The note at Heb 8:8 in the *New Scotfield Reference Bible* (1967) 1317, is similar.

In that passage both the church ("church of the firstborn") and OT saints ("spirits of just men made perfect") are related to the New Covenant, not two covenants. Fourth, Christ's mention of the New Covenant in the upper room discourse (Luke 22:20) would certainly have caused the apostles to relate it to Jeremiah 31. Yet Christ connected it with the symbolic bread and cup which he was instituting for the church. Fifth, the apostle Paul clearly connected the upper room instruction regarding the New Covenant to the practice of the Christian church (1 Cor 11:25). He further called himself and his associates "ministers of the new covenant" (2 Cor 3:6). Sixth, the discussion in Hebrews 8 argues that the title "New Covenant" implies a corresponding "old covenant" which is now being superseded. The Mosaic Covenant is the old one for Israel. If the church has a totally separate New Covenant, what is the old one which it replaces?

In the light of all factors, the last interpretation encounters fewer hermeneutical difficulties and provides the most plausible explanation. Charles C. Ryrie, who at an earlier time preferred the two New Covenants view,¹⁰ appears to have come to this conclusion:

Concerning the Church's relation to the covenant, it seems best understood in the light of the progress of revelation. OT revelation of the covenant concerned Israel alone. The believer today is saved by the blood of the new covenant shed on the cross. All spiritual blessings are his because of this, and many of his blessings are the same as those promised to Israel under the OT revelation of the new covenant. However, the Christian believer is not promised blessings connected with the restoration to the Promised Land, and he is not made a member of the commonwealth of Israel. He is a minister of the new covenant, for there is no other basis than the blood of that covenant for the salvation of any today. Nevertheless, in addition to revealing these facts about the Church and the new covenant, the NT also reveals that the blessings promised to Israel will be experienced by her at the second coming of Christ (Rom 11:26-27).¹¹

¹⁰Charles C. Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (New York: Loizeaux, 1953) 105-25.

¹¹C. C. Ryrie, "Covenant, New," *Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia* (Chicago: Moody, 1975) 1. 392.