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# *The New Covenant: Its Problems, Certainties and Some Proposals*

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**I**t is a simple fact that Christians have a Bible with two parts. That the second part of this unified, whole Bible is a New Testament is not disputed. What is disputed, and has been for centuries, is this: “What is really *new* about this New Testament?”

For more than twenty years I have been thinking and reflecting upon what I consider to be one of the central themes of biblical theology—the newness of the new covenant. Some years ago I decided to go through the New Testament looking at the various occurrences of the word “new” (*kainos*, *neos*, and *palaios*). What I discovered profoundly affected me. What I was unprepared for was just how few biblical scholars had actually dealt with this very central theme.

There can be little doubt that this theme of “newness” needs serious exploration and development by biblical scholars. It also cries out for exploration by the serious Christian reader, whether pastor or layman.

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## **Problems**

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There are a number of exegetical and theological problems associated with the subject of the “newness” of the new covenant that raise interpretive difficulties for those who attempt to develop a definitive theology of the new covenant. I will cite several:

**1) There is no systematic presentation of the complete new covenant.** There is no one passage (including Jer. 31:31-34) to which the reader can turn and find the usual components of a covenant. These components are generally agreed to be: (1) the name of the covenant maker, (2) the names of the covenant recipients, (3) the requirements of the covenant, (4) the inaugural ceremony for the cutting of the covenant, (5) the public reading of the covenant or

recorded agreement of the parties to make a covenant, and (6) what consequences flow from the covenant, including any penalties that accrue from the breach of the covenant or rewards for compliance with the conditions of the covenant. Since no single New Testament text can be adduced where these covenantal elements are clearly articulated, it becomes necessary to reconstruct the nature of the covenant from bits and pieces scattered throughout the Old and New Testaments which seem to be related to the new covenant in one way or the other.

The reader must understand that this problem, however, is not unique to the new covenant. Scholars have struggled for years to reconstruct the *particulars* of the old covenant as well. This problem was exacerbated by source criticism where an attempt was made to demolish the integrity of the Pentateuch. This effort was joined with a consequent denial that the treaty form is present in the text of the Pentateuch.<sup>1</sup> Even conservative biblical scholars have struggled with reconstructing the treaty from Exodus and Deuteronomy. Why? Because no one section contains all the essential elements of the Suzerain-Vassal treaty. What we find is that the *cursings* and the *blessings* of the covenant are separated from the preamble, the historical prologue, and the stipulations of the treaty-covenant. This same pattern holds true for the covenant-confirming oath, the provision for public reading, and procedures against rebellious vassals. An induction of the stipulations of the covenant shows that the stipulations are repeated in more than one place, and they usually give the impression of being newly stated when they have already been recorded elsewhere. This is a disconcerting phenomenon, in certain ways, for the careful exegete of the Hebrew text. The narrative structure of the Pentateuch may account for this lack of systematization, but one cannot be sure whether this is the whole reason for the scattering of the various parts throughout

several portions of material.

**2) The lack of a systematic development of the new covenant leads to a question regarding the form of this covenant.** Is the new covenant to be understood as a Suzerainty, Parity, Patron or Promissory type of covenant? Even George E. Mendenhall, whose pioneer work with the biblical and ancient Near Eastern covenants has been seminal, is unsure whether there is any “form” to the new covenant other than the love command.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, Thomas McComiskey argues that “the covenants that have the distinct function of administering the terms of obedience in redemptive history are the covenant of circumcision, the Mosaic covenant, and the new covenant.”<sup>3</sup> If McComiskey is correct, then both the old covenant and the new covenant have the *same* form, even though the *particular* form may be in dispute.

**3) There is no agreement among biblical theologians on the meaning of *hadasah* in Jeremiah 31:31.** McComiskey argues that this adjective must mean “new” rather than “renew” because the meaning “renew” is infrequent in biblical Hebrew and the nature of the covenant marks a new covenant era in the outpouring of God’s grace. It is therefore a new covenant in the strictest sense of the word.<sup>4</sup> Brown, Driver and Briggs, in their standard Hebrew Lexicon, seem to concur with this assessment. They translate every occurrence of the adjective in their work as “new.”<sup>5</sup> Of course, more than word studies and exegesis are involved in this debate. One’s view of the role of the Mosaic law in the life of the Christian will always be a controlling consideration in deciding how “new” the new covenant really is.

