

B·I·B·L·E & L·I·F·E

Bible Teaching Newsletter

of Biblical Doctrine & New Testament Assembly Life

Vol. 13. No. 1

January 1, 2006

The New Covenant Controversy

by David Dunlap

The institution of New Covenant powerfully unfolds the depth of God's faithfulness and the integrity of His promises. This unconditional agreement was made with Israel because they had broken the terms of the earlier Mosaic covenant. This (new) covenant would be rooted in God's faithfulness rather than Israel's obedience. It points to a future day, when God will gather Israel out of all the nations and bring them into their own land, giving them a new heart and a new spirit (Ezek. 36:28). He will own them as His covenant people—"a nation born in a day." He will merge the two parts of divided Israel into one nation under one sovereign King, and set His sanctuary in the midst of them forever (Ezek. 37:15).

The authority of the New Covenant is anchored upon the blood of Christ, the Mediator of the covenant (Heb. 8:13). Because of this fact, Christ is called by the writer of the book of Hebrews to be *now* the Mediator of the New Covenant, "He is the mediator of a better covenant" (Heb. 8:6). The Lord's Supper demonstrates this—"This cup is the New Covenant in My blood which is shed for you" (Lk. 22:19). As Christians, we are identified with the glorious Mediator and enjoy the spiritual privileges and blessings of the New Covenant, but it is essentially a covenant with Israel. Its final consummation awaits the time when "the Deliverer will come out of Zion, and...turn away ungodliness from Jacob" (Rom. 11:25). Afterwards, this covenant will be fully realized by Israel in the Millennial age.

REFORMED THEOLOGY AND DISPENSATIONALISM

However, this dispensational understanding of the New Covenant is seen by Reformed-Amillennialist teachers as a weak link in traditional dispensational theology. Reformed literature seeks at every turn to attack traditional dispensational teaching concerning the New Covenant. A leading Reformed theologian, Professor Keith Mathison, writes:

The New Covenant is perhaps the clearest example of a promise made to national Israel that is now being fulfilled in and by the church. Dispensationalists have consistently taught that the church cannot fulfill the new covenant of Jeremiah 31...Dispensationalists insist that the church cannot fulfill the new covenant because such a fulfillment would undermine the doctrine of Premillennialism...¹

Current Reformed theology teaches that the church now fulfills the provisions of the New Covenant. The Reformed view has been adopted by a growing number of Charismatic leaders to buttress their view for miracles and healing during this age. They teach that since Christ is presently reigning as the covenantal King, the supernatural blessings of the New Covenant should be experienced by the church today. This view has been espoused by many past and present Charismatic leaders such as Jack Hayford, John Wimber, Peter C. Wagner, and others. This view teaches that Christ, as the Mediator of the New Covenant is now seated on His Millennial throne in heaven. From this center of His kingdom authority, miracles,

"The New Covenant was not made with the church, as some seem to think. It was made with the same people the Old Covenant was made with: Israel. God has not rejected Israel nor has He transferred His covenant with her to anyone else."

John MacArthur

Commentary on Hebrews,
Moody Press, 1983

physical healing, and power over demons will flow down to His people on earth in an unprecedented way. Elements of this “Kingdom Authority” teaching have even found their way into contemporary praise music. Jack Hayford, a Charismatic pastor and musician from Van Nuys, California, in the lyrics to his song “Majesty” writes: “Majesty, kingdom authority flow from His throne down unto His own, His anthem raise.” This teaching is inevitable when the Reformed view of the New Covenant is carried to its logical conclusion.

A PROBLEM PASSAGE: HEBREWS 8:6

Critics of Dispensationalism are quick to point to Hebrews chapter eight as support for their view that the provisions of the New Covenant are fulfilled in the church. In Hebrews chapter eight we read, “...by how much also He is the Mediator of a better covenant, which was established upon better promises” (Heb. 8:6). Calvinistic writers place emphasis on the phrase “He *is* the Mediator of a better covenant.” They argue that Christ presently *is* the Mediator of the terms of the New Covenant. They contend that since Christ is now the Mediator of the New Covenant, then the Covenant is now fulfilled by the church, and not by Israel in a future Millennial kingdom. They teach that Israel has no future Millennial hope, nor should they expect any future fulfillment of the New Covenant. Some Reformed leaders seem to believe that this viewpoint is the most convincing interpretation of this verse. Reformed theologian Keith Mathison, writes:

Hebrews 8:6-13 tells us that Jesus *is the Mediator of the New Covenant now*. Hebrews teaches repeatedly that the old covenant has been abolished and that the New Covenant has been *inaugurated* by Jesus Christ through the shedding of His blood. (italics mine)²

THE TWO-FOLD STRUCTURE OF THE NEW COVENANT

There is an important theological distinction between inauguration and institution. *Inauguration* indicates the fulfilling of the provisions of the covenant, whereas *institution* refers to the setting forth of the terms of the covenant. Has the New Covenant been inaugurated? Yes, Christ is the Mediator of the covenant; but must we then conclude that the church now replaces Israel in fulfilling all the provisions of the New Covenant? How have Dispensational writers answered this question? Dispensationalism offers a reasonable explanation to the question of how Christ is presently the Mediator of the New Covenant, but the new covenant is not yet fulfilled in the church. In defense of their position, many Dispensational writers point to the two-level structure of the four major biblical covenants. In all these covenants, the covenant was first *instituted*, and then many years later, some or all of the covenant’s provisions were *fulfilled*. In the Abrahamic Covenant, God unconditionally promised a seed (son) to Abraham and Sarah; however it was not until twenty-five years later that that provision of the covenant was fulfilled. In the Davidic Covenant, one of the terms of this unconditional covenant was that from David’s seed One would come who would “build a house for My name”(2 Sam. 7:13). This would not take place until the reign of Solomon many years later. God’s pattern for His covenants is that a covenant is first introduced, and then many years later, the provisions of the covenant are fulfilled. This is also the pattern of the New Covenant. The New Covenant was introduced by the Mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ, it was sealed by our Lord when His blood was shed on the cross of Calvary. The provisions of the covenant were offered to the nation of Israel after the resurrection of Christ, but were rejected. Nevertheless, the terms of the covenant will be fulfilled in the nation of Israel during the Millennial reign of the Lord Jesus Christ.

**Kingdom Authority
theology teaches
that through the
New Covenant we
are now in the
Kingdom of God,
and therefore, we are
now reigning over
the earth. This view
is proclaimed in the
popular Charismatic
song “Majesty”, by
Jack Hayford, which
states, “Kingdom
authority flows from
His throne unto His
own.” With this
authority from the
King, we are to
reclaim the earth for
Christ.**

Wayne House
co-author of the book,
*Dominion Theology: Blessing or
Curse*

Elliot Johnson, a professor of New Testament at Dallas Seminary explains:

The distinction between the institution and the fulfillment of a covenant must be clarified further. To *institute* a promissory covenant is to introduce provisions of the agreement which are now available to be received. To *inaugurate* fulfillment is to keep all of the provisions of the agreement. The new covenant was *instituted* only after the death of Christ, the Mediator of the covenant; then He and the provisions of the covenant were offered to the nation, following His resurrection and ascension. Some of the provisions were then made available as given to the remnant gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost. The new covenant will be *inaugurated* in fulfillment when Israel as a nation will accomplish her national destiny.”³

Theologian Dr. Dwight Pentecost, a former professor at Dallas Seminary, adds:

There is a marked and critical difference between the *institution* of the covenant and the *realization* of its benefits. By Christ’s death, Christ laid the foundation for Israel’s new covenant—but its benefits will not be received by Israel until the second advent of Messiah.”⁴

NEW COVENANT and ISRAEL

The New and Old Testaments provide support for the idea that national Israel will still inherit the spiritual and temporal provisions of the New Covenant. If this is true, then it is a powerful argument against the view that the church replaces Israel and inherits all of the provisions of the New Covenant. As we look more closely at this subject, the Holy Scriptures must be our only standard and guide. There are two main categories into which the biblical evidence can be arranged:

THE INTEGRITY OF GOD’S PROMISES TO NATIONAL ISRAEL

The Scriptures teach that God must be absolutely faithful to His Word. In the New Covenant, He has unconditionally bound Himself to be faithful to its provisions and terms. In Jeremiah 31 and in Hebrews chapter 8 (where the terms of the New Covenant are discussed), no less than five times does God use the phrase “I will” to express His loyalty to the terms of the New Covenant. This is essential, for God’s integrity, His faithfulness, and the veracity of His character are at stake. The psalmist comforts himself in God’s faithfulness when he reminds us, “My covenant I will not break, nor alter the word that has gone out of My lips”(Ps. 89:34). In the New Testament, sixty years after the birth of Christ, the apostle Paul in the book of Romans tells us that Israel still possesses the provisions contained in the covenants. Paul writes, “Who are Israelites; to whom pertain the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants... (Romans 9:4). The use of the present tense by Paul in this verse is very important: “to whom *pertain*....the covenants.” The present tense indicates that God has never wavered in His promises made to Israel.

NATIONAL AND MATERIAL PROMISES

Closely associated with the fact that God must be faithful to His promises, is the uniqueness of the covenant provisions to Israel. God has made both spiritual and material promises to Israel. Today, the church enjoys some of the spiritual blessings of the New Covenant by virtue of the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. However, in a careful study of the New Covenant, it soon becomes obvious that many of its spiritual and material provisions can only be fulfilled by national Israel in the future Millennium. By their very nature, it is impossible for these promises to be fulfilled today in the church. Allow us to look at just a few of them. The prophet Ezekiel in chapter 34, begins to speak of some of the blessings of the new covenant. In this chapter, he calls it a “covenant of peace”(v. 25) and states that Israel will be “His people and He will be their God”, a provision of the New Covenant detailed in Jeremiah 31 and Hebrews 8.

“New Covenant blessing does not reach the height of Christian blessing. The New Covenant says nothing of entrance into the Holiest, as we now know it; nothing of being raised up together and seated together in Christ Jesus in the heavenlies; nothing of union with Him as members of His body by the indwelling Holy Spirit. It is blessing for the earth and on the earth in a coming day.”

H. A. Ironside

Commentary on Hebrews,
Loizeaux, 1942

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3116 Gulfwind Dr, Land O' Lakes, FL 34639

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PERMIT #6658
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FORWARDING SERVICE REQUESTED

January 2006

• INFORMATION •

Bible and Life is published periodically and sent out free of charge and is supported entirely by the free will offerings of the Lord's people. checks should be made out to "Bible and Life Ministries, Inc."

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Clearly the context of this passage is that these are blessings which flow out of God's New Covenant relationship to the nation of Israel. Notice some of the provisions:

(1) Wild animals will be removed from out of the land so that the inhabitants may sleep in safety in the fields and woods (v. 25).

(2) There will be a supernaturally abundant harvest of farm crops and other agriculture from the land (v. 27).

(3) Israel will not receive any threats and insults from other nations (Ezekiel 34: 28-29). All of these provisions mentioned by Ezekiel have not taken place today in the church nor in the land of Israel; they are provisions of the New Covenant that will be fulfilled in the future.

(4) In Jeremiah 31:34, the prophet mentions that "they shall teach no more every man his neighbor and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord': for they shall know Me from the least of them unto the greatest of them." This is one of the spiritual provisions in the New Covenant that is certainly reserved for the future. Clearly, this is not true today, even in the church. Instead of seeing a growing knowledge of the things of God, we are presently seeing a sharp decline in the knowledge of the Lord and of spiritual things.

CONCLUSION

The New Covenant is expressly promised to both the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It is a better covenant than the one God made with Israel at Mount Sinai, as it provides for the future salvation of the nation and endows the people with the ability to walk in God's laws and statutes (Heb. 8:10). Under these conditions, the nation of Israel will be able to safely dwell in her own land under the shelter of the Lord Jesus Christ, the King of the Jews. The church, on the other hand, is the Body and espoused Bride of Christ. As such, she bears witness on earth to the fact that Christ, as Mediator of the New Covenant, has shed His blood for the remission of sins.

Endnotes

1. Keith Mathison, *Rightly Dividing the People of God?*, (Phillipsburg, PA: P & R Publishing, 1995), p. 28
2. Ibid., p. 29
3. Elliot Johnson, *Contemporary Dispensationalism*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1999), p. 146
4. Dwight Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1995), p. 173