**4) The difficulty regarding the *newness* of the new covenant is inseparable from the larger debate regarding the relationship between the Testaments.** Systems of *continuity* tend to opt for a renewed old covenant. Systems of

*discontinuity* opt for either a new replacing old as the covenantal rule or, in its most radical form, arguing for two new covenants: one made with Israel and one with the church. In other words, entire theological systems are called into question if the new covenant is a partially emended old covenant, a replacement for the old covenant, or a divided covenant for the two distinct peoples of God: Israel and the church.

**5) What Torah will be/is written on the hearts of “Israel and Judah”?** Is this the entirety of Old Testament directives to Israel? All Pentateuchal legislation? The Ten Commandments? The moral and civil commandments of the old covenant? The moral commands of the old covenant? Basic, fundamental commands such as loving God and loving neighbor? Or is the term a synonym for God’s will without any definite legal content?

**6) How can one reconcile Paul’s six statements that the Mosaic law has been canceled with Paul’s citations from that same law as obligations for Christian believers?** The canceled texts involve the strong word *katargeo* (cf. Rom. 7:2, 6; 2 Cor. 3:7, 11,13; and Eph. 2:15). The canceled old covenant allows the creation of equality between the Jew and Gentile in one new man. The nature of this new man militates against any suggestion that the new man is not absolutely new since Jew-Gentile equality was unheard of until the new covenant was inaugurated. Alternatively, Paul directs children to honor their parents (Eph. 6:2), not covet, not commit adultery, murder or steal (Rom. 7:7; 13:9 and other numerous texts), love their neighbor as themselves (Rom. 13:9; Gal. 5:14), and abstain from idolatry (1 Cor. 10:14). This conflict causes Thomas Schreiner to declare that Paul’s view of the law is very complex.<sup>6</sup> The fact that Paul quotes the old covenant as obligatory for Christians assures those who argue for a renewed old covenant that they are correct, while the fact that Paul also

says the law has been canceled is proof enough for those who argue for a *new* new covenant that they are correct.

**7) The stated or implied conditions of the new covenant are a problem in interpreting God’s promise that He would forgive His people’s iniquities and remember their sins no more (Jer. 31:34).** Does this promise mean that no sin can exclude anyone from realizing the inheritance? Is no covenantal obedience necessary? Can one sin with impunity? Can one lead a life of sin? Can one abandon the covenant, renounce Jesus Christ and the gospel, or consider imperatives given in the New Testament as optional suggestions rather than divine demands? In other words, is the new covenant an antinomian covenant? Is it necessary to insist that the new covenant is a renewed old covenant in order to put teeth, as it were, into Christian obligations? Isn’t it possible that without this approach we will, in reality, reduce the new covenant to some vague “love-ethic”? Must one hear the thundering voice of God at Sinai to live righteously? Is the new covenant weak ethically or incomplete in its details so that one cannot build an adequate ethical system on the new covenant alone?

**8) Why are there so few new covenant texts *within* the New Testament?** (Cf. Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25; 2 Cor. 3:6; Heb. 8:8, 13; 9:15.) Does this paucity of texts mean that the early Christians were really not a covenant structured people as Israel was? Or is it that far more work needs to be done in terms of new covenant terminology and conceptuality by scholars in order to make it more clear how the new covenant permeates the entire New Testament literature?

**9) Should one simply say that some kind of new covenant was prophesied in Jeremiah, announced by Jesus Christ in the Upper Room, mentioned in passing by Paul, and used as a measuring stick of the old covenant**

**sacrificial system by the writer of Hebrews and let it all go at this?** To put this very simply—is the new covenant really that important?

### Certainties

There are many certainties regarding the new covenant that can be acknowledged by the majority of concerned parties in this debate. I list several of the important ones:

**1) The fact that the new covenant is a divine work where God promises to make a new covenant which will involve significant changes in the character of God's people and where the history of redemption will take a major step forward.** The repeated "I's" in Jeremiah 31:31ff. stress God's initiative in the new covenant. The emphasis is on what He will do. "I will make" (vs. 31, 33); "I will put," "I will write," "I will be" (v. 33), "I will forgive," "I will remember no more" (v. 34). This divine initiative will result in an internalization of God's Torah. "I will put My law within them," or "On their heart I will write it" (v. 33); "they shall all know Me" (v. 34). This internalization of knowing God is expanded in Ezekiel 11 and 36. "I shall give them one heart, and shall put a new spirit within them. And I shall take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in My statutes and keep My ordinances, and do them. Then they will be My people, and I shall be their God" (Ezek. 11:19-20). "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" (Ezek. 36:26-27). Paul underscores the difference between the old covenant and new covenant in 2 Corinthians 3. The new covenant is "not of the letter [i.e., as the old covenant], but of the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:6). This ministry of the Holy Spirit is a ministry of transformation from

glory to glory (3:18).

**2) The new covenant is plainly superior to the old.** The old covenant was a ministry of death, engraved on tablets of stone. It had a glory for sure but it was a ministry of condemnation, fading away, and a veiled glory (2 Cor. 3:7-16). The new covenant is the ministry of the Spirit, abounding in glory, indeed, abounding in surpassing glory. It yields hope, creates boldness in speech, unveils glory, and is a source of liberty. According to Hebrews Christ has introduced a better hope (7:19), a better covenant (7:22), better promises (8:6), a better sacrifice (9:23), a better possession (10:34), a better homeland (11:16), a better resurrection (11:35), and a better blood (12:24). The new covenant, therefore, makes the old covenant obsolete, old and ready to disappear (8:13).

**3) There is only one new covenant.** There are not two separate new covenants—one with Israel and one with the church. Arguments for this duality are clearly not based on exegesis but theological polemics.<sup>7</sup> William Everett Bell, in an academic thesis, has provided the best and simplest refutation of the two new covenants view and argument for one new covenant that I have seen. He deftly asserts seven arguments and then proceeds to prove each of them exegetically. His arguments, in summary, are: (1) the Bible knows only one new covenant, (2) the new covenant of Jeremiah is operative in the church (and Paul is ministering that new covenant according to 2 Cor. 3:3), (3) the cross inaugurates the new covenant, (4) the "Israel and Judah" of Jeremiah 31 are the Jewish remnant in the church, (5) Israel still retains her former covenantal promises, (6) Gentiles share with Jewish Christians in the new covenant, and (7) the land aspects of the new covenant in Jeremiah await the establishment of Christ's kingdom upon the earth. While the last point might well be disputed by some, the other six are sufficient evidence to demolish the notion of *two* new

covenants.

4) **There must be some continuity between the old covenant and the new covenant without identifying the two.** God is the author of both covenants. Both are based upon prior redemptive acts: the Exodus and the cross. Both are moral in essential nature. Whether the commands are given by Moses or by Jesus and the apostles, there is an obvious overlapping of commandments regarding the love of God and one's neighbor, the honoring of one's father and mother, doing no murder, committing no adultery, not stealing, lying or coveting. There are other common commandments to pay the laborer, aid the poor, not intermarry with pagans, avoid gluttony and drunkenness, not indulging in impure thoughts, not taking revenge, etc. Neither covenant is a meritorious covenant whereby one gains righteousness with God through human efforts. The ultimate goals of both covenants are the glory of God and the holiness of His people.

5) **The new covenant is not like the old covenant.** This is the clear statement of Jeremiah 31:32. While scholars may not agree on what exactly the "not like" entails, it behooves everyone to discover in what way or ways the two covenants are different. If the only difference is the cessation of offering bulls and goats, then that certainty is a tremendous difference! Furthermore, Hebrews 7:12 states that a change of priesthood requires a change of law. It is clear from Hebrews that Aaron is no longer the divinely ordained priest, but Christ is and Christ's priesthood is after the order of Melchizedek. So at least the "ceremonial" aspects of the old covenant have been abrogated!

6) **The Holy Spirit plays a major role in the operation of the new covenant.** This fact should be established by the Ezekiel passages without any further elaboration. But it is also clear that Paul sees the Holy Spirit as a key factor in his new covenant ministry. The fact that the Corinthians

have had a work of the Spirit on their hearts is Paul's refutation of his opponents' contention that he lacks the proper credentials as an apostle of Christ. For Paul the Holy Spirit is the proof that one is a Christian (Rom. 8:9). It is the Spirit who enables the Christian to "fulfill the law" (Rom. 8:4). The Christian can walk by the Spirit and not fulfill the lusts of the flesh (Gal. 5:16). This statement follows Paul's assertion that the whole law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Gal. 5:14). In fact, the whole ministry of the Spirit is to transform the Christian from glory to glory (2 Cor. 3:18).

7) **Forgiveness of sins is a glorious result of the cutting of the new covenant.** This forgiveness is grounded in the blood of the Lamb who as sacrificial victim bore our sins in His own body on the cross (1 Peter 2:24). This final and sufficient sacrifice not only is the basis for cutting the new covenant, but it is the whole basis for *sola gratia* and *sola fide*. The New Testament texts sustaining this truth are too numerous to list, but Ephesians 2:8-10 and Titus 3:5 spring to mind immediately, along with the entire Epistle to the Hebrews.

### Some Proposals

At this point in our survey I offer several proposals concerning the new covenant. These proposals have received much more detailed discussion and exposition in my book, *All Things New*.<sup>9</sup> The reader is referred to that volume for more detailed considerations.

1) **The old covenant does have the form of a suzerainty-vassal treaty.** This type of treaty was modeled after the Hittite treaties of the fourteenth century B.C., and has been the subject of much study by the academic community in the last several decades. Although it is not absolutely necessary to hold this proposal in order to organize the old covenant data, I have found it very useful to understand the

old covenant as a treaty/covenant. Suzerainty treaties embody a certain structure that appears to parallel the structure of the Mosaic covenant. The first part of this form is the preamble. In this the king identifies himself. The second, which is historical prologue, reviews the past deeds and faithfulness of the king on behalf of his subjects. The third part is the stipulations which are the commands/demands the suzerain makes upon his subjects. Obedience to these commands produces the fourth part, a list of blessings that the king will pour out upon his subjects. Disobedience to the command brings certain cursings upon the subjects as a fifth part of the treaty. Other aspects such as periodic public reading of the treaty, a list of the gods as witnesses, an oath by the vassals to adopt the treaty, and a section on procedures against rebellious subjects follow. Each of these treaty components is to be found in the Pentateuchal texts.

The preamble can be seen in Exodus 20:2a where the king identifies himself as "I am Yahweh your God." Since Yahweh is now known as the God of redemption, no further identification is necessary. It is the Redeemer of the Israelites who is the Author of the covenant.

The historical prologue occurs in Exodus 20:2b as "who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." The Exodus experience will form the basis of Israel's formation as a people for the rest of her history and will be constantly referred to in the biblical narrative.

The stipulations begin with but do not end with the Ten Commandments. These stipulations extend throughout the rest of the Pentateuch and number 613 by Pharisaic accounting!

The cursings and the blessings may be found in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 27-28. Severe penalties accrue when the covenant is broken.

Periodic public reading of the covenant is commanded

in Exodus 24:7 and in Deuteronomy 31:10-11. And the oath can be seen in Exodus 24:3ff.

One does not have to concede that these are "Hittite" elements. The elements are there in the text regardless of what background they are given.

**2) I suggest that the new covenant is also a suzerainty-vassal treaty.** This is a suggestion, on my part, certainly not a dogmatic contention. The reasons I think this classification is necessary go as follows. McComiskey's arguments for both the old and new covenants being *administrative covenants* seem persuasive to my mind. The scattered character of the new covenant components no more demand that there is no structure to the new covenant than the scattered character of the old covenant components demand that it lacks structure. Therefore, it is possible to reconstruct a new covenant suzerainty-vassal treaty from the New Testament data. Let me demonstrate what I mean.

The new covenant preamble might be: "I am the Lord Jesus Christ."

The historical prelude might be: "Who died for your sins according to the Scriptures. I have ascended to the right hand of My Father and will return to judge the living and the dead. I am Lord of all and High Priest to My church."

The prologue would ground the new covenant in redemptive history just as the old covenant was so grounded. This reconstructed prologue would reflect the theme of forgiveness of sins promised by God in Jeremiah's new covenant oracle. The themes of judgment and lordship would serve as indicators of who this Inaugurator of the new covenant is: He is the One to whom all men are ultimately responsible and the One who will begin judgment with His new covenant people (cf. 1 Peter 4:17). Such a prologue would flow naturally into the stipulations of the new covenant because not only does this king have authority over His people, but His work on the cross is not only for-

givenness of sins but transformation of those for whom He died.

Are there new covenant stipulations? To suggest that there are causes concern that the new covenant is another form of legalism. On the other hand, what is one to do with the numerous directives in the New Testament given in the imperative mood? Are these directives merely suggestions, or do they have a certain "bite" to them that means Jesus Christ, Paul, the writer to the Hebrews, James, Peter, John, and Jude really intended their imperatives to be obeyed? The New Testament is permeated with those commands. They cannot be placed in some "optional" category so that Christians can choose what to obey and what to ignore. Is Paul serious when he writes Romans 12:9-21, for example? What about Hebrews 13, or 1 Peter 1:14-16, or 2 Peter 1:5-15, or 1 John 4:21, or Jude 20-21, or Revelation 22:11? It appears that in the evangelical zeal for stressing Christ's work *for us* scant attention has been paid to His work *in us*. Is this a new legalism? Hardly. In fact, a casual approach to these new covenant stipulations may explain the current state of spirituality in most evangelical churches. Christians have been led to look upon salvation as a "sign-up" rather than the beginning of a life-long relationship with the living God and the risen Christ. What grade would any professor with integrity give a student who signed up for a course but never attended a single class, never submitted any required papers, or took any exams? Is salvation so vacuous that it had no demands on its applicants?

A further argument for new covenant stipulations is the role the apostle Paul plays as an adequate servant of the new covenant. Carol Stockhausen, in a magnificent dissertation on 2 Corinthians, concludes her discussion with the title, "Paul the New Moses." In this section Stockhausen considers Paul the "second Moses."<sup>10</sup> It appears that just as Moses serves as an administrator of the old covenant, so

Paul serves as an administrator of the new covenant. That means that the Mosaic commands do not materially differ from the Pauline commands. Both spell out the covenantal obligations of the subjects of the King. The new covenant is therefore not weak ethically so that ethicists have to employ the Mosaic Ten Commandments and other old covenant stipulations in order to have a strong system. The new covenant contains all things necessary for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3).

Of course, this conception does not diminish the role of the Holy Spirit in enabling the Christian to keep the new covenant stipulations. The writer is well aware of Paul's argument that the Mosaic stipulations in and of themselves were unable to sanctify Israel because of the potency of the flesh. It was necessary, therefore, for God to provide an Enabler so that His commands could be obeyed. Paul insists in numerous passages that the Holy Spirit is that Enabler and that is the reason why the new covenant is superior to the old (cf. Rom. 7:4-8:17). Further, the power of the Spirit is seen as freedom for the Christian and frees him from the bondage of a covenant that requires but does not enable (Gal. 5, esp. vv. 13-14).

New covenant stipulations, like the old covenant stipulations, have blessings and cursings attached. A total induction of all new covenant blessings needs to be made. Obviously, the new covenant blessings are much more relational toward God and neighbor in the realm of the Spirit rather than in the concrete land of Palestine. Old covenant blessings are heavily oriented toward prosperity and longevity on the earth. New covenant blessings stress unity (Rom. 15:5), joy, peace, hope, and power (Rom. 15:13), all grace (2 Cor. 9:8), and purity (Phil. 2:15). The ultimate blessings are the maturity of God's people and that God is pleased (Eph. 4:13-16; Heb. 13:16).

Probably the most difficult issue in this consideration is



the matter of new covenant cursings. To even suggest such a category immediately raises the specter of works-righteousness and the loss of salvation. This writer admits that he observes a certain tension in the New Testament itself. While there is certainly heavy stress upon the preserving power of God, there is also repeated stress on the perseverance of the saints. There are just too many passages and “if clauses” that lead one to conclude that disobedience to the new covenant results in some kind of loss. How serious can this loss be? Paul’s exhortation to the Corinthians to hold fast to the gospel warns against believing in vain (1 Cor. 15:2). The Colossians will appear blameless before Christ *if* they continue in the faith, grounded and firm and not being removed from the hope of the gospel which they have heard (Col. 1:22-23). The repeated warnings throughout Hebrews to not slip away (2:1), not neglect Christ’s salvation (2:3), holding confidence fast and boasting in hope firm to the end (3:6), taking care lest there should be in any one of his readers an evil, unbelieving heart in falling away from the living God (3:12), holding fast the beginning of our assurance firm to the end (3:14), fear lest any come short of the promise of rest (4:1), etc., show that apostasy is possible.

The difficulty of keeping the power of God and the need for perseverance in balance has led to two major works on the theme of falling away.<sup>11</sup> One such position, held by Judith Volf, argues that the warning passages are for unbelievers or merely *professing* Christians. True Christians cannot fall away because God sees to it that they don’t fall away. I. Howard Marshall, on the other hand, believes that the passages are directed to Christians and are a toothless lion who roars a lot but cannot bite anything if they are excused as hypothetical, reserved for unbelievers, or only a threat to professing Christians.

This writer has always been impressed with the rele-

vance of Christ’s teaching to this very issue. In His own explanation of the parable of the sower as recorded in Luke 8:11-15, our Lord seems to define the nature of the good soil. This soil is characterized by four things: (1) people hear with honest and good heart; (2) they hold the message fast; (3) they bear fruit; and (4) they persevere. This suggests that God’s purposes involve means as well as ends. If the end goal is life eternal, then there are certain prescribed means of entering that life. The first is believing the gospel. But there must also be steadfast adherence to the gospel, fruit-bearing, and perseverance in holiness. The question boils down to: will all *true* Christians hold fast and persevere, or *must all* Christians hold fast and persevere? The New Testament does not seem to answer this question clearly. It is these acute difficulties that divide Calvinists from Arminians at this very point. Nevertheless, there do seem to be the cursings in the new covenant which can be serious and severe for those who abandon this covenant (cf. Heb. 10:26-39).

It is not necessary that the new covenant includes periodic public reading. Since the whole New Testament seems to be a covenantal document, any public reading of Scripture would constitute a periodic reading of the covenant (cf. 1 Tim. 4:13).

While faith in Jesus Christ cannot be called an “oath,” the fundamental importance of this faith for entry into salvation and the church in the New Testament would be tantamount to an oath in terms of a serious commitment. Perhaps if committing one’s life to Jesus Christ were taken more seriously, the sense of a covenantal bond and responsibilities would attach itself to more young people.

**3) Since strong grounds exist for seeing the new covenant as “new,” then there are strong grounds for not using the old covenant as a rule of life for Christians.** The immediate question that arises from my proposal is

whether or not this leads to some kind of neo-Marcionism. My reply has always been to clearly and biblically *differentiate* the old covenant from the new covenant. The New Testament writers certainly used the Old Testament as their Bible. But did they require Gentile believers to abide by the Mosaic covenant as their rule of faith and practice? Admitting some ambiguity with Paul concerning the use of Moses, it is clear that Paul preached Christ, not Moses. One can still preach from the Old Testament using it typologically, illustratively, analogically, and rhetorically as the New Testament writers themselves do without bringing in the Mosaic covenant as a continuing rule of life for Christians. In other words, the Old Testament should enrich Christians' understanding of the New Testament, and the theological direction should always be from the old to the new.

What *Torah* has been written on the heart? It seems absolutely certain that *Torah* as used by Jeremiah definitely refers to the Mosaic covenant (cf. Jer. 2:8; 6:19; 8:8; 9:13; 16:11; 18:18; 26:4; 32:23; 44:10, and 44:23). In Jeremiah the *Torah* is the law of Moses. But what is the *Torah/nomos* that will be written on the heart according to Hebrews? It would be incongruous for the author of Hebrews to envision the reinstatement of the Mosaic covenant in Hebrews 8:10 and then to proceed to call that covenant "old," "obsolete," and "ready to disappear" in 8:13! Furthermore, the writer of Hebrews has stated explicitly in 7:12 that "when the [Levitical] priesthood is changed, of necessity there takes place a change of law [*nomos*] also." It is also interesting that the writer of Hebrews in following the Septuagint, does not have law (*nomos*), but laws (*nomous*). The plural may be significant in his thinking. It hardly seems possible, then, that the writer of Hebrews regarded the Mosaic law as written on the heart when he calls that law "old," "obsolete," "ready to disappear," and "changed."

I propose, based upon these weighty exegetical observations, that the law written on the heart of the new covenant believer is the law of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 9:21), which replaces the law of Moses. Such a replacement is justified by the nature of redemptive history. As the history of redemption unfolds, the new revelation reinterprets or replaces the old revelation. Examples of new developments abound: (1) the death of Christ fulfilling the Mosaic sacrificial system so that the whole system is replaced—temple, priest, altar, and sacrifices, (2) the Jew-Gentile equality in the church, and (3) the change in the food laws (Mark 7:19). Such examples (and they could be multiplied) indicate that the new age of Jesus Christ brings change in the old Mosaic age. I have attempted to articulate these changes extensively in my book, *All Things New: The Significance of Newness for Biblical Theology* (Baker, 1995). The chapter titles that I use there indicate these changes: "New Wineskins," "New Teaching," "New Covenant," "New Commandment," "New Creation," "New Man," "New Name, New Song, New Jerusalem," "New Heaven and New Earth," and "All Things New."

New Testament scholar Douglas J. Moo explored the law of Christ quite extensively in a festschrift volume for professor S. Lewis Johnson, *Continuity and Discontinuity*. Moo argues that Matthew 5:17 should be interpreted along the lines of "anticipation-realization." By this Moo means that we should see the Mosaic law in *the light of its fulfillment in Christ*.<sup>13</sup> He states, furthermore, that by *telos* in Romans 10:4 Paul means that Christ is the goal of the law and the end of the law "in that his fulfillment of the law brings to an end that period of time when it was a key element in the plan of God."<sup>14</sup> In Galatians 5:14 love is an activity that brings about the intended goal of the law of Moses. Christians "fulfill" the law of Moses but do not "do" it. This distinction, according to Moo, is not just a semantic one but it is intimately linked

with the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>15</sup> This life in the Spirit is the ground of Christian ethics.<sup>16</sup> The law of Christ, then, is Paul's way of stating the demand of God that is binding on Christians since the coming of Christ. Moo summarizes:

The Christian is no longer bound to the Mosaic law; Christ has brought its fulfillment. But the Christian *is* bound to "God's law." . . . In that "fulfillment" of the law, however, some of the Mosaic commandments are taken up and reapplied to the New Covenant people of God. Thus, while the Mosaic Law does not stand as an undifferentiated authority for the Christian, some of its individual commandments remain authoritative as integrated into the law of Christ.<sup>17</sup>

Moo concludes his summary by adding:

In actual ethical practice very little is lost. For the New Testament clearly takes up all the Decalogue, except the Sabbath, as part of "Christ's law" and thereby as authoritative for believers. But considerable difference in theological construct is involved, and the difference in approach is therefore not at all insignificant.<sup>18</sup>

The law of Christ in progressive New Testament understanding is the "Torah" which God through His Holy Spirit writes on the hearts of all who believe the gospel of Jesus Christ. This "law" has content and authority for all who are His children under the new covenant.

**Conclusion**

This essay has argued that the new covenant is a vital part of a genuinely biblical New Testament theology. I began by listing nine problems associated with the new covenant. I then gave seven agreements that the various interpretive positions can hold regarding the new

covenant. I then made several proposals regarding the new covenant.

My argument is that the new covenant cannot be a simple renewal of the old covenant. This position argues that there is, in the reality of the case, nothing really distinctive about this new covenant. It treats the covenant as if it were not actually *new*. This is why I made my attempt to spell out the distinctiveness of the new covenant in several ways.

It is my conviction that there can be continuity between the two Testaments without neglecting discontinuity. This line of inquiry involves a book-length discussion such as the aforementioned book of essays.<sup>19</sup> Suffice it to say that this writer is convinced that there is both continuity and discontinuity between Israel and the church. Key elements of discontinuity would be Jew-Gentile equality in Christ, spiritual gifts given by the Holy Spirit to the entire church, and a new approach to God through the shed blood of Christ. Key elements of continuity would be the ongoing fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant, the continued fulfillment of the Davidic covenant, the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, the covenants and promises given to Israel being extended by the believing remnant of Israel in the church to the Gentiles in the church, and the progressive realization of the purposes of God redemptively.

I have also argued that the Torah written on the hearts of Christian believers is the law of Christ instead of the law of Moses. This law of Christ replaces the law of Moses as the ethical base for Christians. Some old covenant stipulations are reintroduced into new covenant stipulations. These stipulations go far beyond the Ten Commandments. The understanding of Torah as the law of Christ is a change from Jeremiah's understanding because of the development in redemptive history and progressive revelation through Jesus Christ and the apostles of the New Testament.

The problem with Paul and the law of Moses remains an area for further study. Certainly Paul's debates with the Judaizers are a key factor in resolving the tension, but there may be some tension in Paul himself in attempting to live with one foot in Judaism and one foot in Gentile liberty in Christ. It was very difficult for Paul to talk about the complete abrogation of the Mosaic law for both Jews and Gentiles without being accused of antinomianism.

New covenant cursings are a part of the New Testament text and go so far as to warn against sins like adultery, fornication and apostasy excluding individuals from the kingdom of God. Such warnings are difficult to reconcile with so-called "eternal security," but are more compatible with a doctrine of the perseverance of the saints.

It is not possible to ascertain why the New Testament writers do not do this or that. When they do not tell us why they omit this or include that we are at a loss to give a reason. It is unwise to conclude that the new covenant is a minor New Testament theme since there are not many direct references to it. There is far more there than meets the eyes, and hard work may further demonstrate the centrality of the new covenant to all New Testament theology.

It should be clear from the foregoing proposals that the new covenant is a key theological theme and is very important for biblical theology. It certainly deserves far deeper treatment than it has received in the past. I pray that this issue of *Reformation & Revival Journal* will provoke earnest interaction between Christians and greater understanding of the strategic place of the new covenant in the life of the Christian and the church.

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**Endnotes**

- 1 See Dennis J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant. Analecta Biblica* 21A, (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978).
- 2 See this discussion of "Covenant" in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 1:722-23.
- 3 Thomas Edward McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 144.
- 4 Ibid., 167.
- 5 Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1959), 294.
- 6 Thomas R. Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 160.
- 7 For a recent example of this old classical dispensational tenet see John R. Master, "The New Covenant," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, ed. Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master (Chicago: Moody, 1994).
- 8 William Everett Bell, Jr., "The New Covenant," Th.M. Thesis (Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1963).
- 9 Carl B. Hoch, Jr., *All Things New: The Significance of Newness for Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).
- 10 Carol Kern Stockhausen, *Moses' Veil and the Glory of the New Covenant. Analecta Biblica*, 116 (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1989), esp. 172-75.
- 11 Judith M. Gundry Volf, *Paul and Perseverance; Staying In and Falling Away* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), and I. Howard Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1969).
- 12 Chapter Nine of *Continuity and Discontinuity:*

*Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Westchester, Illinois: Crossway, 1988), 203-18.

- 13 Ibid., 205-206.
- 14 Ibid., 207.
- 15 Ibid., 209-10.
- 16 Ibid., 215.
- 17 Ibid., 217.
- 18 Ibid., 218.
- 19 Cf. note 12.